

Johnson Institute

for Responsible Leadership

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Thad Allen served an illustrious career with the United States Coast Guard, retiring with the rank of Admiral and serving in the highest position, Commandant. He spent his career serving posts both at sea and on shore including: Commander Atlantic Area and U.S. Maritime Defense Zone Atlantic, Commanding office USCG headquarters and Chief of Staff from 2002-2006. Allen was appointed FEMA Deputy in-charge of search and rescue and recovery operations in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and was then given full command of Katrina relief efforts. He also led the Coast Guard's response to the earthquake in Haiti. Allen was chosen to serve as the National Incident Commander for the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill disaster. Upon retirement, Allen was a Senior Fellow at the Rand Corporation and is now Senior Vice President at Booz Allen Hamilton.

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Admiral Thad Allen: Leadership in a Crisis



Hurricane Katrina

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in southeastern Louisiana. In the hours that followed, the storm wreaked havoc along the Gulf Coast. In its wake it left 1,836 dead, hundreds of thousands homeless, and property damage estimated at \$81 billion. It was the deadliest U.S. hurricane in more than 75 years.

As the crisis unfolded, the news media conveyed horrifying images of stranded citizens, many of them African Americans, huddled in squalid conditions inside the badly damaged New Orleans Superdome. The death toll from the hurricane and subsequent flood was overwhelming, and yet the most pressing task was to rescue those who had managed to survive the initial crisis. Once out of immediate danger, the next step was keeping survivors alive and safe while a recovery plan was formulated. The world watched as federal, state, and local government agencies struggled to meet the needs of these distressed citizens.

Within a few days, many people began to turn a critical eye toward the federal government and, in particular, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for its apparent failure to get any traction in addressing the crisis. Local officials in the Gulf, political pundits, and media outlets claimed that FEMA, under the leadership of Michael Brown, was completely overwhelmed and had lost its credibility as the spearhead of federal relief efforts.

Over the Labor Day weekend, Vice Admiral Thad Allen, then Chief of Staff of the U.S. Coast Guard, was asked by Michael Chertoff, the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, if he would come to New Orleans to be the Deputy Principal Federal Official under Brown. His job was to take stock of the entire coordinated federal response and recovery effort specifically in New Orleans, while Brown remained responsible for the larger set of issues across all of the Gulf States. However, a few days later, on September 9, Allen was called to Baton Rouge. Secretary Chertoff told him that there was going to be a press conference in 30 minutes and that he was going to relieve Mike Brown as the Principal Official for



the entire federal response. Allen recalls that he had some trepidation about the assignment, having seen images of the chaos in New Orleans and elsewhere. He wondered if he could actually add value to the relief efforts:

I think if you believe ... there's no way to fix it ... you shouldn't take the job to begin with. You should take the job knowing that things may seem intractable, but part of the reason you're there is to create the art of the possible even where it appears that none exists.¹

Meanwhile, thousands of volunteers from around the country flocked to the region to offer assistance. One of them was Lisa Scales, an administrator at the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Lisa and many other volunteers were working out of a make-shift field office in Baton Rouge. They had no time to get caught up in the FEMA controversy. As Scales recalls, "We were just trying to make a difference and we didn't have much interest in what was happening with FEMA." However, there was a great deal of fatigue, and some frustration among the volunteers.

Scales recalls, "We had been assigned general roles, but there were no clear responsibilities, no clear priorities ... everyone was doing whatever was needed and working minute to minute."²

Upon his arrival in Baton Rouge, Admiral Allen saw that the relief efforts were floundering and that the volunteers themselves were overwhelmed and confused about their role and their jurisdictional authority. He knew that he immediately needed to focus their efforts and boost their morale. Allen recalls:

I asked to assemble as many [volunteers and other relief personnel] as we could in one location so I could talk to them. We got about [2,000 people] in a big, open space, and I got up on a desk with a loudhailer ... I explained I was giving them a firm, direct order and said, "You're to treat anyone you come in contact with that's been affected by this storm as if they were a member of your own family, as if they were your brother, mother, father or sister ... If you really do that, and you make a mistake, you will have erred on the side of doing too much, and that's okay. Also, if you err on the side of doing too much and

¹ Rich Cooper, "An interview with Adm. Thad Allen (USCG-Ret.)." *Defense Media Network*, November 16, 2010 (<http://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/an-interview-with-adm-thad-allen-uscg-ret/>).

² Lisa Scales, personal interview, January 30, 2012.

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1. Assess the situation and respond to what the situation presents, not what you want it to present.
2. Mobilize all assets at your disposal, including all governmental levels, nonprofit organizations, volunteers and the private sector.
3. Instill a commitment to unity of effort even when unity of command is not possible.
4. Hold yourself and others to a high standard of accountability and transparency.

