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Tom Bossert

White House Press Briefing on Hurricane Harvey

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Everyone, sorry to move from one serious topic to another, but I wanted to come out and speak to you a little bit about Hurricane Harvey, the federal government's preparations, the state and local governments' preparations. If I could, I'll try to stick to the themes of informing you, then maybe influencing, and then maybe inspiring. Maybe the last will be a little bit too far for me to go.

Our highest priority at this point is the safety of the public. And by that, we mean everyone in the path of the storm, but also the safety of the responders. So, life safety here is our priority.

I want to walk through a few things that we've done. State and local officials have the lead for this, as always. We encourage individual responsibility and planning, as always. And I would stress that this is a serious storm. As you've seen from the reporting, we've had significant rainfall predicted. Storm surge in Texas and Louisiana over the weekend and into the next week are forecast to be serious.



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This could remain a dangerous storm for several days, and certainly we don't want to lose any life. Flooding, flash flooding, and other high wind damages -- although we expect this to be a rain event more so than a wind event -- neither of those can be counted upon. So taking this seriously and preparing is very important.

Right now, President Trump and his entire team have been actively engaged with the state and local officials in Texas and Louisiana preparing for this storm. As you know, President Trump spoke to both governors today, spoke to his FEMA Administrator, Brock Long, and myself and General Kelly. He also spoke to Acting Secretary Duke. We did that this morning around 10:15 a.m.

Under that leadership team -- we couldn't have a better team, to be honest. Under the leadership team at DHS, we're in good hands at the federal level. As you might know, the Secretary of Homeland Security and the FEMA Administrator are responsible for bringing together the firepower of the federal government to assist the state and local governments.

But the state and local governments are in the lead here, and we've got a lot of respect for and a lot of faith in the governors of these respective states, as well, directly in the path.

So Governor John Bel Edwards in Louisiana has a strong handle on what he's doing, and Governor Abbott in Texas likewise.

So what we'd like to do is reinforce their planning efforts, challenge the people in the path to be prepared, to listen to their institutions and their state and local governments. Now is not the time to lose faith in your government institutions. Those emergency managers giving you advice and making recommendations for you to evacuate are doing so with your best interest at heart. We encourage you to listen to them.

And then, lastly, I'd encourage a little shameless plug here for all Americans to visit Ready.gov. It sounds like something that might not teach you anything. Maybe you know how to take care of yourself, but I think maybe you'll learn something if you go there and it would help you and your family.

So with that, I'll take some questions. If I could start with Jon Karl.





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Question: Tom, give us an idea of what the President is doing to monitor the developments of the storm and what he'll be doing as he moves to Camp David this weekend. How is he going to be in touch with federal officials and local officials?

Mr. Bossert: First, I'll start with what he has done. We've been giving him fairly regular briefings. And by "we," I mean John Kelly and myself. We've also had him in touch with his Secretary of Homeland Security and his FEMA Administrator.

That started several weeks ago, really several months ago, as we transitioned into this administration. You saw President Trump visit FEMA, give a talk to the team over there, but also to set his clear expectations for his new FEMA Administrator. I've known Administrator Long now for 15 years. We couldn't have picked a finer leader. He's had state director experience. He's had FEMA experience. He's absolutely the top of the top.

And what the President will do as we move forward is continue talking directly with them, directly with the governors. If they have any unmet needs, that's our problem. The President won't tolerate that. But he'll also continue talking to me and the Secretary -- now Chief of Staff Kelly.

And as we move out to Camp David, as you know, he's got the full resources and capability to communicate with us.

Question: Will the President sign an emergency declaration before landfall -- that has happened in the past -- to pre-prepare and set the funding in motion even before the event happens? Is that being contemplated? Will that be done today?

Mr. Bossert: That's being contemplated, and what we'll do is take the governors' request. I believe the governors actually made that request. As you know, the process works thusly; first, the governor assesses whether he has unmet needs and the affected communities are unable to respond collectively to this event. If he makes that determination and a number of other statutory requirements, he then requests of the President federal assistance. That request moves through the FEMA regional administrator, to the FEMA Administrator, up to the President. I believe it's in that process right now.



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Once it gets to the President of the United States with a formal recommendation from his FEMA Administrator, he'll act on that very quickly. I'm under the impression that the governor of Texas has made that request and it's at FEMA right now.

Question: Would you anticipate it tonight?

Mr. Bossert: If all the conditions are met and if it's appropriate to provide federal assistance, I believe the President will be very aggressive in leaning forward and declaring that disaster.

Question: Tom, Iowa Senator Chuck Grassley urged the President not to repeat the mistakes of the past -- 2005 Katrina, specifically. How much is that in the back of your mind as you prepare for landfall of Harvey?

