The Honorable Tom Davis
Chairman
Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation 
for and Response to Hurricane Katrina
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I commend you and the Select Committee for your investigation into the 
preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. Many of the deficiencies identified 
by the Committee were also identified by DoD during earlier internal after-action 
reviews. These findings will be incorporated into DoD action plans to improve our 
Department’s support to civil authorities during future catastrophic incidents.

Upon review of the Military section of the report, I noted three areas where 
inaccurate or misleading statements could lead to incorrect conclusions.

On page 204, I am quoted in an interview with Mark Sappenfield of the Christian 
Science Monitor: “During Katrina, the federal military remained under FEMA’s 
control.” The referenced article inaccurately stated my comments, which in the original 
article did not appear in quotes. The Federal military was never under FEMA’s control 
during Hurricane Katrina. Rather, consistent with law and policy, military forces 
remained under the control of the US Northern Command commander, the Secretary of 
Defense and the President. What I conveyed to Mr. Sappenfield was that DoD Federal 
military forces were always engaged in missions in support of FEMA. This is a critical 
distinction for both legal and policy reasons.

Also on page 204, the report details what it characterizes as a lengthy and 
cumbersome process to communicate Requests for Assistance (RFAs) to DoD. The 
process described is incorrect. While our Defense Coordinating Officers (DCO) 
informally notify their chain of command of impending RFAs, the actual RFA process 
is much more direct and rapid. The FEMA Federal Coordination Officer, after consulting 
with the DCO, forwards the RFA to FEMA HQ which then passes the request to DoD. 
The Joint Staff determines availability of forces and the impact on readiness. A 
coordinated recommendation is then made to the Secretary of Defense or, in his absence, 
the Deputy Secretary. This process is not slow, cumbersome or bureaucratic. In fact, 
we often worked with verbal or draft requests from FEMA, obtaining approval from the 
Secretary prior to receipt of the official request. Mr. Scott Wells, Deputy FCO for 
Louisiana, stated in his December 8 testimony to the Committee regarding DoD response 
to RFAs: “I need to say, parenthetically, that in Katrina we did not see that lag that we
normally see in most disasters. And they were fairly responsive.” Unfortunately, the RFA process described in the report is factually incorrect.

Finally, the report on page 203 and 204 faults DoD and DHS coordination. It describes communications reflecting a “lack of information sharing, near panic, and problems with process.” Having reviewed the cited emails, we don’t agree with this characterization. More importantly, as the text of the report makes clear, when DoD recognized that RFAs from FEMA were not being generated at a rate and with the substantive capabilities required, DoD proactively began drafting the needed RFAs in cooperation with FEMA. To reference this as a deficiency in the Military section of the report gives the impression that DoD was the problem, when in fact, consistent with our sense of urgency, we provided the solution.

Thank you again for your leadership of the Bipartisan Select Committee. Please let me know if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Paul McHale