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HEADLINE: Video underscores public's frustration with government at all levels

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President Bush vowed, "We are fully prepared." Mike Brown barked orders. Weather experts warned of a killer storm. The behind-the-scenes drama, captured on videotape as Hurricane Katrina roared ashore, confirmed Americans' suspicions of government leaders: They can run a good meeting, but little else.

It is hard to review the transcripts and footage obtained by The Associated Press without reaching three conclusions.

Federal, state and local officials knew what was about to occur.

They knew what to do about it.

They failed to deliver.

For most Americans, this is not a revelation. The public blamed all levels of government long before Bush and other leaders owned up to their responsibilities after the sluggish post-Katrina response. But the videotape and transcripts offer a graphic display of a fatally inept bureaucracy at work a system where everybody talks a good game and nobody produces.

"The city of New Orleans failed. The state of Louisiana failed. The federal government failed. It is astonishing to me that five months after the obvious failure of all three layers of government that there has been no serious systemic change," said former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Republican.

It's no wonder Katrina has become a tipping point event that crystalized the public's long-simmering concerns about the competence and accountability of government.

A bit more jaded than before Katrina, Americans are less likely to give Bush the benefit of the doubt, and they are quicker to question his positions on the Iraq war and post-hurricane controversies such as the port security issue.

The president can no longer say, "Trust me," without a majority of Americans asking, "Why should we?" But this is not just about Bush.

A Pew survey two months after Katrina showed Americans expressing increasingly negative views of a wide range of major institutions, including Congress, corporations and oil companies.

In an AP-Ipsos survey released last week, only 15 percent of Americans said they were "very confident" in the federal government's ability to handle a major disaster in the future, down from 19 percent in mid-September when visions of rooftop-stranded citizens were still fresh in the public's mind.

A separate Roper poll suggests the public is twice as likely to have a lot of confidence in individual Americans than the government in times of tragedy. That may be why Americans set charitable donation records after Katrina and thousands of civic-minded citizens rushed to the Gulf Coast to help out.

Jon Berry, senior vice president at Roper, said the videotape will exacerbate the public's skepticism.

"With all due respect to the president, Americans must be looking at all this as very disconcerting, in that it appears to confirm what many suspect that they can't rely on government in times of disaster," Berry said.

Theda Skocpol, dean of the graduate school of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, said Bush lost his can-do credibility in Katrina's winds.

"The whole episode has raised the question in the public mind about what government can do, but it also raised questions about the Bush administration, which was built on the promise of protecting people in case of emergencies," she said.

The White House points to places in the transcripts where Bush is said to be engaged. That may be true, but Americans also heard the president on videotape boasting that his government was prepared for Katrina. He was certainly wrong about that. Now the public has more evidence to consider whether he was also arrogant, out of touch and dangerously incurious.

Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco criticized Bush and his administration after Katrina, but the transcripts show state officials complimenting the Brown-led Federal Emergency Management Agency and other federal partners even after the storm hit.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said the videotape gave him a "sinking feeling." But he can't avoid blame. Federal officials urged him to evacuate his city sooner, and the mayor knew as well as anybody that a monster storm was brewing.

Brown's reputation may be rehabilitated a bit by the videotape and transcripts. But his complaints about a lack of funding and attention to FEMA from its new parents at the Homeland Security department came far too late for Katrina's victims.

Every level of government failed. Some people, like Gingrich, think the only solution is massive reforms.

"The entire system of the 19th and early 20th century government which we inherited is incapable of moving at the speeds of the modern world," the former House speaker said.

For most Americans, it's not a matter of bigger government or smaller government. They want better government; less bureaucracy, less partisanship and more accountability. They don't expect their leaders to be perfect; only perfectly frank.

"They want us to get things done," said Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack, a Democrat. "Is that so much to ask?"

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press since 1992.

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