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Staffing up for a disaster

By Jeremy Alford (Contact)

Monday, September 22, 2008

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If Gov. Bobby Jindal would have taken out a classified ad prior to interviewing potential cabinet secretaries and staffers roughly 10 months ago, it may have read something like the mock ad to the right.

At the very least, the first sentence works. Jindal, 37, has surrounded himself with others who were reared during the Reagan years. It has quickly become a hallmark of his administration, and a tie that surely binds the players involved.

The celebrated generation gap, however, has also been the Achilles heel of this young administration. Old-school lawmakers grumbled loudly during this year's three legislative sessions that Jindal's top staffers were arrogant and know-it-alls—traits sometimes associated with youth. Columnists and reporters picked up on the age-fueled angst early on, but missed out on another common denominator amongst the green staffers and new cabinet secretaries.

Still, even if the mock ad had been published, particularly with the final sentence regarding hurricane-related experience, it's doubtful that many reporters would have played up the angle. Few would have suggested then that Jindal was building a Category 5 levee of leadership. Yet now that Louisiana has received another two-fisted beating from Mother Nature, the analogy is certainly warranted.

That's because Jindal was able to conquer hurricanes Gustav and Ike—from an administrative standpoint—by having all of the right human resources in place and, more important, knowing how to manage them. "What a novel idea, especially in government," says Merrie Spaeth, CEO of the Dallas-based Spaeth Communications, an award-winning business consulting firm whose specialties include crisis management.

"This is a case study of hiring people with skills, rather than people who want to be politically correct. That was also a lesson learned from Katrina," Spaeth says. "But if you have the right people in place and are actually listening to them, the management part isn't all that difficult sometimes."



MEAN STREETS: Gov. Bobby Jindal tours Grand Isle with Mike Edmonson (left), superintendent of the Louisiana State Police, and Bennett Landreneau, who is the Louisiana adjutant general for the National Guard, on Sept. 2, one day after Hurricane Gustav made landfall in nearby Terrebonne Parish.

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Jindal brought Alan Levine aboard as secretary of the Department of Health and

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Hospitals. He also had experience working in health care during hurricanes as the former administrator at the North Broward Hospital District in Florida. Jindal hired Mark Cooper as the director of the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. Cooper was previously the deputy fire chief of the Los Angeles County Fire Department and managed a \$1 billion budget. Tim Barfield, the new labor secretary formerly with the Shaw Group, brought with him experience of federal contracts.

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From those choices, it's clear that Jindal had given some thought to hiring battle-ready troops. But he also managed his human resources well. After Hurricane Gustav made landfall near Cocodrie in Terrebonne Parish,

Jindal decided to launch a program to distribute nearly 400 generators to power-essential service providers, including pharmacies, gas stations and grocery stores. Rather than having a staffer take on the task, he handed it to a rainmaker, someone who could get phone calls returned: Natural Resources Secretary Scott Angelle. It had an immediate impact. "This program helped our citizens to re-enter their communities," Angelle says.

Jindal's point person on the ground in New Orleans was Paul Rainwater, the new executive director of the Louisiana Recovery Authority. On paper, it looks like a bureaucrat was shipped off to ground zero, but not so. Rainwater is a combat-decorated lieutenant colonel in the Louisiana National Guard who was deployed to both Kuwait and Iraq. He was also formerly the chief administrative officer for the city of Lake Charles and stood knee-deep in the mess that was Hurricane Rita.

In the aftermath of Gustav and Ike, there was even a role for the governor's wife, Supriya. She has visited a number of distribution locations and soup kitchens around the state, no doubt sending reports directly back to Louisiana's CEO. She has also played a key role in food drives for the hurricane-impacted areas.

Top aides have discussed Jindal's management style in a number of published reports since the two storms ripped through Louisiana. Nearly all of them described Jindal as a leader who wants to work with problem-solvers; when a challenge is brought to the governor's attention, solutions should follow closely behind. Jindal isn't afraid to delegate, his staff says, but that just-enough-rope approach did have its drawbacks.

The framework at the Department of Social Services seemed to breakdown under the stress of poor leadership. There were problems with establishing proper shelters before the storms and nightmares involving the distribution of food stamps after landfall. Jindal promised "significant changes" at the department. DSS Secretary Ann Williamson resigned and was replaced on an interim basis by gubernatorial policy adviser Kristy Nichols. Another top staffer soon followed and an undersecretary was fired.

In the end, though, the face of the state's efforts was Jindal. And in a certain respect, all he had to do was show up. Former Gov. Kathleen Blanco made sure of that. Her response to Katrina and Rita in 2005 is the stuff of legend and lore. It has been painfully detailed in books and is still lambasted by the media even today. But if not for Blanco, and the follies of the federal government, Jindal would not have had a blueprint to follow.

And follow it he did. Jindal was calm and collected during his daily briefings, fostering an unfamiliar public confidence. Jindal, the wunderkind policy wonk and Rhodes Scholar, was in his element. He consumed figures and statistics easily and could rattle them off from the top of his head or from intricate notes. He wisely called for early evacuations, pulled down all the right federal resources and served as a voice of frustration for Louisiana's citizenry.

When discussing possible outcomes for Gustav and Ike, Jindal was direct. When explaining the



Associated Press

STAMP STUMPED:
Department of Social Services Secretary Ann Williamson speaks to the media about the emergency food stamps program on Sept. 10 in New Orleans. Williamson apologized for confusion that led to some residents to the wrong location to sign up for food assistance in the wake of Hurricane Gustav; Williamson resigned on Sept. 15.

recovery process, he spoke in microscopic detail. When Entergy officials argued that it might take three or more weeks to return power to residents, Jindal called it “unacceptable.”

It was a far cry from the mess Blanco found herself in three years ago. Then again, she was the sacrificial lamb, one of the primary reasons Jindal was able to shine earlier this month and cement his foothold in Louisiana history.

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