When asked what skills helped him respond to these crisis situations, Allen was reflective:

Dealing with heterarchies, rather than hierarchies, that connect those things together and bind them to produce results, and the question of personal leadership when you don't have legal authority and all you may have is moral authority to bring people together to create unity of effort. The glue that does all that is trust, and how do you enable that? Those are characteristics that we need to build in people to start to move away from the parochial interest of a specific department or agency. And, when you're in one of these situations, you have to know when to step out of the role and move to the larger "meta-leadership" role that focuses you on the event or problem to the exclusion of the parochial interest of who's involved and looking to integrate and synchronize all the resources that could be available. Otherwise, you're not going to meet the expectations of the public looking for a whole of government or whole of community response."⁴¹



⁴¹ Allen interview, March 8, 2013

somebody has a problem with what you did, their problem is not with you, it's with me, because I gave you the order."³

Lisa Scales remembers that these words had a profound impact on the weary and demoralized volunteers.

We knew that some survivors were reluctant to seek government aid because they were illegal immigrants. They were afraid of being caught by the Immigration Service. They did not want to expose themselves and risk deportation. "Get them food. Treat them as a member of the family." These messages from Admiral Allen trickled down through the ranks and provided us with clear direction, focus, and hope.⁴

Underlying this heartwarming story is a lesson in strong leadership: leaders have clear values and priorities, they communicate those in both words and actions, they give clear guidance, and they empower their followers and constituents to take action. Tom Atkin, then a Coast Guard Captain and Chief of Staff to the Principal Federal Officer, had a similar encounter with Thad Allen.

One of Thad Allen's remarkable strengths is his ability to empower people. He empowered me to coordinate the federal response in New Orleans and [surrounding] regions. One of the parish presidents came to me and said he wanted Admiral Allen to give permission to relieve the water pressure on the lock. Without hesitation I responded, "Admiral Allen just did it ... you have his permission." The official looked puzzled because I had not called the Admiral to request his permission. I didn't need to call for his permission because he empowered me to make decisions and I

made them. However, I then called Allen and told him, "You just gave the parish president permission to do this." He said, "Ok, thanks for telling me." Admiral Allen's leadership credo is "Give them the guidance, trust what they are going to do, and regardless of what happens you've got their back." An interesting side note is that that the parish president didn't even need Admiral Allen's permission but people were looking to him for leadership, for guidance.⁵

A "Black Swan" Event

Hurricane Katrina was, in the words of Thad Allen, a "Black Swan" event – an incident so rare and so overwhelmingly destructive that it renders useless all routine responses. For such events, Allen argues a leader needs to make fundamental changes in his or her "mental model." Allen frequently talks about the need for leaders and organizations to continuously learn and adapt, especially in fast-paced crisis situations, citing the research of famed MIT Professor Peter Senge.⁶

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, Allen had to adjust his usual mental model of how to intervene following a disaster.

I don't think that early on in Katrina we really understood what had happened. It was no longer a hurricane when the levees were breached. What we had was a weapon of mass effect used on the City of New Orleans ... And you need to focus quite differently if that's what you are thinking about in terms of catastrophe.⁷

The new mental model for Hurricane Katrina meant coming to terms with the complete loss of government

³ "Thad W. Allen in the Spotlight as the Face of the Federal Response to the Gulf Oil Spill," *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2010, (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/27/AR2010052705616.html?hpid=topnews>).

⁴ Scales interview, January 30, 2012.

⁵ Tom Atkin, personal interview, May 10, 2013

⁶ See, for example, Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 2006.)

⁷ Kyra Phillips, "Adm. Thad Allen & His Remarkable Career," *CNN News Room*, July 8, 2010. (<http://newsroom.blogs.cnn.com/2010/07/08/adm-thad-allen-his-remarkable-career/>).

continuity in the region. Federal, state and local resources were completely overwhelmed. Allen's mental model needed to adjust away from traditional response protocols where FEMA would work in a supporting role with local jurisdictions to facilitate their work. With Katrina, the operational response capability of those local jurisdictions was essentially destroyed. Consequently, Allen often had to take actions that, under normal conditions, might have exceeded his authority.

I had little choice other than do what I did down there, and some folks thought I probably exceeded the authority of a principal federal official in directing operations when it was critically needed and very much different from the FEMA model which pulls resources in support of state and local governments.⁸

Despite the complete incapacitation of state and local government response mechanisms, Allen understood that local governmental authorities have to be respected and fully involved in decisions affecting their jurisdictions. Tom Atkin summarizes the delicate balance that Allen needed:

The reality is that [Allen] did not technically or legally have the authority to "direct" but to only to "coordinate." The political structure of Louisiana is unique. The government structure was still in place. Even though communication was broken, they were still able to govern. We needed to respect that. [Admiral Allen] needed to speak with people. He did not over promise, but he certainly over delivered. Mostly, it was his ability to listen that built trust and began turning things around. Some people have the tendency to go negative before they go positive. They want their voices heard. Even when people were angry, even when they blamed us for not doing enough, he was able to listen and respond, "Here is what we can do and here is what we are capable of doing"... and things got better.