And also, in hurricanes past, typically there were events where the hurricane goes through, and then you come in in the aftermath to pick up the pieces. I know -- Mark Lemondi [ph] and I were at Katrina in 2005. We saw what happened there. This time, though, this is going to be a multi-day event. What sort of challenges does that present in terms of trying to get aid to people who need it immediately while you still have buckets of rain coming down?

Mr. Bossert: Yeah, so a number of good questions there. I'd start with the first one. I was also in and through, and had a role at FEMA during Hurricane Katrina. I remember it very clearly and had a role in helping our government write the "lessons learned" report from it. And so I think it's not just what's on my mind, but it's on the minds of all the emergency managers in our community, especially those in Texas and Louisiana. That experience is still in their memory. It's still in their experience, their muscle memory. And what we've done has gotten a lot better as a government.

Congress has gotten better. It passed laws to allow us the flexibility we need to employ, not just deploy, resources and assets in advance of an event, which Brock Long has marshaled heretofore. He'll employ those resources carefully if the state requests and we grant that declaration, which I suspect we might.

And then lastly, to your point about how difficult it is to get assistance to people, I would say this: You never want to plan for the federal government to swoop in and provide everything that you need when you need it just on time, right?



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It's going to be 4.6 million people, I guess, in the path of the storm, depending on how the forecast goes. That's a lot of people. We encourage people to be ready, be prepared, take some responsibility for their own safety as the next 72 hours unfold.

Of course, food, water, shelter are the primary concerns. But then secondly, when we provide that assistance, we do it in such a way that's so organized -- if things work out the way they're supposed to -- that the assistance flows either directly to the individuals that are eligible for it, or it flows to the state and local officials who have the logistics trail in place to provide that food, water, and those commodities, and the shelter.

And lastly, I'd like to make a plug for non-governmental organizations as well. As you know, we've got a number of organizations, like the Red Cross and others, to manage shelters.

Those types of resources are imperative to the people that are confronting this peril, and I'd like to thank them for their work.

Before I take that next question, I would say that I just came off of what FEMA organizes, which is a conference call -- actually, a video teleconference call with all the affected parties, and there were no unmet needs reported. We went across all the emergency support functions of the federal government, but also the state and local governments and the non-governmental organizations, and they all seem to be well-postured. And they didn't report to us any additional needs. In fact, they all reported that they're in the right operational posture right now to help the American people in the path of this storm.

I'm going to take a question in the back, please.

Question: Thank you, sir. The President tweeted out a photo of you briefing him this morning. What questions did President Trump have for you about the preparations that are underway?

Mr. Bossert: So the President had three primary concerns. His first concern was the life safety and evacuation timing. Are people getting out of harm's way that need to get out of harm's way? And then his second concern was, do we have the appropriate resources to bring to bear? That was a question he directed at Administrator Long and Elaine Duke. Brock Long reported to him that we did, in fact, have all those resources pre-deployed.



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And, really, the third concern from the President's perspective after hearing the briefing was not only that the people in harm's way in Texas be prepared and be evacuated as appropriate, but that the people in Louisiana, should the forecast wobble in any direction, also be prepared.

And so, as we see this move to the south -- the forecast track -- don't lose track of the fact that we've got low-level areas all through the coast of Louisiana. Fifty-percent of the population of Louisiana lives on that coastal region. New Orleans, as we've seen before, to the allusion to Katrina, lives below sea level. They rely a great deal on pumps to pump water out.

The Army Corps of Engineers, with FEMA's coordination, have been providing necessary electric power generation to those pumps to make sure that if the conditions were to materialize in New Orleans, that we don't have necessarily bad flooding that would put lives in harm's way.

And so those were his three concerns: New Orleans, Texas, life safety, and evacuations.

Yeah, thank you. I'm sorry, can I come here please?

Question: Thank you. Can you tell us specifically who is going to be traveling with the President this weekend? You mentioned that you will be. Who will be accompanying you?

And is there any discussion about the President canceling his trip, in light of everything that you're saying? And then can you just give us a sense of how he and you and your teams are thinking about this? Is this a storm, are you anticipating, that will be of the magnitude of Katrina, given all the comparisons?

Mr. Bossert: I don't want to make that comparison. I guess the first answer is, I don't have any insight into the travel package with the President, but I do have insight into the resources he has available to him at Camp David. So it is just as well-resourced as the White House, so he'll have access to anybody, all the communications means that he might need. So it's not a trip. I wouldn't characterize it as a trip. It's just 45 minutes up the road, as you all know. For those of you in America thinking Camp David is far away, it's right up the road.

