

Federal Emergency Management Shows New Face in Response to Hurricane

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Soon after Hurricane Marilyn struck St. Thomas, Federal Emergency Management Agency Director James Lee Witt arrived on the island, followed by a procession of military transport planes carrying relief supplies. That stream of cargo jets was evidence of FEMA's transformation from an agency once locked in a Cold War mind-set into one dedicated to prompt disaster relief. The FEMA-coordinated response to Hurricane Opal further illustrated the change. The morning after Opal tore

through the Florida panhandle, a phalanx of top federal officials gathered in Tallahassee to plan relief efforts. "I have never seen the kind of assistance that we got from all the federal agencies," said Gov. Lawton Chiles. Once obsessed with what national security officials referred to only as "the project," FEMA used to spend \$12 on nuclear war contingencies for every \$1 it spent on disaster relief. Corridors inside headquarters were sealed with combination locks. Supervisors reprimanded employees for opening

office blinds to the sunlight. The enemy might be peering in. Providing relief to victims of floods, hurricanes and earthquakes was almost an afterthought. But a new administration and scorn heaped on FEMA for its sluggish response to a series of calamities in the early 1990s changed it from a Cold War relic to what Witt calls "an all-hazards agency." Witt, 51, was Arkansas' state emergency management director under then-Governor Bill Clinton. Clinton tapped the former construction company owner to

head FEMA, urging Witt to reset agency priorities. "He told me, 'We want to set up the same kind of system as we had in Arkansas. We want to be responsive,'" Witt said. The agency's hurricane relief fund was budgeted for only \$856,000 when Witt took over; he boosted that to \$3 million, 80 percent of which is disbursed to state and local officials for planning and preparation. Communications, computer modeling and other equipment reserved for the nuclear mission was made available for

any emergency. Witt emphasized cooperation between government agencies and placed experienced relief workers in jobs once doled out as political plums. Witt's down-home manner and his experience rushing to flooded farms and consoling tornado victims seem to be just what the agency needed. Known as "James Lee" to colleagues and employees alike, he looks at home in the midst of a hectic relief operation, sporting a baseball cap, dungarees and a big brass "Arkansas" belt buckle. After Hurricane Marilyn hit the U.S. Virgin Islands, he queried staff on the

whereabouts of relief shipments and negotiated distribution schedules with local authorities. The morning after Hurricane Opal, he phoned sheriffs along the Florida Gulf Coast for information from the hardest hit areas, not wanting to wait for a staff briefing. By all accounts, morale has improved greatly since a 1992 American Federation of Government Employees survey found that four-fifths of FEMA employees thought the agency was poorly managed and more than half wished they worked elsewhere.

RESIDENCE HALLS

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flicts. "Usually I'm pretty good about compromise and all that sort of stuff," said Karen Goodman, a resident of the quintuple and a sophomore from Todd. "But after about five exams, living with four other people gets hard ... and sometimes you just really start to bite people's heads off." To help keep the room running smoothly, the roommates tried to arrange the room into two different sections, a sleeping and living area and a study area. But the system has its flaws. "See, we have two phone lines in our room, and one of them is in our study area," Goodman said. "That is already a problem when someone wants to study."

Jenna Blevins, a freshman from Charlotte living in a four-person room in Spencer, said studying was one of the difficulties in their room as well. "It's really hard to study in here sometimes," she said. "We've set aside a couple of hours a day for us to all study, but it's still difficult." Blevins also said being thrown together with four near-strangers — her roommates are also freshmen — was a fairly nerve-racking experience. "There are times when you don't want to worry about so many other people's feelings," Blevins said. "But we just keep

working things out as we go along." Everyone agreed there were benefits to living with several other women. "We do get (to have) two phone lines into our room," Dogenhart said. "And that is very nice. And I really like living here. It keeps things interesting; it keeps you on your toes." Four- and five-person rooms are also far larger than most University residence hall rooms. But residents said this large size had become one of the biggest drawbacks. "People are also always dropping by, asking to come in and see our 'big' room,"

Goodman said. "It gets on your nerves sometimes." According to Rick Bradley, assistant director of student services for the Department of University Housing, problems in the four- and five-person rooms were minor and the women living there got along fine. Even so, Bradley said University housing officials worked to keep the number of such rooms low. "We have two four-person rooms in Spencer and only one five-person (residence hall room)," Bradley said. "That's a handful when you provide housing for thousands of students."

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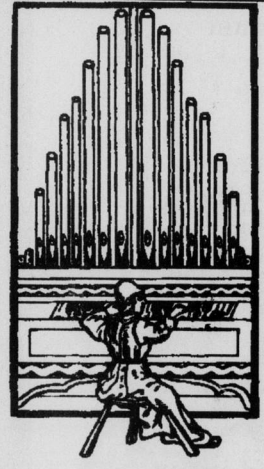
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