8 *Defense Media Network*, November 16, 2010.

On a daily basis Allen delivered full briefings on his team's actions and plans to New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco.⁹ Sometimes those meetings were contentious, especially as the media began looking for people to blame for the slow response. Allen sought common ground rather than assignment of blame:

You can always find something to argue about and always find something where you don't agree. I think the first thing you've got to do is find out where you do agree, lock that down, make an agreement, and start achieving effects based on what you both believe can be done and then start expanding that and just try and get better information about what you think needs to happen and how you both can contribute to that.¹⁰

But he also understood how jurisdictional authority could quickly move into rivalries and dysfunction.

...[F]or the first few weeks after I got there, we were still taking people out of the city, recovering them, and relocating them, but it wasn't on the scale that had previously occurred. But you look at approximately 1.5 million people that were displaced, 250,000 units of housing that were lost. The diaspora associated with Katrina was greater than that of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s ... It created a pretty difficult political problem for me because the mayor and the governor kept telling everybody that they wanted them to come back, but they didn't have a good solution of how to replace 250,000 units of housing and how you actually deal with it. But, they steadfastly said, "Come back, we're going to rebuild." It was impossible to have a discussion with them about it because, as I found out later ... if only half of the 1.5 million people would have come back, Louisiana would lose

9 Angie C. Marek, "Always ready for the storm," *U.S. News and World Report*, October 22, 2006 (<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/061022/30allen.html>).

10 *Defense Media Network*, November 16, 2010.

Walking alone is a common experience that many leaders share. Allen notes that it is especially challenging during a crisis when there is an inundation of bad news and good news is hard to find.

There are going to be a lot of times where you're going to get negative feedback for a long, long time before you get any positive feedback. You have to be able to ascertain what you need to do, lay out a course of action, identify the effects to be achieved, and then go after that; and you have to do that with a fairly stable emotional base to work from. That's not easy to do because you can get very angry and frustrated ... You know people will grade your performance during this particular response, and I had a lot of people say that I should be fired. You've got to figure out how to kind of put that aside and do what you need to do.³⁷

Policy Implications of the Black Swan Phenomenon

A catastrophic event is, by definition, unexpected and sometimes even unprecedented. Leaders in all sectors, but especially political leaders, recognize the need to prepare for such events but often fail to do so. There are many reasons for this including scarcity of resources, lack of political capital, or simply the shortsighted nature of electoral politics that provides government leaders with few incentives to extend their vision beyond the next election in two or four years.

While certainly not a Dooms Day theorist, Allen believes that the world needs to be better prepared to respond to Black Swan events like Hurricane Katrina, the 2011 tsunami that devastated Japan, and the 2010 earthquake that ripped through Haiti. Allen notes:

Populations are increasing. We have large population centers near water. You could have the same event that happened fifty years ago, and the ... number [of casualties] will be much larger. We are more vulnerable. We have every reason to believe sea levels are going to rise. We have changes in weather patterns. It's probably

37 *Defense Media Network*, November 16, 2010.

not good enough to get better [at disaster response] than the last time.³⁸

Following the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 (also a Black Swan event), the intelligence and response infrastructure of the U.S. were overhauled, and the Department of Homeland Security was created to provide better coordination and less bureaucracy. Allen believes that additional efforts must be made to be prepared for Black Swan events.

I think that we need to understand and hopefully accept the fact we're going to have large anomalous and unprecedented events, and they're not always going to fit the molds of the current statutes, regulations, and response plans, and I think we need to learn how to be more flexible and agile in how we adapt.³⁹

Organization theorist and Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon used the term "bounded rationality" to describe how decision makers behave under conditions of extreme uncertainty. Simon believed that the environment is simply too complex and too dynamic to allow for the luxury of strategizing then acting. Instead, he and other theorists tell us that decisions must be made, and actions must be taken under conditions of extreme uncertainty and with information that is unreliable. The best one can do in such circumstances is to move tentatively, step by step and with trial and error. Simon concluded that in truly turbulent environments leaders can only hope to "satisfice," not "optimize."⁴⁰

Simon's renowned theory of bounded rationality seems to be applicable in the types of disaster responses coordinated by Admiral Allen. Yet in reviewing his actions in all of the incidents described above, one gets the impression of a very clear strategy (or perhaps a management philosophy) that Allen has followed again and again:

38 <http://mitsloanexperts.mit.edu>.

