

ONE-ON-ONE

Admiral Thad Allen



Thad Allen retired from the U.S. Coast Guard as its 23rd Commandant in 2010. Over a distinguished public service career, Allen led and coordinated the federal government's response to some of the most challenging and high profile crises of our times. He was lead federal official for the responses to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. He also directed Coast Guard operations in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the Haitian Earthquake. For this leadership and more, ASPA awarded Allen the 2016 Nesta M. Gallas Award for Exemplary Professionalism in Public Service.

Allen is executive vice president at Booz Allen Hamilton where he supports clients in cyber security, energy and the environment, navigation systems, emergency response and crisis leadership. A 1971 graduate of the Coast Guard Academy, he holds masters degrees from The George Washington University and MIT Sloan School. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration.

You have been at the forefront of our nation's most significant natural and manmade crises, from leading the Coast Guard's Atlantic Area forces in the wake of 9/11 to spearheading the federal government's response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to serving as national incident commander for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. What lessons did government learn from those crises? And, where does government still fall short in preparing for and responding to future crises?

You have to lean forward and create situational awareness for senior leaders. Someone has to be the face of the government's response and accountable to our citizens. Creating unity of effort is the number one goal to effectively confront the inevitable complexity. We have seen increasing instances where mayors and governors are more aggressive in ordering evacuation, mobilizing the National Guard, assisting populations at risk and putting leaders' "boots on the ground."

We still have a challenge to create national resiliency. From better land use decisions to building codes to insurance, we need to make better, data-informed decisions. Individuals need to take responsibility for themselves to the extent they are able. Unless you are forced from your home by fire or flood, a family should be able to sustain themselves for three to seven days with essential supplies. The first responder in any situation is "you." Several good things happen when you are resilient as an individual or family. First, you can comply with the direction of community leaders. Second, you do not place a demand on emergency services needed elsewhere. Third, you can help your neighbor. This is a virtuous cycle that needs to be ingrained in our national persona.

Crises can be both predictable and unpredictable. What are the types that concern you the most, both in terms of their potential impact and our preparedness for them?

The most vexing crises are those where the complexity of the problem starts to defeat existing policies and operating procedures. This can be because of the scale of the event in terms of citizens impacted or the novelty or lack of precedent of the event. These events often do not fit into existing legal frameworks, identifying which department should take the lead and there is no immediately accessible source of emergency funding. A good example would be the recent Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa. In these cases, leaders must question the status quo and create the art of the possible in the absence of clear policy or legal authorities. We must learn to confront complexity as a risk aggravator and challenge traditional response doctrines when they are ineffective.



Introducing and implementing a "whole of government" approach to addressing major challenges has been a hallmark of your career. What does this approach mean to you and where have you seen it recently work particularly well?

Implicit in a "whole of government" response is the realization that any major crisis cannot be successfully dealt with by a single entity

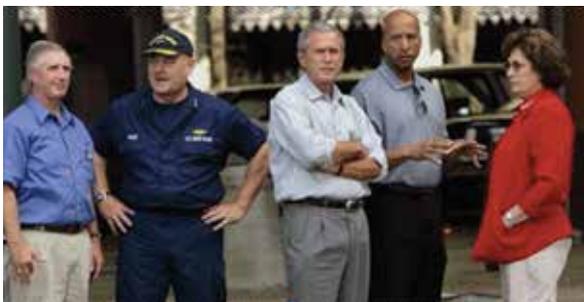
(department, agency, military service). There always will be constraints from authorizing legislation and appropriations. The outcomes expected by the American public in a complex crisis must be coproduced across organizational boundaries in government and in cooperation and collaboration with the private sector. The public has little patience for claims of lack of resources or authority to act when it has been conditioned by the technology that pervades its lives to believe we are a connected society. The art of the possible is more than a single agency can create. The dividing line between public and private goods and “inherently governmental” is being blurred. Capping the well in the Deepwater Horizon oil spill could only be done by the private sector and any major cyber threat will necessarily involve the private sector as well.

What are three lessons or “rules” you would share with governments seeking to promote a “whole of government” approach in their operations?

1. Create a process to designate a clear lead among government agencies that removes any ambiguity as to whom is responsible.
2. Develop agreed upon procedures as to how responses will be resourced pending emergency supplemental funding to allow agencies to act.
3. Involve the private sector, state and local governments and not-for-profits proactively in exercises and create pre-need relationships.

Where do you see the most critical intersection between theory and practice within the emergency management arena? Where do we need more research to better serve distressed populations?

We need to revisit Pareto’s assumptions on sector allocation of resources against what is needed to solve complex problems requiring cross-sector collaboration. The future of the Highway Trust Fund



sustained by taxes on fossil fuels is a good example. We also need to understand that events do not create the preconditions; to the extent you have underserved populations or infrastructure problems, the consequences are exacerbated. Attending to our community issues regarding citizens or housing codes creates resiliency.

You have been involved with ASPA in many capacities. What do you see as our organization’s role in promoting excellence in public service? What has your involvement meant to you?

ASPA faces the same challenges all associations, advocacy organizations and non-governmental groups face. We live in a connected society where technology is changing the way we interact with each other, our government and the world. Every organization needs to challenge itself to redefine its mission space for a constituency that demands information, mobility and greater value in relationships. We need to—in theory and practice—face hard questions of governance, resource allocation and prioritization of government effort. The post-Westphalian nation-state is being challenged by structures and threats that are agnostic to physical borders and the traditional concept of sovereignty. Many public service challenges are global, including climate change, sea level rise and exotic diseases.

ASPA is a forum to raise and discuss these issues and influence the broader national discussion needed. Many solutions are being developed at the state and local level where there is greater control of spending and debt. We need to foster innovation from the citizen to the federal government. We cannot address the challenges of the future in the current frameworks.

What is the one piece of advice you share with students and new professionals beginning their public service career?

Do not be put off by antiquated systems that require reform, from HR to financial management. Jump in and attack the problems. Do not be constrained by your job description. It is not a goal. It is merely the price of admission to serve. It is a floor, not a ceiling. Challenge existing paradigms and confront complexity through the creation of unity of effort across organizational boundaries. Engage in life-long learning and focus on your emotional intelligence so you can understand others better.