

Chertoff, Rumsfeld, Myers: "We Dodged a Bullet"

Secretary Chertoff, Meet the Press, Saturday, September 4, 2005

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MR. RUSSERT: People were stunned by a comment the president of the United States made on Wednesday, Mr. Secretary. He said, "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees." How could the president be so wrong, be so misinformed?

SEC'Y CHERTOFF: Well, I think if you look at what actually happened, I remember on Tuesday morning picking up newspapers and I saw headlines, "New Orleans Dodged The Bullet," because if you recall the storm moved to the east and then continued on and appeared to pass with considerable damage but nothing worse. It was on Tuesday that the levee--may have been overnight Monday to Tuesday--that the levee started to break. **And it was midday Tuesday that I became aware of the fact that there was no possibility of plugging the gap and that essentially the lake was going to start to drain into the city.** I think that second catastrophe really caught everybody by surprise. In fact, I think that's one of the reasons people didn't continue to leave after the hurricane had passed initially. So this was clearly an unprecedented catastrophe. And I think it caused a tremendous dislocation in the response effort and, in fact, in our ability to get materials to people. **(bold added).**

Department of Defense Briefing, Tuesday, September 6, 2005 (from transcript of CNN LIVE EVENT).

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you gentlemen both speak of a massive and meaningful military response that's no doubt going on now – saving lives, putting out fires, plugging the levee.

And yet, Mr. Secretary, you say that first responders, local and state responders, were struck low by the original blow . . .

RUMSFELD: Not quite correct. **The original blow was the storm.** And New Orleans escaped a great portion of it, if you're talking about New Orleans as opposed to Mississippi. **The flood followed that by a day.**

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MYERS: **The headline, of course, in most of the country's papers on Tuesday were, "New Orleans dodged a bullet," or words to that effect. MYERS: At that time, when those words were in our minds, we started working issues before we were asked.** And on Tuesday, at the direction of the Secretary and the deputy secretary, we went to each of the services – I called each of the chiefs of the services, one by one, and said, "We don't know what we're going to be asked for yet." **The levees and the flood walls had just broken.** "And we know some of what's going to be asked" – because we already had some requests for assistance – "but there's probably going to be more. And so as you, a service, think of capability that might be needed, you work with Northern Command, Admiral Tim Keating, and you push it forward" – and we used what we call VOCO, or vocal approval of orders – "and then we'll sort it out later. If NORTHCOM says that's a good capability to push forward, then we'll push that forward."

And we started that before the magnitude of this tragedy was even understood by anybody at any level.