39 *Defense Media Network*, November 16, 2010.

40 See Herbert A. Simon, "Theories of bounded rationality." In C. B. McGuire (Ed.), *Decision and Organization* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1972), 161-176.

any other way to do it, they had a lot more flexibility in what they could spend the money on.³⁴

But SUVs present a management challenge as well. If their efforts are not focused on a common goal, if they lack the knowledge and resources to truly add value, or if they are unprepared for the rigors of post disaster assistance they can become liabilities, burdening leaders with yet another unpredictable variable in the post-disaster chaos.

Returning to the “all hands” meeting following Hurricane Katrina where Lisa Scales and her fellow volunteers were huddled around Allen, he told them candidly that the unfolding crisis was beyond the capability of the government to handle alone. The government – their country – needed their help. It needed and valued the citizen sector. Scales recalls:

I was really struck by him being clear about what government can and cannot do and what volunteers need to do to assist. That was a great learning experience for me from the Katrina disaster – what government can do and cannot do. I felt that here is a person in charge. We had a direction. We had our marching orders, and we knew what to do. He talked about the value of people and that all of us had a role to play.

Allen recognized that the government and the volunteer personnel were looking for some direction:

...[J]ust a simple set of core values and a North Star to steer by ... I think is what they were looking for ... In any major event the public participation will happen whether it's managed or not. So your options are suffer, adapt, or manage. We've chosen to try to adapt and manage.³⁵

Tom Atkin reflects on Allen's distinctive capabilities in this regard:

[Admiral Allen's] greatest strength is his ability to communicate. It doesn't matter if he is communicating to the President or to me, he is able to take the concept and the intent and communicate it to people in words they can understand ... to put the message into a form that each individual based on their experiences can understand. Not many people can do that.

Self-Management and Walking Alone

Thad Allen earned a reputation for being cool in a crisis. Some people believe that his calm demeanor is a personality trait, perhaps something he was born with. Others suspect that he acquired the capability to remain calm through a career of crisis management. Perhaps it is a bit of both. Either way, Allen believes that leaders must manage their emotions in order to be successful, especially in crisis situations. Moreover, he believes that there is a theory of self-management that can be practiced and learned.

When you're in a position of responsibility, you cannot spend a lot of time going to the emotional basement. You've got to figure out a way to pull yourself out of it, not only for what you need to do as a leader, but as an example to the folks that are working for you. I've found that in a crisis, the higher up you are, the more you're going to be the one that has to pull yourself and everyone else out of the emotional basement, stabilize what you're doing and focus on what needs to be done. If you can't do that, you're going to get consumed in pathos and everything that's going on and not serve yourself or the country well. You could look to your subordinates or your superior, but there are going to be times where you walk alone, and you need to learn to do that.³⁶

a house seat in Congress ... So, you have these underlying political forces that are in operation.¹¹

Allen's unique perspective post-Katrina focuses on the broader question of leadership during multijurisdictional efforts:

[Y]ou're really not talking about unity of command at that point. You're talking about unity of effort Overall what you're trying to do is aggregate everybody's capabilities, competencies, and capacities to achieve a single purpose, still taking into account the fact that they have individual authorities and responsibilities. That makes it a much more complex matrix to manage. And it makes it a much more complex management challenge. But it's a feature of our democratic government. And it's one of those things where we need to start raising leaders that have the capability to do that.¹²

Many traditional leadership theories begin with the assumption that the leader is officially designated, and occupies a command position that is legally or operationally recognized by all followers. Allen's unique position in the post-Katrina environment demonstrates that leadership can, with the right tools, also be effectively exercised from a position of ambiguous legal authority.

Again, Tom Atkin conveys his perspective:

[Admiral Allen] was able to bring a shared vision for an enlarged federal family team to work with the private sector ... we had NGOs sitting at the table with us during strategy sessions. Those folks needed to know where the needs were and how to fill those needs. [Commanding Generals and other military personnel] sat at the table and participated in the team effort. Once people understand where they fit into the puzzle, they can participate in

putting together the puzzle. I can't remember a time when the [Department of Defense] resisted anything we asked. I can't recall anyone saying, “You don't have authority to direct us,” because he built the collaborative environment. As we continued the response, the further we went, the more he would empower. There was an accumulated trust.

