

PART 2 THE MARIA CRISIS

Written October, 2017

The crisis in Puerto Rico is far from over, and there will be more discoveries and disclosures as time passes, however, we know some things already. Arguably, the two most important functions of our government – security and communications - were almost nonexistent and the PR owned and operated businesses of power and transportation collapsed. The results reflect dereliction of duty:

Communications. It is understandable that commercial cell phone, land line, and internet services were interrupted, but this is not acceptable. It is absolutely appalling and negligent that there were no working emergency communications between the Central Government and Vieques for 5 days. Command and control were nonexistent.

Security. The government failed in its most basic mission - its justification for existence - by not protecting the essential assets required for the safe operation of the Commonwealth. Even with a practice in June, with a “dry run” two weeks earlier during Irma, and with witness to the riotous events on other islands, somehow there was insufficient appropriate action and resource to guard and transport the critical supplies of fuel, water, food, and medical services required. Law-and-order was not maintained.

Electricity. It was fully expected the electrical grid could not withstand a significant hurricane, and excuses were being made weeks in advance. Government cannot duck responsibility by saying: “We can’t help it now if everything fails because it has been screwed up for a long time!” This is in no way acceptable. Residents have been paying the ridiculously high fee of approximately \$.14/KWH for distribution and maintenance of this system, but all we have to show for it is a rundown, antiquated mess. Where did the money go? The system is financially bankrupt, but the real problem is that the organization is morally and ethically corrupt. Self-serving personnel at many levels have been fleecing the public for years. The time is right for a major change.

Water. The water and sewage services provided by the government business (AAA) are both antiquated and inappropriate for an island community. Our systems are complicated, fragile, and deliver water that has not passed EPA standards. This is not acceptable. Interruption of our sole source of water due to flooding at the pump station, theft of diesel at the generator, and then breakdown of the local generator highlights the lack of care and professionalism demanded by such an important function. Our waste treatment system is inadequate in both reach and quality for a coastal community.

Emergency Response. The following elements of response appeared to be absent from the government for a week or more:

- Command and Control
- Coordination
- Security
- Reception (supplies, equipment, personnel....)
- Distribution
- Storage

This is not even close to acceptable. The Central Government has been reluctant, slow, and even refused to accept outside assistance for critical supplies and services. PR unions have been holding the relief efforts hostage by preventing outside nonunion drivers from driving the trucks sitting in the ports. The inmates have been granted control of the institution.

The one bright light, and a saving grace, was the immediate and aggressive response of the USCG. They were here by the end of the storm asking what we needed and then delivering it. They were very effective responders, and some of their excellent people are still here helping in any way they can.

After a week or two, other responders from the US Air Force, Army, and Marines were visible and contributing to reestablish communications, security, and logistical support. FEMA assessments began, and the Red Cross had joined the command center.

The Ferry (ATM). On a normal day the ferry system is horrible, inadequate, and inappropriate in ways too numerous to mention. The system is “controlled” in Fajardo and has operated after Maria without accurate communication with Vieques. Schedules are posted but not followed. Schedules are designed for the benefit of the Fajardo staff. The people making important decisions can’t be trusted to pick matching socks.

The issues that come to light are not that the federal government has failed to provide resources or has functioned improperly; it’s that the macho PR Central Government has let the people of Puerto Rico down. The emergency response plan was either totally inadequate and/or negligently implemented. The money that residents paid for maintaining and upgrading the infrastructure was squandered and stolen. The people of Puerto Rico have been sailing on a sinking ship for years, and the lifeboats turned out to be full of holes.

For us in Vieques, we can be proud of the way the community has pulled together. We realize that our priority in the scheme of things will put our 9,200 population behind the 3,400,000 residents on the main island. We further understand that the scale of the catastrophe on the main island makes management incredibly challenging. What we didn’t comprehend ahead of time is that we would be **totally ignored** for five days and, worse yet, had no functioning official local leadership. Since we were not allocated adequate resources to design and implement a meaningful, workable disaster plan, we were led to believe that the paternal Central Government would be responsible - as they claimed to be.

We are forced to be dependent upon an undependable master who mandates our submission on almost everything. We are subservient to the omnipotent elites in San Juan who refuse to implement any of the significant changes we request, and at the same time, refuse to allow us do it on our own.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me!

It’s over. We’ve been had for the last time. The self-serving political elite have demonstrated beyond any doubt that they will never put the needs of Vieques high enough on the priority list to get anything done, and they won’t allocate the needed resources to let us do it ourselves. We are trapped in the cellar with the water rising, and they won’t give us the keys to let ourselves out.