So, secondly, I would say that we're not seeing this -- and every disaster is different, so I don't want to make any starch comparisons here -- strong comparisons, rather. Stark comparisons.



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But I would say this: For the person affected, if your house is flooded, it doesn't matter if 10,000 other houses are flooded or 10 houses are flooded. So what you need to do is be prepared for your own damages, your own consequences. The governments need to be prepared for the uniqueness of each community. We've got some low-level islands here -- Galveston and others -- that might be in the storm surge path.

But Katrina was a massive event. It was a staggering event that took place in just the perfect condition, and, as you know, we had a flooding event associated with levy failure and other things. So I don't want people to draw those comparisons. I won't characterize the magnitude of this event until it's over.

Going to go here.

Question: The nation's fuel supply chain may be impacted by this hurricane. What are you doing to prepare for that? Give me a sense about the concerns that you've expressed to the President about that particular issue.

Mr. Bossert: Yeah, so a number of things inform my thinking here at the White House for the President. And one of the things I hope to do is have full faith and trust -- and I do in this case -- in the responders at the state and local level and at the Federal Emergency Management Agency to coordinate and bring to bear the full resources of the Cabinet to keep this regional event focused on the life-saving, life-sustaining efforts and to make sure Americans in harm's way are protected.

Second concern you have, though, is making sure that that regional event doesn't lose containment and become a national or international event. And so as the refining capacity, as I understand it, approximately 50 percent of the Gulf Coast refining capacity and a third of the U.S. capacity is in the storm path. That's something we have to take very seriously. There have been reports on that speculating on potential gas price increases and so forth.

I'm not in a position to confirm those increases, but I will tell you that the last report I received was that the appropriate steps were being taken by the private sector to take their refineries into a position where they were ready to withstand some wind and some flooding.

We still have to wait it out, let Mother Nature play its course, and see what kind of damage is on the other side.



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But the hope is they'll be able to fix those damages, repair them quickly, and be right back in business. And so, while a large proportion is affected, it might not cause a large and long-term disruption.

Question: South Florida right now is marking the 25th anniversary of Hurricane Andrew. So in that situation, the FEMA response was incredibly slow. By comparison, how quickly are you prepared to move into Texas?

Mr. Bossert: We've made leaps and bounds since 1992 in our federal planning, in our state and local planning, and as an emergency management community as a whole. We had a federal response plan that failed. We updated that federal response plan after 1992. Then we had a 9/11 event that caused us to create a national response plan. We tested it in Katrina and found deficiencies, and created a national response framework. A great deal of effort went into changing those names of those documents, and a great deal of effort went into training the people to execute those changes.

And so I've got a tremendous amount of experience here and a tremendous amount of confidence in the people at FEMA, and the people at the state and local levels in these emergency management operations centers. And I actually have a lot of confidence in the American people that they're going to do what they need to do in this case.

Question: Can you give us a timetable? How quickly can you move into the area then?

Mr. Bossert: Well, it's not about how quickly we can move into the area. The federal government has already pre-positioned all sorts of resources in the area. So what we do is we begin helping people from before a storm landfall. We're already helping people in a way, depending how you assess and define that. So we're already providing resources. In fact, I mentioned as an example, the Army Corps is providing extra generation capacity. That's going to help a lot of people if those pumps stay running.

So we're already leaning forward, and the authorities that were given to us by Congress after Katrina have allowed us to do that in a more full-throated way.

Sir.



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Question: You mentioned in your opening statement that now is not the time to lose faith in your government institutions. That struck me as a very interesting line coming from somebody behind the White House podium. Can you talk a little bit -- expand on that a little bit? Is there a fear that you have or the administration has that either political climate or rhetoric being used either in this town or more broadly could have real impact on lives -- in this case, people maybe not listening to a government if they lost faith in their government, as you warned?

Mr. Bossert: No, not at all. I'm telling you from my own personal experience that it's important in every emergency, and I've been through a lot of them, to remind people to listen to their state and local officials. Because, inevitably, people don't, and then they end up thinking they wish they had. Right? So you have nothing to lose but your life, and I want you to take it seriously, and I want you to listen to those state and local officials.

In fact, I'm not worried about you losing faith in the federal government; I'm worried about you losing faith in the state and local government that provides you the best information that they have. And so don't worry about parsing whether they're right or wrong. If they're asking you to evacuate and telling you to do it now, listen to their advice.

Oftentimes people try to supplant their own judgement for theirs, and what they don't understand is the number of time and man-hours that go into planning those evacuation routes. You have to coordinate them with other counties farther north, and you have to do road closures and reverse the traffic flow, and there are things that people just might not be aware of. So have a little faith in the professionalism of your emergency managers, listen to their advice, and you'll be better off for it.

