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Cover Story - Brown's Flood of Criticism

Saturday, March 11, 2006
by Paul Singer

Since being pushed out of the Federal Emergency Management Agency last September amid the furor over the federal response to Hurricane Katrina, former Director Michael Brown has gone public with allegations that FEMA's problems are a direct result of its merger into the Department of Homeland Security. Best-known as the recipient of President Bush's now-widely ridiculed post-Katrina compliment -- "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job!" -- Brown says that the emergency-response agency has been marginalized within a department obsessed with terrorism. Before Katrina struck, Brown contends, he repeatedly voiced his fear that FEMA was being gutted, but his superiors within the Bush administration ignored his pleas. Yet House Majority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio, told reporters on March 7 that Brown "should have been fired long before he was," and that "he ought to be convicted of malfeasance" for having failed to cooperate with the White House. A day earlier, Brown had discussed these issues with National Journal. Excerpts follow.

NJ: Should you have been more aggressive in going public with your concerns about FEMA's budget and structure, beyond raising concerns within the administration?

Brown: Absolutely. In fact, the personal lesson learned, for me, is that you can be Don Quixote [only] so long, tilting at windmills, and you have to at some point step out and say, "This is the windmill I'm tilting at, and it has to be fixed." Frankly, I didn't want to be the next [whistle-blower] who went out publicly and said this stuff and got the boot. In hindsight, I wish I would have gotten the boot. I guess I did get the boot, but I wish I would have gotten the boot earlier for doing something differently.

What I see them doing [at the Homeland Security Department] really is just destroying -- actually disassembling -- FEMA and scattering whatever its functions are within other parts of DHS. So at the end of the day, you will look around and you'll go, "Well, there is no more FEMA."

I think [that is] a bad thing because in DHS, the mission of the department is the prevention of terrorism. That's its foremost goal. Let's just say there are 180,000 people at the department. For 178,000 people in the department, their goal is to prevent an act of terrorism. The Transportation Security Administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Coast Guard -- all of those things are about preventing something from happening. There are about 2,000 people whose job is -- if there is a failure of that prevention mechanism, or there is a natural disaster or a man-made disaster -- to clean up the mess. Who's going to win in terms of resources, money, attention, and everything? It's going to be the 178,000, versus the 2,000, I think, until you pull FEMA out.

I couldn't get people within DHS to grasp that preparing to prevent something is one thing, and preparing to respond is a totally different mind-set. If you have a \$40 billion budget, and 90 percent of your job is to prevent acts of terrorism, where is the bulk of the money going to go? And where is the mind-set going to be? And where is the bureaucracy going to push toward? It's going to go to the detriment of that other part, which is the cleanup part, the mop-up guys.

I think [FEMA] should resume its independence. I think that's the only way to do it. The people who have told me they have been interviewed or approached about taking my old job have told me that they said, "I will take it under one condition, and that is I'll report directly to the president, and then I have control over my budget, and I have the ability to do what I need to do." And [the administration] says, "No, that's not the way it's going to be." To me, that proves my point -- that they are always going to be the stepchild, so the only way to solve that problem is to pull them out, give them their own budget, make them their own agency.

NJ: Hurricane season starts in June. Will FEMA be prepared?

Brown: I sincerely, from the bottom of my heart, believe that we are worse off. And I believe that from what people inside FEMA are telling me. Look at what [acting FEMA Director David] Paulison is saying. He's still got a couple of hundred slots he can't fill. People are so busy within FEMA right now trying to do the reorganization stuff. It takes so much effort, and FEMA is so small.

NJ: What is the appropriate role of the military in disaster response?

Brown: We should rely on the Department of Defense. I think DOD and NorthCom [the U.S. Northern Command, the military's new homeland-security unit] have a valid role. But I think, if you ask almost any governor, you ask any emergency manager, if we become too reliant upon DOD, that will weaken the state and local mechanism even more, because they will know that they don't have to worry about it, because DOD will come in and save them. And the mission, the objective, should be to strengthen state and local governments, not make them even weaker than they already are ... because the stronger they are to handle disasters, the less DHS and FEMA have to get involved at all.

NJ: But the lesson of Katrina is that a disaster can wipe out state and local infrastructure.

Brown: And that's why, when those situations occur, you have to have a strong, robust FEMA in partnership with DOD that can come in and save the day.

NJ: NorthCom has complained about being underused and about poor communication.

Are those complaints valid?

Brown: I think [they are] valid. One of the problems that [NorthCom Cmdr. Timothy] Keating ran into, which I found embarrassing during Katrina, was with the USS Comfort. I had requested the ship, and it's moving into Mississippi, because Mississippi wanted it for medical purposes. So I gave the order through NorthCom to move that ship there. As it was making its way to Mississippi, Mississippi decided they no longer needed it. The Comfort is primarily a medical ship, so I made the decision, "Steam on to New Orleans, because we can use you in New Orleans for medical triage." And a certain U.S. senator became ballistic that that ship was going to bypass Mississippi. That senator called and screamed at me. And I said, "Well, your state doesn't want it. Your governor doesn't need it anymore, so it is best utilized somewhere else." [The senator responded,] "Well, I don't care. I want it in my state." He called [DHS Secretary Michael] Chertoff and convinced Chertoff to use the ship there. And Keating is, I'm sure, ready to pull his hair out, because there is an e-mail that finally gets to me that says, "I'm fed up. Somebody tell me where the Comfort is going or I'm sending it back to Baltimore," or wherever it was. It was that kind of baloney that was going on. And it was [Mississippi Republican Sen. Trent] Lott. [The senator's office did not return National Journal's calls for comment.]

