



Storm Front

Local and Federal Authorities
Battle to Control Disaster Relief
**Florida Beat Back Washington
During Hurricane Wilma;
A Video-Conference Coup
Mr. Fugate Seizes 300 Phones**

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MARCO ISLAND, Fla. -- Shortly after Hurricane Wilma's 120-mile-an-hour winds died down and the rains passed, Florida's emergency-management czar, Craig Fugate, helicoptered to this exclusive resort town to survey the damage.

The lush villas had survived the October storm unscathed but Mr. Fugate was agitated. He thought he had outmaneuvered federal emergency officials to take control of the relief effort, but now discovered that federal agents had been on the island, without his knowledge, conducting their own review. "Unbelievable," he fumed. "Washington managed to sneak in some spies after all."



Craig Fugate

The power struggle that unfolded in Florida during Hurricane Wilma is shaping a debate about how the country should respond to disasters, both natural and man-made. The big question: Should state or federal authorities be in control of recovery efforts? Giving the debate more urgency are growing concerns about a possible flu outbreak and experts' warnings that next year's hurricane season may be even deadlier than this summer's record-breaking series.

The Bush administration says Katrina showed that some states can't deal with large-scale disasters. The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the Federal Emergency Management Agency, wants to intervene in response efforts and is pressing local officials to vet their emergency plans. It's also looking to equip locally based federal employees with cameras and communications gear to provide Washington with real-time disaster information.

Adm. Timothy J. Keating, who heads U.S. Northern Command, a newly created military body overseeing homeland defense, has told lawmakers that active-duty forces should be given complete authority for responding to catastrophic disasters. President Bush has already suggested that the military be ready to quarantine cities and states in the event of a flu pandemic.

Local officials, from small-town sheriffs to big-state governors, say Louisiana's problems during Katrina were the exception, not the rule. They say the Department of Homeland Security and the Pentagon are over-reaching and that a federal takeover of relief work will make matters worse.

The head of the Washington state National Guard, Maj. Gen. Timothy J. Lowenberg, suggested in emails to colleagues that Adm. Keating's suggestion amounted to a "policy of domestic regime change."

Days before Wilma churned through his state, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush appeared before Congress alongside the governors of Texas and Arizona. "I can say with certainty that federalizing emergency response to catastrophic events would be a disaster as bad as Hurricane Katrina," he told lawmakers. "If you federalize, all the innovation, creativity and knowledge at the local level would subside."

Florida may be the best-equipped state to handle disasters because of its experience tackling the big storms that have battered it regularly since 1992. Hurricane Wilma was the sixth major hurricane of the record-breaking 2005 storm season and the third to reach Category 5 status. At its peak on Oct. 19, Wilma was the most powerful Atlantic storm ever recorded.

Gov. Bush was so confident of his state's ability to deal with the looming disaster, and the capabilities of his Division of Emergency Management chief, Mr. Fugate, that he promised residents ice, water and food within 24 hours of landfall. As it turned out, these promises turned out to be overly ambitious.



A fifth-generation Floridian, Mr. Fugate, 46 years old, is treated like a rock star by first responders and emergency managers. He rose from firefighter and paramedic to become in 2001 director of the state's emergency responses. He operates out of a mobile command center, a souped-up bus with plasma TV monitors, meeting rooms and a special air-filtration system to block chemical weapons. During Wilma, it was filled with firefighters, police and volunteers eager just to shake his hand.

Orange Cap, Blue Cap

Mr. Fugate has created a response system to prepare Florida for everything from tornadoes to terrorists. The state coordinates purchasing of supplies, for example, so that emergency services can work together. Even fire-hose connections are the same from Key West to Panama City. New York, by

contrast, has at least six different hose connections, meaning Albany firefighters can't use their equipment in Manhattan without an adaptor.

When a crisis is at its peak, Mr. Fugate wears a tattered, orange University of Florida Gators cap. He grew up near the university in Gainesville, Fla., and is a rabid fan. When the situation is under control, he puts on a clean, blue Gators cap.

"No one in the country knows more about preparing for and responding to hurricanes than Craig Fugate," says Bruce Baughman, a former federal FEMA operations chief, who is now head of Alabama's Emergency Management Agency.

But watching Wilma lurch toward Florida with growing alarm, the Department of Homeland Security wasn't taking any chances. FEMA had taken the brunt of the blame for the slow response to Katrina, culminating in the resignation of its top official, Michael Brown, less than two weeks into the disaster. That was followed by a public outcry for FEMA to act more assertively.

For Wilma, federal officials began mobilizing emergency reporting teams and arranged for hundreds of satellite telephones to be sent into the state. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff hunted for a Coast Guard officer to head up the response, just as he did after Katrina and before Hurricanes Ophelia and Rita.

Mr. Chertoff, a lawyer by training, had risen quickly from federal prosecutor to assistant U.S. attorney general. In February, he was charged with transforming Homeland Security's dysfunctional bureaucracy into a finely tuned agency focused on preventing terrorists from attacking an American city. But Katrina showed him that nature was also a potent foe. That set off an urgent scramble in the middle of hurricane season to prevent a similar calamity.

Mr. Chertoff blames information gaps and a lack of detailed planning for the Katrina fiasco, in which federal officials often didn't know where victims were, how many people needed rescuing and where aid needed to be delivered. One solution he has offered: federal emergency reconnaissance teams that would fan out in a disaster area and report back real-time information for use at all levels of government.