And lastly, I'd say if you do, and you're out of harm's way, you don't put a responder's life in jeopardy later, and you allow us to recover more quickly, which is really the goal.

Question: Because there has been some controversy in Texas -- I'm thinking of Corpus Christi -- about mandatory evacuation, can you add what FEMA's experience is, particularly related to the length of flooding that might follow this storm, about the federal government's perspective on whether local officials should or should not declare mandatory evacuations?



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Mr. Bossert: No, I'm going to leave that judgment to the state and local officials that make those determinations. A lot is said about mandatory versus not mandatory, and that's one of the responsibilities I have here to enforce both of those decisions and to reinforce them with rhetoric. I think the idea here is, we have faith in their judgment. The people affected by those local government officials should as well. Mandatory or not, if you're asked to leave, I think it's a good idea to make those preparations and take those steps.

Question: Related question on that. There's been some concern that patrol checkpoints for the Border Patrol north of the border in Texas are being maintained and that could dissuade some people from getting a shelter. Are you addressing that?

Mr. Bossert: Let me understand your question. There are people that can't get across the border for life-saving purposes?

Question: No, not across the border. North of the border there are immigration inspection checkpoints, and supposedly those are being maintained, as well as the fears that there could be checks at shelters. So that would dissuade people from evacuating from --

Mr. Bossert: I haven't heard that, but people shouldn't be fearful of going to a shelter and receiving food and water. That's not a problem.

Question: Tom, you have described your experience and Director Long's experience, but this is the first time President Trump will be in charge for a national disaster of this -- natural disaster of this scale. What do you think he has to project in terms of leadership or skillset for the country to feel that he has led well in this situation?

Mr. Bossert: This is right up President Trump's alley. Not only has he shown leadership here, but his entire focus has been on making America great again. He is focused on the Americans that voted him into office. He's focused on the Americans that didn't vote him into office. He's focused on effecting positive change in this country. And when we go in and brief him on the preparations for this hurricane, he is acutely focused on making sure that -- and just the right thing, by the way -- that the American people in the storm's path have what they need.



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His questions weren't about geopolitical issues or about large political consequences. His questions were about, are you doing what it takes to help the people that are going to be affected by this storm.

You might not, if you're living in the northeast, think about this storm over the weekend; you might go about your business. But the President is worried about the 4.6 million people or so that are in that area of Texas that are going to be affected by this, because to them this is the most important thing they are going to have to worry about for the next 24, 48, 72 or more hours.

So from my perspective, I was extremely happy with his leadership instincts on this, and I think that that will carry through as you see him respond to this event.

Sir.

Question: Governor Abbott has requested disaster declaration before landfall. Is that something the President would do? And does it really make much of a difference in the response, one way or the other?

Mr. Bossert: It can make a little bit of a difference here, and it makes every bit of a difference to the spirit mentality of the people that have to employ those resources. So to the extent that it meets the criteria, I would advise him to consider it very favorably. And to the extent that any ambiguity be cleared up at the implementation level, people know that they have the ability to employ resources for FEMA to start mission assigning and providing money to the other departments and agencies to do what they have to do. It's a good idea and there is precedent for it.

Question: Was there any discussion with the President about him coming out and addressing the nation, given the magnitude, potential magnitude, of this storm? Should people be hearing from their Commander-in-Chief about the preparations the government is taking, and just hear it from his mouth that he believes that you should be listening to state and local officials and offer assurances at a time like this?



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Mr. Bossert: Yeah, I think at the time when it's appropriate, the President will come out and address this. I think right now what's more appropriate is that the faces and the voices of this event be the two governors of the affected states.

Remember, no matter what we do, no matter how forward- leaning we are, all the federal families here support the two governors in this event and any governor in this event, and they're there to support the local officials.

So this is kind of an enshrined principle of federalism. If and when this becomes of the magnitude and the severity that it overwhelms the state and affect local officials and the President declares such, and issues a declaration that this is a major disaster, provides all the federal assistance, then it might be a good opportunity for him to come out and speak to you on it. But for right now, let's hope and pray that people follow the advice of their officials; that they do what they have to do to stay out of harm's way, that there is no loss of life in this event.

Let's say a little prayer for those that are affected over the weekend. Know that here in the White House, over across the street at DHS and FEMA, and all the way down to the lowest level -- local level -- in Louisiana and Texas, that people are doing the right thing.

You'll hear from the President later, I'm sure, if it merits. Let's hope that this event fizzles and that the forecasts are all wrong, but I don't think that is the right thing to hope for right now. We're executing and we're going to do what it takes to save people's lives and to make their lives easier as they sustain damage.

So I really appreciate your time today. Thank you very much. And we'll keep you informed, okay?

Thank you.