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Ex-FEMA Chief Michael Brown Is Vindicated

by John Gizzi
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Seven months after Hurricane Katrina, the “blame game” continues—finger-pointing to and from the Bush Administration over who, in and out of office, was most responsible for what appeared to be a weak response to the greatest natural disaster in American history.

At first, Michael Brown, deposed as head of the Federal Emergency Management Administration, was the premier recipient of blame. Indeed, negative comments from administration officials and the national media so focused on Brown that the former official seemed to be the “poster boy” for government response to Katrina; late-night TV comedians made the President’s now-famous remark to him “Brownie, you’re doing a heckuva job” a staple of monologues.

Brown did not go gently into the night. In a series of interviews ([including one with HUMAN EVENTS](#)) and appearances on Sunday television talk shows, the Oklahoma lawyer hit back and defended himself forcefully. His testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and the showing of the initial Katrina teleconference in which Brown warns of impending disaster and appears very much on top of the situation particularly won converts to his cause. A [poll of HUMAN EVENTS readers](#) found that a strong 64% believe Brown is owed an apology for his treatment by the Administration.

Andy Lester, Brown’s attorney, had some thoughts on his own on the downfall and apparent rebound of his longtime friend.

Once again, the Republican dominated Committee is trying to whitewash the role of the White House and DHS. Before Katrina hit, Michael Brown warned the White House and Secretary Chertoff, in no uncertain terms, that Hurricane Katrina was likely to be “the big one.” Michael Brown repeatedly talked with the White House – Deputy Chief of Staff Joe Hagin, Chief of Staff Andy Card, and President Bush himself – both before and after landfall, giving them up-to-the-moment, blow-by-blow accounts of what was happening in New Orleans and elsewhere along the Gulf Coast. Michael Brown repeatedly informed Secretary Chertoff – directly with Secretary Chertoff, through Deputy Secretary Jackson, and through the appropriate channels that existed within DHS (HSOC) – of the same thing.

Almost since landfall, the Administration has been diverting the media’s and the public’s attention for the shortcomings in the government’s response to Katrina onto Michael Brown. As I wrote yesterday in Human Events, one senior Administration official who is extremely close to the President told Brown on September 7 that the media maelstrom surrounding him fit perfectly with Administration desires. Referring to a cabinet meeting held the day before, this person stated that “someone commented that the press was sure beating up on Mike Brown, to which the President replied ‘I’d rather they beat up on him than me or Chertoff.’”

Michael Brown warned DHS two years before Katrina that DHS was crippling FEMA’s

ability to respond to a catastrophic disaster. In March of 2005, shortly after Secretary Chertoff took office, Brown again sounded the alarm. He told the White House the same thing. He did this repeatedly. His warning fell on deaf ears.

The recently released videotapes confirm that Michael Brown was doing his job in connection with Katrina. The tapes of the secure video teleconferences have demonstrated beyond doubt that Michael Brown was the one senior administration official who was ably doing his job. But they also demonstrate why some in the Administration wanted Brown not to answer the questions of Congressional investigators.

When the post-Katrina investigations started, many criticized Brown for not cutting through the red tape. Now the Republicans are criticizing him for cutting through the red tape. Were it even true, the charge would be inane. But it's not true. It's false.

Michael Brown repeatedly urged everyone to move forward all their resources, to "push the envelope," even to "jump over the envelope." He was on the job, was doing his job, and was making sure that the people above him – both the White House and Secretary Chertoff – were fully aware, in a timely manner, of everything that was going on.

It seems the Administration, with an able assist from House Republicans, has decided that the only senior administration official who took Katrina seriously must remain the designated scapegoat. I hope the public will reject this shameful attempt once again to divert attention from the necessary reforms to make FEMA work again.

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