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CONGRESSIONAL RECORD — SENATE

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Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, I yield back my time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tem, The Democratic leader.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, this has been cleared with the majority. I ask unanimous consent that Senator LIEBERMAN be permitted to be absent from today's pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE TO HURRICANE KATRINA

Mr. REID. Mr. President, there are many things we do not yet know about the Government’s response to Hurricane Katrina, but two things are very clear: The Federal Government’s response was unacceptable, and the victims and all Americans deserve to know why.

Its answer to 9/11, preparedness for national emergencies was supposed to be a priority for our Government. Americans were made to believe that the Government was doing everything it could to prepare for terrorist attacks, natural disasters or any domestic crisis. In Katrina makes it clear that we failed. We must find out why, and we need to do it soon, to make sure that devastation, such as caused by this hurricane, never happens again, whether natural disaster or act of terrorists.

When we faced a similar situation after 9/11, Democrats and Republicans came together and established an independent blue ribbon commission. I am sad to see the Republicans now want a different approach. We don’t know the details of the compromise, but I have been told to one on a couple of occasions very lightly about having either chairmen, ranking members, and few members from some of the committees to get together. It would be a joint task force of the House and Senate.

I have great confidence in the Senate committee structure. The chairmen and the ranking members are where they are based on the rules of the Senate, something that is called seniority. Democrats do it differently than the Republicans, but it is still basically a seniority system. So that is why I have confidence in the HELP Committee, with MIKE ENZI from Wyoming, a fair man, and T.ED KENNEDY, the ranking member, a fair man; also, Homeland Security with SUSAN COLLINS and JOE LIEBERMAN.

I could go through the whole committee structure we have in the Senate. They do good work together, as indicated by what has been going on in the Judiciary Committee with the relationship developed with Senator SPEICHER and Senator LEAHY. At a very difficult time in the history of our country, with two Supreme Court vacancies, they are working their way through this. I do not think it is the time to invent something new.

Yesterday, the Republicans unveiled very briefly their proposal to investigate the events of last week. They called a press conference. I do want to say that we have a role for committees. We have a committee structure in place to investigate matters.

I have had somebody ask, well, why should Secretary Chertoff have to appear at a committee in the House and then one in the Senate? That is the way we do things around here. That is what oversight is all about. We have the ability to do things on a short-term basis under what we call regular order, have Congress itself, in its role in oversight, do what is done in the ordinary course. We have seen what happens when this administration investigates itself or any administration investigates itself. It simply does not work.

There are serious concerns about this so-called Republican approach. That is why Americans deserve answers independent of politics. That is why Democrats and Republicans preferred an independent commission for investigating 9/11. It took awhile before the President signed on to it, but when he finally did, we got great people such as HAMPTON and Kean. The Government did a wonderful job as the chairman of this 9/11 Commission. They came up with facts that have been supported. They spent a
Mr. DAYTON. Mr. President, I echo some of the remarks the Democratic leader made. I am about to leave this Chamber to go to a behind-closed-doors hearing of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs with the acting director of operations for FEMA and the Commandant of the Coast Guard. I am told that the chairman of that committee, the distinguished Senator from Maine, and the ranking member from Connecticut, tried to get this hearing in public but that the administration officials would not appear in a public session. I think the public deserves to and would benefit from having these people with key roles in this recovery effort.

Similarly, on Tuesday evening, a majority of us in the Senate met with 10 members of the Cabinet, 10 Secretaries—all of them had important things to say—as well as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the head of the Coast Guard. That briefing should have been in a public setting. There was not a single remark made by anyone that was not unclassified and should not have been available to all of the people of this country, certainly those who are most beleaguered, who are looking for answers to the questions that the Democratic leader and others on both sides of the aisle have raised.

We had a brief time for questions. We were not able to ask those questions of the administration officials in a public setting before the American people. Yet the President is coming forth now with a second request for funding, $51.8 billion or so, in response to the devastation that has been caused by Hurricane Katrina. The President, I think, has the right to ask for additional help to put the needs of the relief effort and basically try to calm the waters, but more importantly execute an excellent decision to have the Vice President, Dick Cheney, who is a no-nonsense individual. He has been Vice President—will note that the Vice President and himself has looked at an issue, decides how to get it done, and moves forward. He did that as Defense Secretary. He has done it, obviously, if they are pursued logically, how the money is being spent. So I congratulate the House.

In addition, I think the President’s decision, along with the Vice President, to have the Vice President physically going there and being on the ground in that region is a very positive step in our efforts to get order in the process of delivering relief.

Anybody who knows the Vice President—and I have had the good fortune to serve with him in the House and fortunate to serve with him here while he has been Vice President—will note that he is a no-nonsense individual. He goes out and finds out what needs to be done to get the best results for resolving the problem, and moves forward. He did that as Defense Secretary. He has done it, obviously, as Vice President. He will bring immediate coherence, intelligence, and aggressive action in solving the problem and will move forward with the complexities of this reconstruction and relief effort. I think it is an excellent decision to have the Vice President step into the middle of this effort and basically try to calm the waters and put together efficiently what is going on in the area of the Federal relief effort. However, it does lead to the point I made earlier—