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Do more have to die?

9/11 commission leaders rail at the failure to heed panel's crucial findings

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In his address Thursday evening, President Bush announced that he had ordered the Department of Homeland Security to review the emergency preparedness of every major city in America. This is a positive step, yet it should not have taken a second urban disaster to prompt action. We failed to heed the lessons of 9/11.

The memory of that day should have created a sense of urgency for reform. But unaddressed problems have again cost lives.

On Sept. 11, 2001, the communications systems in place were not sufficient for a massive emergency response. Radios from the FDNY, NYPD and Port Authority police could not talk to one another. The frequencies available for those radios were overloaded by the hundreds of police and firefighters at the World Trade Center site. The transmissions were too weak to penetrate the many floors of the towers above.

Command and control also were problems. Guidelines outlining the roles of public safety agencies in a major disaster were vague. The FDNY and NYPD considered themselves operationally independent and were not prepared to mount an integrated response at the WTC site.

Last year, the 9/11 commission issued recommendations to rectify these two failures: Congress should reallocate high-quality broadcast spectrum for public safety radio use, and states and localities should establish - and practice - unified command procedures for responses to major disasters. Each of these common-sense recommendations would have saved lives on 9/11 and in Katrina.

As we noted in a report issued last week, there has been minimal progress on these two recommendations. For the past four years, other priorities have been judged more important than giving police and firefighters the radio frequencies they need to communicate during a terrorist attack, or planning ahead so that rescue efforts during major disasters are coordinated and efficient. This is scandalous. What priority of the government could be more important than the safety of our first responders and those they protect - the American people?

In Katrina, public safety communications failed again. New Orleans and three neighboring parishes were using different equipment and different frequencies - they couldn't talk to one

another. Helicopter crews couldn't talk to rescuers in boats. National Guard commanders in Mississippi had to use human couriers to carry messages.

Command and control were just as dismal. Early search-and-rescue operations were improvised by field commanders, so different agencies often covered the same ground. There was a vacuum of centralized authority, and little coordination. Put simply, no one knew who was in charge.

After 9/11 and Katrina, it is high time to implement the reforms recommended over a year ago by the 9/11 commission to solve these very problems:

- Congress should reclaim, at the earliest possible date, the high-quality broadcast spectrum loaned to local broadcasters in 1996 to ease the transition to digital TV, and reallocate it to improve public safety radio communications.
- Every metropolitan area should have a clear plan, so that all responders know what their roles will be in a crisis. State and local governments should establish in advance - and practice regularly - who will take the lead when multiple agencies respond to an emergency. The federal government should not give homeland security grants to jurisdictions that have not taken these steps.

These problems could have been solved four years ago. They must be solved now. There should be no higher priority for federal, state and local governments than implementing these two common-sense recommendations, so that such failures do not happen again. We should not have to learn the same tragic lessons a third time.

Kean and Hamilton are the former chair and vice chair of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the 9/11 Commission).

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