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# The Miami Herald

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JUNE 9, 2010

## Call oil spill chief Admiral Fix-it

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**BY CAROL ROSENBERG**  
The Miami Herald

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He's a bear of a man with a grandfatherly demeanor who has had a role in some of the nation's most politically charged controversies.

President George W. Bush put him in charge of the Hurricane Katrina response in September 2005 amid an outcry that FEMA director Michael D. "Brownie" Brown wasn't doing a heck of a job after all.

He was Coast Guard chief of staff during the effort to tighten up port security in the aftermath of 9/11. And he was in charge of Miami during an era of interdictions, when the Coast Guard's image shifted from heroic rescuers to those who detained Miami-bound Cubans at sea and sent them back.

Now Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, 61, is "national incident commander" of the worst oil spill in U.S. history, the face of the federal effort responding to the Gulf of Mexico disaster.

And while it's BP's responsibility to plug the Deepwater Horizon's leak, it is Allen's role to marshal the public effort -- from the states to the U.S. government -- and oversee federal resources brought to the problem.

Between the Katrina assignment and his experience as a Coast Guard leader up and down the East Coast,

he brings an understanding of the push-pull of private-public enterprise to this latest job, says a senior Coast Guard officer who has served several times on Allen's staff.

"Admiral Allen is able to take a very complex problem and break it down into small segments that are more easy to understand, and then bring a wide range of people together to come to a common solution," the officer said.

Lately Allen has been emphasizing the need to converge skimmers from across the nation on a 200-mile radius around the well site.

But, as his daily press briefings now demonstrate, he's also expected to help answer questions about everything related, from the spill's impact on wildlife to what is going on 5,000 feet below the ocean's surface.

"I've never said this is going well," he said grimly at Tuesday's daily briefing, where he has emerged as a key voice of the Obama administration in what he calls "the largest oil spill response in the history of the country."

"We knew this was catastrophic from the beginning when the oil rig exploded and caught on fire. I've said time and time again nothing good happens when oil is on the water," he added. "We're making no illusions that this is anything



Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, National Incident Commander for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response, arrives by helicopter to tour clean-up efforts on Fourchon Beach in response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in Port Fourchon, La., Thursday, May 27, 2010. (Gerald Herbert / Associated Press)

other than a catastrophe, and we're addressing it as such, and we'll continue to do that."

Says the Coast Guard officer, who talked about his old boss with anonymity because he is not authorized to speak about the oil leak: "He tells people, key decision makers, what they need to hear as opposed to what they want to hear. He does that with everybody. Nobody tells him what to say. He tells BP what they need to hear, he tells the president what the president needs to hear."

Even when the solution is an unpalatable one -- to try to mitigate damage and wait until a new relief well is dug.

In that regard, the Center for Biological Diversity's executive director, Kieran Suckling, agrees.

"There are no good options here.

It's not like anyone can be waltzing in with solutions," he said wearily Tuesday, Day 50 of the crisis.

But Suckling says Allen had until this week seemed too sympathetic to BP -- the admiral and BP CEO Tony Hayward were spotted having dinner together in New Orleans a week ago -- and too upbeat about an early resolution to give Americans confidence in his role.

"He should be visibly and singularly in control of the cleanup effort," Suckling said. "He should be giving BP its marching orders. He should be telling the American people the straight scoop of what is happening instead of mirroring BP's talking points."

Federal officials and oil industry executives try to disarm their critics by pointing out that the BP spill is a calamity without precedent -- and the effort to cope being improvised on the spot.

But in April 2002, as commander out of Portsmouth, Va., Allen took part in a civilian twist on a war game of sorts, a drill with the participation of ExxonMobil.

The site of the mock exercise was New Orleans's Superdome. The scenario was a cascading series of accidents that put the public and environment

at risk -- an imaginary well blowout in the Gulf of Mexico that dumped 126,000 gallons of crude and leaked uncontrollably for 30 days; a tanker grounding that unleashed hundreds of thousands of gallons of gasoline onto a highway, and a collision between a foreign freighter and a tanker off the Texas coast.

And Allen's role, as he explained June 1, was "national incident commander for that exercise."

In between, he oversaw the Katrina response, another job that put him in the role of telling politicians things they might not want to hear.

A case in point: Allen persuaded New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin to reverse himself in mid September 2005 on plans to repopulate portions of his evacuated city.

It was a moment of high drama, and deep disappointment, for people poised to come home to rebuild. But Allen had warned that, with Tropical Storm Rita bearing down, the hurricane-ravaged city was not prepared to evacuate all over again.

Like the Coast Guard itself, Allen blends a military style with a civilian sensibility.

He talks of having "rogered" President Barack Obama's belt-tightening

message as a budget-cutting Coast Guard commandant, and that the Coast Guard's "command and control structure" was sufficiently "agile and flexible" to offer quick help to Haiti after the earthquake.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, Obama's Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, attended the change of command ceremony earlier this month when Allen handed off the job of commandant to a new Coast Guard admiral.

That's when his tenure in the top Coast Guard job ran out.

Now he's serving "at the pleasure of the president" ahead of his long-ago scheduled July 1 retirement, a status that means he's still wearing the uniform of an active duty four-star admiral.

Whether he'll continue in the federal role as a civilian is still an open question.

But Allen, a Tucson native and 1971 Coast Guard Academy graduate who biked to work at times, boasted earlier this year he didn't plan a traditional buy-a-boat retirement.

Instead, he said, before the calamity befell the Gulf of Mexico, that although he had lived at 47 different addresses, he looked forward to getting into not-for-profit public service work.