

## Sept 15 2005 - Slaughter Leads Rules Debate on Hurricane Katrina Investigation

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Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, today led debate on the rule governing H.Res. 437, a resolution creating a partisan Republican controlled investigative committee into the government's response to Hurricane Katrina.

Rep. Slaughter objected to the creation of the Republican dominated committee instead advocating for an independent committee modeled after the 9/11 Commission which earned great respect for their work from the American people, Congress, the President and the media.

From Rep. Slaughter's Remarks:

"Today, this Congress has to offer the American people its own definition of responsibility. The appalling aftermath of Hurricane Katrina which swept over citizens from Louisiana to Alabama to Mississippi was the product of a combination of failures - failures of planning, failures of execution, failures of accountability. It is the responsibility of this body to examine why our federal government was behind so many of those failures.

There is only one way to do this, only one path the public will respect, only one route to producing real answers to real questions which the American people will trust. What we need is a 9/11 Commission for hurricane Katrina.

The 9/11 Commission was our government's response to the tragedy of September 11th, 2001. After an exhaustive study, it produced a report that was trusted by the American people and by the members of our government..."

"The Republican Leadership of the House and Senate has called for the creation of an overtly Partisan Congressional committee to investigate the government's pre and post-Katrina actions.

They have specified that it would be a committee appointed by Republicans, with a Republican majority.

This would give Republicans control of every aspect of the proceedings. They alone would control who would be subpoenaed. They alone would control which documents could be examined. And they alone would control the scope of the investigation

They would have the power to take the investigation in any direction they chose, with no checks, no balances and no incentives to get real answers.

They have nominated the fox to guard the hen house..."

"A commission controlled by politicians of one party, charged with investigating itself, will face tremendous internal political pressure to eliminate embarrassing truths from the public eye, to defer blame, to hide facts. That is fundamental truth. We all know how politics work in this town.

Politics, by the way, is exactly why those recent scandals I just mentioned were never investigated - because it wasn't politically expedient for the Majority to investigate them, because they would in effect be investigating themselves.

Is what I am saying abdication of our responsibility as elected officials to investigate the workings of this government? Exactly the opposite is the case.

If we intentionally cast an investigation, which so desperately needs to be impartial, into a political maelstrom which we know ahead of time it cannot survive - that, M. Speaker, would be an abdication of our responsibilities."

Rep. Slaughter's Entire Remarks as Prepared:

On Tuesday, President Bush said that he took "responsibility" for the recent failure of the federal government to fulfill its ultimate duty of saving the lives of its own people within its own borders.

But what does "responsibility" mean to Mr. Bush? If it means anything, it means a sincere concern for what has occurred under his watch. It means stopping at nothing to find out why a nation led by officials who claim to care about keeping Americans safe, presided over a recovery effort which left behind so many innocent men, women, and children as they were crying out for help. It means caring about the truth.

And it means putting people before politics.

Today, this Congress has to offer the American people its own definition of responsibility. The appalling aftermath of Hurricane Katrina which swept over citizens from Louisiana to Alabama to Mississippi was the product of a combination of failures - failures of planning, failures of execution, failures of accountability. It is the responsibility of this body to examine why our federal government was behind so many of those failures.

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study, it produced a report that was trusted by the American people and by the members of our government.

This trust was earned. The 9/11 Commission was not beholden to any interests besides those of its own integrity and the good of the country.

This honorable response to the tragedy of September 11th puts to shame what has been proposed today in the wake of hurricane Katrina.

What was perhaps our federal government's greatest failure to date to defend life at home is being met with a failure of leadership and openness and honesty in this chamber today.

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M. Speaker, I don't object to such a plan because Republicans would be in control, as supposed to Democrats. I object to it because it is the Republican Party which controls the levers of government, and as such manages FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security, and every other federal institution which must be examined.

The conflicts of interest are so obvious here that it is incredible anyone would deny them.

But the Members of the Majority not only do just this, but they put forth one justification after another for their plan, each less convincing than the one before it.

They tell us that the structure of the committee is based on precedent, and cite the bipartisan commission which investigated the Iran-Contra affair as evidence of this.