Early Years and Rising through the Ranks



The United States Coast Guard was home to Thad Allen from the very beginning of his life. On the day of his birth, his father, Clyde Allen, was on duty aboard a Coast Guard cutter. While Clyde Allen was present and influential in his

son's development, Thad preferred to find his own way through the challenges of boyhood and adolescence. He would often stumble during that journey as an adventurous and oppositional spirit led him from one troublesome encounter to another. Clyde Allen told Newsroom in 2010 that “[Thad] was always getting into stuff. His work, school work, he'd finish it up and then he'd get into trouble.”¹³

After high school, he followed in his father's footsteps to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. His physical prowess was an asset, yet his combative personality followed him to the Academy, and he often found himself in trouble. Allen readily admits that in these early years he showed little promise or potential as a true leader. “I was kind of a recalcitrant junior officer. I required a lot of counseling, a lot of mentoring, and some stern warnings from time to time.”¹⁴

Following graduation from the Academy in 1971, his path began to gain focus. A near death experience

13 Phillips, “Adm. Thad Allen.”

14 “Adm. Thad Allen, USCG Commandant, 2010 Commencement Address,” United States Coast Guard Academy, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, June 2, 2010 <https://www.piersystem.com/go/doc/2487/571827>.

34 U.S. News and World Report, October 22, 2006.

35 Harvard Business Review, October 14, 2010.

36 Adm. Thad W. Allen: Leadership in a Crisis, The Washington Post, April 19, 2011 (http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/politics/adm-thad-w-allen-leadership-in-a-crisis/2011/04/19/AFJFRW8D_story.html)

11 Thad Allen, personal interview, March 8, 2013.

12 Harvard Business Review, October 14, 2010.

taught some important lessons. While doing repairs on a docked Coast Guard vessel, a fire erupted and trapped Allen and his shipmates. He recalls:

We could not get out ... We were down onto our knees and then crawling around trying to stay below the toxic smoke. It became apparent that we could not communicate with anybody and things were looking pretty bad. ... I took a knife and we cut the insulation off the wall of the radio room. And we took the sledge hammer [and] ... started beating an SOS on the side of the bulkhead. We did that for a while [until we were lying face down in only an inch or so of clean air] ... actually we were starting to say goodbye to each other. A pretty tense moment. [Then] I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked up and I saw an oxygen breathing apparatus ... coming from the smoke. It was the engineering officer ... A quartermaster on the dock ... heard the SOS up on the bulkhead. They came in and they got us out.¹⁵

Throughout the first half of his career, Thad Allen acquired as much knowledge as possible about the operational and tactical aspects of the Coast Guard. Like many emerging leaders, Allen was acutely aware of both his strengths and weaknesses and what he still needed to learn in order to advance to higher levels of responsibility:

I decided that if I was going to go any further in the Coast Guard, a couple of things better happen. Number one, I'd better get some post-graduate education and go to grad school, and number two, I'd better figure out how the Coast Guard works above the operational level ... learning how the budget works, how to make policy decisions, how we figure in the national frameworks, how we deal with the Congress, and that kind of stuff ... I learned that much later in the game than most folks.¹⁶

Allen was selected to participate in the prestigious Sloan Fellowship program at MIT, a mid-career master's degree program for people who have already demonstrated significant accomplishment and leadership potential. This intensive one-year program requires a full-time commitment from participants and counts among its alumni some of the most successful managers in business, government, and nonprofit organizations. He began preparing for a leadership position in the Coast Guard.

I came up with this metaphorical bag in which you carry around things that irritate you and piss you off in life ... Over my career I've just kind of accumulated these things and I think if you're rising to levels of leadership then you have a duty to yourself, your organization and the country to unpack that bag. So, when I became Commandant, I started unpacking it, and ... I ... said; "I'm going to fix that; this one was irrelevant, it got fixed five years ago; that's interesting, but it's not worth spending political capital on." And, then you take this bunch [in the bag] and say, "Let's go to work on it" ... The saddest thing in the world is a senior leader who gets into a position with no agenda.¹⁷

Don Kettl, Dean of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, has observed Allen's focus on an agenda:

Thad Allen has demonstrated his ability to create a culture of performance inside a military organization. He has an almost laser-like, singular focus on results. If there are people stuck on rooftops, then the job is to get them off. If people are stranded, the job is to get them out. But along with placing importance on outcomes, he also has a focus on people. He treasures the people who work for him and he invests heavily in developing them and empowering them to do their best ... For Thad Allen, the mission is central. He allows

own legal standing and jurisdictional limits. Coast Guard personnel must be mindful of their mandate to protect the shores and ports of the United States, but also they are constantly reminded of limits on their authority when interacting with states and localities that may have jurisdictional standing.

Like most leaders who are trained in one of the nation's military academies, Allen developed a highly disciplined way of thinking premised on the notion that our democracy has historically imposed well-defined limits on military authority, clearly placing it under civilian control, especially when military action (or inaction) alters fundamental public policy decisions and direction. In some cases Allen secured and solidified his decision making authority. In others, he deftly avoided the issue. In all cases, he asked people to embrace the notion of "unity of effort" as opposed to "unity of command."