NJ: After the storm, the Senate came back into session to get money out overnight. Was the congressional response to Katrina too rushed?

Brown: I don't think the general public understands that most of the initial money that gets allocated in those [emergency supplementals] goes into the disaster relief fund to pay for things that we're already spending money on. Paying for the transfer of urban search-and-rescue teams and all the contracts that we're suddenly trying to get -- water or MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] -- or to reimburse DOD for airlift capabilities. That's money that's being spent for response.

So, I'm all for [Congress] rushing back into session to make sure that the disaster relief fund has enough money in it for us to keep paying the bills. But they ought to step back sometimes before they start saying, "We just appropriated \$60 billion for the Gulf." Well, for what exactly? Is it for housing programs? What are you going to do with it?

NJ: Because that money is not going to end up in the wallets of victims?

Brown: Some of it does, but when you get outside the Beltway, and if the figure is \$60 billion, they think that Congress and the president have allocated \$60 billion to go to rebuilding of schools and highways and to help individuals, when what a lot of it has probably gone to is to reimburse DOD for all the things we assigned them to do.

NJ: How has your impression of President Bush changed as a result of your experience in government?

Brown: I still like the guy. But I think he has a tendency to get overconfident. And I think that's what happened with FEMA, and I think that's what was happening in the Gulf. People say he was detached. He wasn't detached, because I can tell you I was on the phone with him every single day until I got the boot. But the problem was, I think, that he is disengaged from the minutiae of what's happening to FEMA. I think in the whole Katrina thing -- to him it was, "Well, my God, Brown's done all this other stuff. He'll do it in Katrina, too."

NJ: You said you had good discussions with the president about Katrina. What kind of questions did he have?

Brown: One in particular -- I made a statement to him that about 90 percent of the population had been displaced in New Orleans. And he was really astounded that it was 90 percent of the population. He was really concerned about where are these people going, and do we have a plan in place to house them. And I saw that as an opportunity to take a dig at some of the things I had been fighting for that I wasn't getting. "Well, no, sir, we don't have a plan for it, because my budget for catastrophic housing was cut by DHS."

NJ: What did he say?

Brown: "Well, you've got to go fix it! Pull those plans off the shelf and go make it happen." I think that George W. Bush and [former FEMA Director and Bush campaign manager] Joe Allbaugh are peas in a pod in how they operate. It is: "Explain to me what the problem is. Give me two or three alternatives for how it can be fixed. I'm going to choose one of those. Now go run and do it. And I expect you to do it; I expect you to make it happen."

NJ: Since you had described the problems to him, why was he in Mobile, Ala., on September 2 saying everything was great?

Brown: Because that is his nature. People can say I'm trying to defend him, but I'm not, I'm just trying to tell you what I think is going on in his head -- that he feels this obligation to rally the troops. He feels this obligation to give this positive [vision], "We're going to make these things happen." That's the way he looks at the world: "We're going to make these things happen."

I wish he had cracked heads more, but I also fault myself. And I have said that is one of the crucial mistakes that I made. It's that typical Washington, D.C., thing. You are doing a press conference, and you are standing with the governor, and it's: "All of us are working as a team. Everything is going great." And I, honest to God, wish I had just stood up and said, "You know, this thing sucks. This really is awful. This is bigger than anything we've faced before. I'm having a hard time getting things moving. I don't know what the mayor is doing down there. I don't know why he used the Superdome as an evacuation center. And I am asking the American public to be patient with me, because this is ugly. This isn't working."

NJ: Did Bush know you were concerned that FEMA was unprepared for a disaster?

Brown: President Bush sent [former Secretary of State] Colin Powell and [Florida Gov.] Jeb [Bush] and I to the [South Asian] tsunami [region] four or five days afterward or so. And I came back, and in the Oval Office I told the president that we were not ready for something like that happening here. And I tried to engage him at that point about this. In D.C., we always talk about 30,000-foot-level discussions. With the president, I was trying to have a 100,000-foot-level discussion -- that we are not prepared, that we are not doing the kind of planning and exercises that we need to do for housing, response, medical care in this country if we have that kind of natural disaster.

NJ: And what was his response?

Brown: His response that day? "Well, go get ready." What I should have done in that Oval Office meeting was say, "I need you to tell [OMB Director Josh] Bolten or tell [then-DHS

Secretary Tom] Ridge or whomever to give me the money to do the catastrophic planning." That's a mistake that I made.

NJ: Your critics say this is just Mike Brown trying to restore his reputation by destroying everybody else's.

Brown: That would be true if I hadn't been doing anything for the [previous] two years trying to fix it. Then you would be absolutely right. But if you go back and you read what I had been trying to do for the previous two years within the system, everything that I had said internally, I am now just saying it externally.

NJ: There was a month or so when you were the punch line in an awful lot of jokes. What effect did that have on you?

Brown: I'm too old to stay up late, so I missed most of those. But my daughter would inform me -- "Gosh, Dad, guess what Leno said about you last night." And she would tell me the ones that were truly funny. The mean ones, I guess I never heard.

It was devastating. I was pretty much immobilized for the first 30 days. I have a fairly strong faith, and I have a very strong support group out there in terms of friends all over the country, family, professional relationships. And they all encouraged me to take some time off, go to our place in New Mexico, sit and stare out the window, and watch the deer and look for the bear and all that stuff -- which I did. And by the end of the year, I was ready to go again.