As Mr. Chertoff made his plans to assist Florida, the U.S. Northern Command moved to ready the Fifth Army to take over the role of coordinating military assistance in the state. Northcom, as it's known, was created after Sept. 11 as the first standing combat command in the country since the Civil War. Its role is to coordinate military responses to terrorist attacks in the U.S. and help states cope with natural disasters.

No one in Florida had requested Northcom's assistance. But neither had anyone in Texas when Hurricane Rita barreled up the Gulf in late September. Nevertheless, the Fifth Army was activated to help run the Rita response. Federal officials urged a hasty mass evacuation from Houston.

Mr. Fugate had his first run-in with Homeland Security at around that time, just before Rita passed over the Florida Keys en route to Texas. During a video conference, he says top Homeland Security officials pressed him for trivial details about his evacuation plans and demanded explanations for his every action.

According to Mr. Fugate and other officials present, he lost his cool. "I told them in no uncertain terms that I had moved more people during last year's hurricanes than had ever been moved before, and that I would be happy to sit there answering their stupid questions, but that I had a job to do."

Washington Seeks Control

State emergency coordinators dubbed Washington's constant requests for information "reindeer games," a reference to the 2000 movie with that title in which the phrase described a pointless exercise. Mr. Fugate kept a set of costume antlers in his office and in the run-up to Wilma he recalls holding them in his lap before one video conference call. Gov. Bush asked him what they were for. "In case they ask me stupid questions," he says he replied.

With Wilma, Washington wasn't asking questions -- it wanted control. On Oct. 18, Lt. General Robert T. Clark, commander of the Fifth Army at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, called the head of Florida's National Guard and said he wanted to start flying in equipment to establish a Joint Task Force Command, federal and state officials confirm.

The National Guard chief, Air Force General Douglas Burnett, says in a later interview that he was taken aback. "Did we need a three-star general from Texas to come to direct our response? No, we did not," he says.

Gov. Bush called Mr. Chertoff to complain. According to a senior federal official who overheard the call, Gov. Bush told the Homeland Security secretary that the federal government's unilateral actions were "insulting" to him personally, Mr. Fugate and all Florida citizens. Mr. Bush's spokeswoman and Homeland Security officials says they won't discuss details of the call.

The turning point took place at the daily video conference call on the morning of Oct. 20. Present were officials from Northcom, Homeland Security, FEMA, a handful of other agencies and the White House. Then, Mr. Fugate pulled off the equivalent of a boardroom coup.

Without warning federal officials, he announced the creation of "Wilma Command" to oversee the response. It was done according to the rules of Homeland Security's own National Incident Management System, or NIMS, mandated by President Bush after 9/11 to ensure that all levels of government worked from the same playbook. Its bedrock principle: one incident, one commander, no matter how many agencies send help.

It's a relatively new process that few state emergency officials have mastered. But Mr. Fugate knew what to do. He said the Wilma Command team would include himself, Gen. Burnett and Justin DeMello, the head of FEMA in Florida who was close with state officials. Then Mr. Fugate reached off camera and pulled Mr. Bush into the frame. "I'd now like to introduce the Incident Commander," he said, "The governor of Florida."

"Craig had outmaneuvered them and they knew it," recalls Mr. DeMello, the local FEMA representative. "There was nothing for them to say as under the NIMS they are required to support the incident commander." Mr. Fugate took the 300 satellite telephones Homeland Security had sent for its reporting teams and gave them to local emergency workers.

Homeland Security officials continued lobbying Florida to allow Mr. Chertoff to name a Coast Official Guard as the "Principal Federal Officer." But by Oct. 23, a day before landfall, they had given up. Northcom never activated the Fifth Army.

Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke says the department decided against sending a Principal Federal Officer to Florida -- the only storm-hit state since Katrina without one -- "given the state of Florida's high level of preparedness and their strong emergency-management experience." Northcom spokesman Michael Kucharek says the decision not to deploy forces was taken when Northcom saw that Florida's National Guard had the situation under control.

The only concession by state officials was to allow a team of Homeland Security officials to collect information for Mr. Chertoff from the state emergency operations center in Tallahassee. FEMA had a significant presence in the state although it operated under the auspices of state officials. Homeland Security officials did press ahead with plans to use department employees, such as federal building guards, as eyes on the ground.

The Storm Passes

Wilma didn't turn out to be the disaster many people expected. The storm entered Florida through the Everglades, missing densely populated areas on the west coast. Instead of breaking up, however, the storm maintained its strength when it hit the Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach areas.

Wilma Command had successfully evacuated vulnerable areas, maintained order and made sure there were enough police to prevent traffic disasters and mayhem at gas stations. In the first week of recovery, the response team moved more ice, food and water into south Florida than during the six storms of last year combined.

Still, it wasn't enough. Wilma knocked out power lines and substations throughout south Florida, leaving more than six million people without electricity. Demand for ice and water outstripped early supplies at many distribution centers in Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, thwarting Mr. Bush's promises of near immediate after-storm delivery. Basic goods, however, were available everywhere within 72 hours.

With Mr. Chertoff at his side two days after the storm, Gov. Bush said the blame was exclusively the state's.

Later that evening, in a parking lot across the street from a shopping mall, Mr. Fugate sat in his mobile command center and tried to console his boss via cellphone, telling him that no one could have done the job better. "Perhaps it was overambitious," he said into the phone, pulling the brim of his tattered orange cap down over his eyes. "But we can try again next year." The next day, Mr. Fugate switched to his blue hat.

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