[In situations like the BP spill or Hurricane Katrina there are] limits of authorization, appropriations, policy doctrine, executive directives ... that ... constrain the ability of a government agency to completely produce a whole government response without interacting with other agencies, the private sector, for-profits, and so forth. It's producing a new mandate in my view to produce [leaders who] are capable of leading horizontally across government.

The Limitations of Government

In both Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil Spill, Allen confronted both the power of government but also its inherent limitations in the face of nature's awesome unleashed power or fallible manmade technology. Following Katrina, Allen saw that government capacity in the Gulf had been essentially wiped out, as if struck by a nuclear weapon. In the BP incident, Allen saw the technological limits of even the most sophisticated government on the planet when trying to cap an oil well deep underneath the ocean surface. In both cases, he confronted legal and jurisdictional limits and regulations that were out of step with the crisis at hand. And, above all, there is the general public,

some of them many miles away from the disaster, demanding action. Allen notes:

There's a larger inferred social contract by the American people about what government should do in one of these [disasters]. I think there's a growing perception - because of the Internet, social media, the 24-hour news cycle - that government is capable of, or should be doing more than, what the law has told them they need to do. Whoever is in charge of one of these things, whether it's a hurricane or an oil spill, is going to have to figure out a way to talk to the American public, be transparent and honest with them, but also explain to them what the limits of your authority are.³³

"SUVs"

Working to achieve unity of effort involves not only government agencies and personnel, but citizens as well. In both Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil Spill, Allen saw the power of what he later called "SUVs" - spontaneous unaffiliated volunteers. SUVs flocked to the Gulf by the thousands, eager to lend a hand. Some of them brought specific skills such as food distribution network mobilization or knowledge of how to rescue contaminated wild life. Others simply brought their motivation and passion to help their fellow human beings. In each case, Allen recognized something valuable and useful to the task at hand. Allen recalls drawing upon all of these resources following Hurricane Katrina:

And sometimes it's dealing with faith-based organizations or nongovernmental organizations. I got some significant help on some really difficult problems I had during Katrina by going to the Bush/Clinton Fund, where they had raised all the money to help the Gulf down there. And if I couldn't find

¹⁵ <https://www.piersystem.com/go/doc/2487/571827>

¹⁶ *Defense Media Network*, November 16, 2010.

¹⁷ Allen interview, March 8, 2013.

³³ "Booz Allen Adds Former Coast Guard Chief Allen to Roster," *The Washington Post*, November 29, 2011 (http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/capitalbusiness/booz-allen-adds-former-coast-guard-chief-allen-to-roster/2011/11/29/gIQAtrqgTO_story.html).

and frustration. There is personal and societal grieving. You need to understand that, but you can't let it hobble your response. You can't become so overwhelmed with emotion that you can't focus on what you have to do ... People often are very angry, and they're using a lot of energy being angry, when you could be using that energy to fix the problem. It's often possible get emotional buy-in for a unified effort.²⁹

But he also understood that the public needed a central figure to be the "face" of the disaster – a person who would provide as much information as possible on the unfolding events and progress toward a solution. He gave daily briefings to the press, and withstood an onslaught of questions, not all of which were gentle or well-intended. Throughout, he insisted on transparency and accountability in all of his public statements. Joel Achenbach writes:

He has a technique ... of visualizing what he will say and how he will say it before he gets in front of the microphones and cameras. It's similar, he said, to how an athlete visualizes a play. "Once I get the mental model down, and understand the mental landscape, my job is to craft a way to the end. That was my job, every day. Create the art of the possible."³⁰

While he was sometimes preempted by local officials who held press conferences from time to time, Allen stepped forward day after day to face the cameras and, indeed, face the world with whatever information and updates he had at the time.

I think ... you've got to keep a pretty level head. These types of incidents caused a lot of local anguish and put a lot of stress on society. People see their way of life at risk and it's easy to get really excited and have a confluence of great passions. To the extent that you can de-emotionalize this situation and try and do the right thing and to keep everybody pointed

in the same direction without becoming too caught up in the emotion of it, I think it's probably necessary as well.³¹

Leadership in Post-disaster Settings: Some Lessons



In a variety of interviews and speeches, Thad Allen has reflected on some of the lessons he has learned throughout a career of helping people and regions recover from disasters. Speaking with Joel Achenbach, author of *A Hole at the Bottom of the Sea: The Race to Kill the BP Oil Gusher*, Allen sums up some of the lessons:

Take care of the little things. Pay attention to the stuff that doesn't quite make sense. Don't ignore those anomalies and hope they'll go away of their own volition. Respect the rules. Follow proper procedures. Don't ignore low-probability, high-consequence scenarios. Hope for the best, plan for the worst. They [BP] behaved as if past results were an accurate predictor of future events. They [BP] didn't take care of the little things.³²

In addition to these helpful ideas, Thad Allen has stepped back to look at how society has changed during his career and the resulting challenges and opportunities facing current and future leaders.