Never mind that in that situation, a Republican President was being investigated by a Democratically-controlled committee, eliminating the political pressure to sweep truths under the rug.

Last night in Rules, they told us, rather incredibly, that nobody is better at evaluating this body than its own Members. But the American people know better.

After all, Accountability hasn't exactly been the hallmark of this Republican Leadership.

This Majority didn't investigate those who concealed the Department of Health and Human Services' real estimate of how much the 2003 Medicare legislation we passed would cost.

It didn't investigate the role of top Bush campaign contributors in writing Vice President Cheney's energy plan.

It didn't investigate the Valerie Plame scandal.

And it didn't investigate what led to our dehumanizing and shameful treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and Abu Ghraib in Iraq.

Why didn't these investigations take place? The Majority has no answer, besides to promise us that this time, things will be different.

Last night in the Rules Committee, the Chairman offered his personal assurances again and again that the commission set to be created would be fair, that everyone in it would have a voice.

The fact that he felt compelled to defend its future fairness so staunchly revealed that he knows how unfair past Congressional investigations have been, and how many times the Minority has been shut out of the proceedings in this House.

He repeated over and over that Democratic members of the commission would have the right to ask any questions they wanted of witnesses brought before them. But this is intentionally deceptive, because the Republicans will exclusively control who gets called before the Committee. Only allowing a handpicked group of witnesses to be questioned prejudices the investigation before it has even begun.

And though I don't doubt his intentions or sincerity, why should the integrity of this entire investigation rely on the personal assurances of our esteemed committee chairman and the Republican leadership? On a promise to be fair, but not a requirement to be so?

The truth of the matter is that even if the Chairman did his best to keep the commission fair and honest, he alone can't control it.

If a true interest in a fair, open, thorough and independent investigation runs that deep, why not create an independent panel? That is the central question I have for all my Republican colleagues here today...Why won't you support the creation of an independent commission? Was there some problem with the 9/11 Commission?

The American people clearly had faith in that independent body. Why don't you? What are you afraid of?

A commission controlled by politicians of one party, charged with investigating itself, will face tremendous internal political pressure to eliminate embarrassing truths from the public eye, to defer blame, to hide facts. That is fundamental truth. We all know how politics work in this town.

Politics, by the way, is exactly why those recent scandals I just mentioned were never investigated - because it wasn't politically expedient for the Majority to investigate them, because they would in effect be investigating themselves.

Is what I am saying abdication of our responsibility as elected officials to investigate the workings of this government? Exactly the opposite is the case.

If we intentionally cast an investigation, which so desperately needs to be impartial, into a political maelstrom which we know ahead of time it cannot survive - that, M. Speaker, would be an abdication of our responsibilities.

The American people don't need political infighting. The people suffering in Louisiana, and Alabama, and Mississippi - hundreds of thousands displaced, millions more affected - they need answers, they need true accountability.

And the only way we will live up to our responsibility and give them answers they can trust is if we create an independent commission composed of non-Congressional and impartial personnel who won't think at all about the political ramifications of their findings.

The public already overwhelmingly supports the creation of such a body. A recent Washington Post/ABC News poll revealed that 76 percent of respondents - 76 percent - want an independent commission comparable to the 9/11 Commission to look into what happened before, during, and after Katrina.

Over 160 members of this body representing more than 100 million of our nation's people have already supported the creation of such a commission.

Its findings wouldn't just help us to prevent another terrible disaster from taking place. They would also help our government to regain its credibility in the eyes of the public. A Newsweek poll from earlier this week found that fully 57 percent of the general population has doubts that government officials will respond well the next time that disaster strikes.

These doubts will not be reduced until people believe that a real, independent investigation of Katrina has taken place. But the findings of the Congressional commission being proposed by the Republican leadership will be forever tainted by the pervasive public belief that details were overlooked or truths hidden for political reasons.

M. Speaker, two weeks ago, our government missed an opportunity to rise to the occasion when it was needed. The consequences were worse than we could have imagined. We can't afford to miss another opportunity here today. We need to create an independent commission so that we can get to bottom of this mess, and so that the American people can begin to trust us again.