



FEMA's Unholy Trinity

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With all the enduring mysteries about the Bush Administration's doings, one looms as large any: Why was Michael Brown in charge of protecting Americans when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast?

A new investigation released earlier this week by [Real News](#) reveals why Brown—a man with virtually no experience in government or management of any type, and no familiarity with disaster response—secured the job of chief of America's disaster response.

It all starts with Joe Allbaugh, Bush's former Texas chief of staff and 2000 presidential campaign manager. Allbaugh asked to be Bush's first FEMA director and brought with him to Washington his little-known fellow Oklahoman Michael Brown. The investigation further explains why Allbaugh arranged for the eminently unqualified Brown to replace him in the top slot when Allbaugh left government to launch a career as a consultant and lobbyist. Allbaugh then began signing up clients who wanted—and got—FEMA's lucrative contracts.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf States, Brown's inexperience and lack of qualifications quickly became apparent to the world. Reporters discovered that Brown had substantially exaggerated his extremely modest accomplishments. Bush initially expressed his support for the embattled Brown, famously declaring, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job." But with criticism reaching fever pitch, the president—famous reluctant

to hold subordinates accountable—took the unusual step of forcing Brown out.

Little more was heard about Brown, or how such an inappropriate choice could have ended up running an agency responsible for protecting the American public from natural and manmade disaster, including the aftermath of terrorist attacks.

But the aforementioned RealNews investigation, encompassing scores of interviews and hundreds of documents, shines a bright light on the connections between Bush, Allbaugh and Brown.

When Allbaugh brought Brown to Washington, he presented him as a lifelong associate of high character and substantial credentials. “I hired him solely on his ability as a strong ethics attorney,” Allbaugh said in an official FEMA press release at the time. “He is very experienced, knowledgeable, and professional and will be a great asset to the agency and to myself.”

The truth is that the relationship between the two rests on a decades-long hidden partnership designed to advance both men's business and personal interests. By all appearances, that relationship drove Allbaugh's decision to ask Bush to let him run FEMA, and his decision to turn the place over to Brown so he could profit from their ties. Brown now also appears to be profiting from his ill-fated tenure at FEMA. He has formed a disaster-relief consultancy. *The New York Times* [reports](#) that when testifying on the Hill today, Brown did not name clients but said he had signed up a number of companies, including firms that sell communications equipment and work on rebuilding on the Gulf Coast.

Allbaugh and Brown's previously undisclosed longtime business relationships (replete with unpaid debts, personal bankruptcies and questionable business ethics) lie at the root of the disastrously failed government response to Hurricane Katrina.

The RealNews findings are too copious to list here. But among the revelations are that both Allbaugh and Brown appear to have deceived the Senate during their confirmation processes by failing to disclose litigation in which they were defendants—and despite explicit questions about such matters on confirmation questionnaires they completed.

Here are a few other things the RealNews investigation uncovered:

- Once in Washington, Allbaugh and Brown characterized themselves as long-time friends, and were content to leave the impression that they knew each other from college and Republican circles. But lifelong associates of both men say that is untrue. Indeed, the association between the two appears to have been a largely covert one, based less on selfless brotherhood than on mutual self-interest, as represented by a series of murky business ventures.
- Both Brown and Allbaugh were accused in the past of fiduciary malfeasance. Before coming to Washington, both were known to associates and creditors not as rising stars but as ethically-challenged, and frequently failed, entrepreneurs.
- In one business venture, Allbaugh worked for Brown, as a lobbyist. In another, Allbaugh partnered with Brown's brother-in-law and sister-in-law. That business involved mysterious, large amounts of cash that upset Allbaugh's then-wife, and contributed to their divorce. One Allbaugh business partner would later be convicted of mail and wire fraud and serve time in a federal prison.
- Brown, who was brought into FEMA initially by Allbaugh to run the legal operation, has a history as a failed low-level lawyer, replete with discontented clients, unhappy employers and damaging lawsuits.
- Brown and Allbaugh had apparently agreed on Brown's role in the Bush administration well in advance. For six months prior to Bush's election in 2000, Brown was telling incredulous associates that he expected to land a high position in Washington. When Katrina struck, Brown was known to be planning his own exit—presumably to profit from his own FEMA ties.
- At FEMA, Allbaugh launched a purge, forcing out many of the most experienced officials. Allbaugh and Brown also abandoned a recent agency tradition of hiring experienced professionals and filled high FEMA positions with political operatives lacking familiarity with emergency disaster management.
- Allbaugh edged out his #2, one of the most experienced men in government, in order to replace him with Brown.
- Under Allbaugh and Brown, FEMA changed the way in which the agency handled contracts, awarding them to numerous firms with political connections but little in the way of corporate infrastructure to handle the work. Some of these recipients were merely Enron-style shell

- corporations that subcontracted all the work to others, keeping a sizable share of the profits.
- When Allbaugh left FEMA, he immediately began setting up a network of lobbying interests to benefit from his connections. His clients quickly won major contracts from several government agencies, notably the Brown-led FEMA.
 - One example of the way FEMA did business under Brown: In 2003, the agency, which had been dealing directly on a non-exclusive basis with a number of large bottled water suppliers, suddenly issued a sole-source contract to a tiny, politically connected firm that had to turn to other companies to supply water. This cumbersome arrangement is blamed for substantial problems with deliveries of water following Hurricane Katrina.

Allbaugh's close personal and professional ties to both Bush and Cheney cry out for some answers from the White House. Thus far, though, it has managed to avoid explaining the endless parade of apparatchiks, cronies, incompetents and worse into key agencies of vital importance to the American people. With these new revelations, will it be permitted, once again, to say nothing?