Interjurisdictional Management

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the BP Oil Spill and many other challenges, large and small, Thad Allen was thrust into a menagerie of federal, state, and local jurisdictions, each of which had a role to play and all of them with a large stake in the outcome. Perhaps more than any other branch of the military, the U.S. Coast Guard interacts on a daily basis with state and local governments, port authorities, transit authorities, and other quasi-governmental units each with their

people to take risks with the promise that he will protect them.

BP Oil Spill

On April 20, 2010 there was a massive explosion on *Deepwater Horizon*, an oil drilling platform leased by British Petroleum (BP) operating in the Gulf of Mexico. Methane gas made its way up the drilling pipeline, spilled onto the deck of the rig, and ignited. The explosion and subsequent fire killed eleven men and injured seventeen others. Five thousand feet below the surface, the explosion ruptured the wellhead equipment on the ocean floor, resulting in an oil gusher that eventually released 4.9 million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico before it was finally capped nearly three months later.

Hour by hour, day by day during this period, people around the world watched in horror and disbelief as underwater cameras continuously transmitted images of the gusher spilling crude oil into the fragile ecosystem of the Gulf, causing extensive damage to marine and wildlife and fouling the shorelines of States along the Gulf Coast.

A few weeks away from retirement as Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, Admiral Allen was directed by President Obama to serve as the National Incident Commander of the Unified Command in charge of monitoring and abating the flow of oil.

Assessing the Situation: Severity of the Problem

Allen immediately recognized that this disaster was unlike any he had encountered before.

In prior assignments, the severity of the problem was readily apparent to everyone or at least could be grasped with disciplined investigation. Even in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as the calamity gained momentum, one could at least see and comprehend the extent of the physical and personal damage caused by the hurricane and issue reasonable projections of short and long-term consequences for the region. Those scenarios may have been almost unimaginable, but they were at least discernible. Also, during previous emergency situations, Admiral Allen could monitor

the progress of relief efforts and could measure the effects of the intervention. He could assess whether particular intervention tactics were working, make adjustments, if necessary, and keep the public relatively well-informed on progress.

In these previous disasters his skills as a diagnostician may have been challenged, but they were never overwhelmed. Not so with the BP Oil Spill. Indeed, Allen recognized even before he arrived at his new post that his most vexing challenge would be to diagnose the problem itself, once again adjusting his "mental model."

Two challenges I had with Katrina and the oil spill were to deal with the technical issues ... You don't have to know it going in, but you have to be a pretty quick study, and you're a better quick study the more you engage in lifelong learning and intellectually refresh yourself.¹⁸

The drilling rig above the surface burned out of control for two days before it sank into the sea. But the real problem lurked deep beneath the surface, and even the experts could not agree on the extent of damage at the wellhead which was on the ocean floor. Initial reports on April 23 suggested that no oil was leaking from the wellhead. A revised assessment the following day put the leakage at 1,000 barrels per day. Then a progression of increasingly alarming reports pegged the estimate at 5,000 barrels on April 29; 19,000 barrels on May 27; and eventually 62,000 barrels per day at peak flow before the wellhead was successfully capped. Internal documents obtained later from BP estimate that, at its peak flow, up to 100,000 barrels per day may have leaked from the wellhead.

Throughout the entire response, there was no way for humans to access the event. Everything we knew was from a [Remotely Operated Vehicle] or a sensor that we put down there. We had to manage things basically as you would for an event in outer space. I said it

29 <http://mitsloanexperts.mit.edu>.

30 Achenbach, 76.

31 *Defense Media Network*, November 16, 2010.

32 Achenbach, 3.

18 *Defense Media Network*, November 16, 2010.

many times and it's still true: this was much closer to Apollo 13 than Hurricane Katrina.¹⁹

Not only was the flow of oil difficult to assess, but so too were its effects on the ecology of the Gulf. True, there had been oil spills before from ships and drilling rigs but nothing of this magnitude in waters so far offshore.

In the twenty years since the [Exxon] Valdez spill, we had focused on making sure there would never be another tanker accident. All our spill response and the regulatory regime was focused on trying to protect the oil being transferred, but in the meantime, the industry moved offshore and went way deep under a different set of rules and regulations.²⁰

It would be weeks before this oil would wash up on the shores of the Gulf States, with the tragic sights of oil coated birds and fish and spoiled beaches and marsh lands. Offshore, however, the damage was difficult to see due to the constantly shifting flow of oil through and around sub-surface ocean currents. Much of the oil never even rose to the surface but instead traversed in underwater currents, making it nearly impossible to predict its next moves and consequences. Envision the side view of a marble cake, then try to envision the layers constantly changing, and you have an approximation of what Admiral Allen was trying to comprehend and forecast. Allen notes:

There's a long-term scientific question about the fate of the oil in the water. If someone tells you they know what happened to it, they've just told you they don't understand the problem. There hasn't been enough research. We need a coordinated scientific effort to understand what happened in the Gulf in the chemistry of the oil interacting with the water.²¹

Swimming Upstream and Mobilizing Resources

While he may not have been able to immediately comprehend the scope and nature of the problem, Thad Allen was certain of one thing – all of the resources of the most powerful nation on the planet were useless in stemming the flow of oil and capping the wellhead 5,000 feet beneath the surface. No government entity at the federal, state, or local level had the equipment or the technical expertise to deal with an environmental disaster of this magnitude. Allen understood that BP was the only party with the expertise to cap the wellhead.

Don Kettl observes:

Unlike Katrina, the BP Oil Spill required Allen to adjust to a far larger role for the private sector. He was tough in his dealings with BP, but he also focused on issues of performance and getting results. He knew that to get those results he would need to have stronger engagement with private sector. What Thad Allen is best at is figuring out where the problem is, figuring out where the assets are, and then driving toward the solution. Single minded focus on what is the job, where are the assets, and how he can mobilize them.²²

Hostility toward BP rose steadily as the crisis unfolded and new information came to light. Former employees – especially men who had previously worked on the Deepwater Horizon rig – alleged that BP had not followed safety procedures and had taken shortcuts to maximize their profits. Local politicians and environmentalists were furious and demanded that BP be “kicked out” of the Gulf immediately. Allen empathized with their anger, yet disagreed with their conclusion. Joel Achenbach, who chronicled the BP incident notes:

Allen possesses an unusual equanimity. He does not speak in exclamations. From the start of the crisis, he set a certain tone of all-business. He would not craft sound bites for

the media mob. He had a goal, which was to get to the end of it. Keep the end in mind. Focus on the objective ... He wanted no part of pyrrhic political victories. When a BBC reporter asked him if the government had considered firing BP from the oil spill response, Allen stiffened momentarily and said, “I am in government, and there was no solution without BP.”²³

With the benefit of hindsight, Allen drew the following analogy:

While BP created the problem, it was BP and the industry that had to solve the problem, because BP had to muster forces from other oil companies to solve the problem ... It is analogous to being hit by a car driven by a doctor. He may have caused the problem, but he is also the only person at the scene capable saving you. Are you going to kick him out or ask him to help?²⁴

Still, Allen and the entire federal government came under criticism from some who believed the government had essentially delegated the clean-up to BP and its affiliates. This prompted President Obama to react:

They [BP] do [their work under] our supervision, and any major decision that they make has to be done under the approval of Thad Allen, the National Incident Coordinator. So this notion that somehow the federal government is sitting on the sidelines and ... letting BP make a whole bunch of decisions is simply not true.²⁵

Allen himself understood the frustration of local politicians and he understood that they, in turn, were facing the wrath of their local constituencies.

What you had was a simultaneous political response and an operational response to this thing. They're not going to be always congruent, but you handle both of them. That was my job.²⁶

Unlike the situation following Hurricane Katrina, during which all local and state agencies were essentially rendered inoperable, the Gulf States and their municipalities were flexing their jurisdictional muscles and rightfully demanding a commanding role. Allen was acutely mindful of this jurisdictional dilemma and kept flowcharts in his office reminding him of what agencies had jurisdictional authority.²⁷ He created the Integrated Service Team, a collaboration of eighteen federal agencies that had a stake in the BP oil spill.

You need to understand that you're never going to achieve unity of command as we know it in the military, and you have to do your best to achieve unity of effort. There are always going to be a lot of different authorities and jurisdictions for the different Cabinet departments and agencies, and your real challenge is to try to bring all that together and point it in the same direction; trying to converge on single effects you're trying to achieve.²⁸

Politicians in the area quickly surmised that the federal government was going to be relatively powerless in actually removing the oil and capping the wellhead. Despite their respect for Admiral Allen, they often vented their frustration and anger on him as the on-site symbol of the federal government. Allen himself has been philosophical, even empathetic, regarding the emotions of people affected by the crises he has helped remediate.

One aspect to the emotional content of work like this is the natural reaction of communities that have been traumatized. Often, it's anger

23 Joel Achenbach, *A Hole at the Bottom of the Sea: The Race to Kill the BP Oil Gusher*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 76.

24 Thad Allen, Meeting with students in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh, March 23, 2011.

25 *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2010.

26 Achenbach, 153 & 194.

27 Achenbach, 76.

28 *Defense Media Network*, November 16, 2010.

19 “One Year Later,” 2011

20 ibid

21 <http://mitsloanexperts.mit.edu>

22 Don Kettl, personal interview, May 14, 2013