

# Commanding the Coast

BY CAITLIN CARROLL ]

Presidents have turned to Admiral Thad Allen, MPA '86, to lead the government response to crises in the Gulf.

It's Sept. 19 and 206 million gallons of oil have leaked into the Gulf of Mexico from a deepwater oil well. Adm. Thad Allen, MPA '86, has been giving consistent updates to the public throughout the summer as the government's point person for the disaster, at times describing the spill as "an insidious enemy that's attacking our shores" and "holding the Gulf hostage."

But on this day in September, Adm. Allen made a very different announcement about what had become the largest oil spill in U.S. history: the "well is effectively dead."

The phrase that made headlines across the nation was long-awaited good news for residents of the Gulf of Mexico whose livelihoods had become increasingly threatened each day of the spill and for people across the world who had been following the event for a frustrating five months.

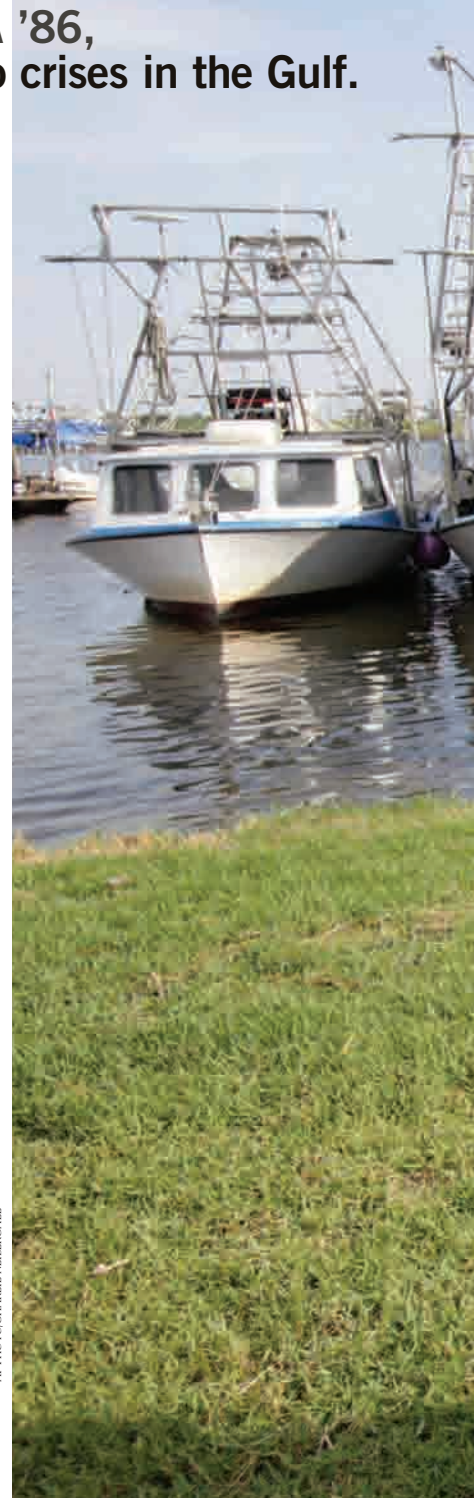
Reflecting on that day, the former commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard who served as the president's appointed national incident commander is careful to call it anything but "a great next step in the response."

"Control of the source and getting that well killed was very, very important," Adm. Allen said in an interview with *GW Magazine*, noting that the leak was plugged weeks earlier, but the well could not be officially declared dead until September when a relief well was finished.

"One of the things that you really have to be concerned about down there is over-promising and under-delivering," says Adm. Allen in the authoritative-yet-relatable style that has characterized his nearly four-decade career in the Coast Guard. "I'm very wary of celebrating anything too soon because the folks down there have been through a lot, and the last thing they want to hear is a Washington bureaucrat saying 'mission complete' or 'we're done' or anything that appears to be self-congratulatory."

Adm. Allen should know. This isn't his first time responding to an event of catastrophic proportions in the Gulf. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005 and left the city largely underwater, the federal government's handling of the Category 5 hurricane was turning into a disaster of its own measure. The public face of the response, Federal Emergency Management Agency Director Michael Brown, was on the outs. In came Adm. Allen, then chief of staff of the U.S. Coast Guard, who replaced Mr. Brown as head of the response efforts.

In the wake of Katrina, the Coast Guard saved nearly 33,000 people from floodwaters. Adm. Allen's overall leadership during the aftermath was commended by many—he is considered to be one of the only government officials to emerge from the event with a better reputation than he had before. Within a year of the disaster, President Bush named Adm. Allen the 23rd commandant of the Coast Guard.



AP PHOTO/CHARLIE NEBERGALL



*Adm. Allen briefs reporters about the spill in Port Sulphur, La., in May. The admiral will join the GW faculty this spring.*

That put Adm. Allen in charge of the military's fifth service, an organization where he had played critical roles not only in Katrina's aftermath, but also in securing the Eastern seaboard after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, in the American response efforts to Haiti's earthquake, and in the U.S.-Cuba immigration and custody affair involving Elian Gonzales, to name a few. He was set to retire from his four-year term, at 61 years old, in June.

But retirement didn't happen according to plan. On April 20, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico exploded, killing 11 people and beginning a drastic release of oil with no strategy in place to stop it. Adm. Allen once again was the go-to official, tasked with coordinating the massive effort to quell the oil—an effort that would take 152 days before reaching that milestone on Sept. 19.

### **“More Like Apollo 13 Than Katrina”**

From April to August, Adm. Allen stood before reporters regularly in and around New Orleans, the event's command center, to explain the status of the spill. The situation posed an unprecedented problem.

“Many things didn't make it a normal spill, but the one thing that was the hardest about it was there was no human access to the point of release,” says Adm. Allen, who often asked reporters, “was that responsive?” after answering questions, helping earn his reputation as a clear and straight-forward official. “Nobody's ever had to control a well and respond to an oil spill when there was no human access to the source, and that made it very, very challenging.”

The procedures in place to deal with oil spills are based on older models of oil production—what Adm. Allen calls “tanker-centric legislation.” The government and other groups did not

have adequate plans to deal with a spill resulting from deep-water drilling, which involves relatively new technology.

“I hope it doesn't sound too trite: I tell everybody the oil spill was more like Apollo 13 than Katrina. It was a vastly different technological problem,” Adm. Allen says, referencing the 1970 spacecraft that experienced an unforeseen explosion. “They had to actually engineer solutions to cap that well and shut it in—things that had never been done before in the Gulf of Mexico in terms of the oil production system.”

Many different groups played roles in the response, from the “responsible party” BP, the oil company that owned the well; to the federal government, local governments, and agencies like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

“There is always going to be an accountability issue every time one of these events occurs. The worst thing you can do in my view is not have a single face in the federal response who is willing to be accountable to the American people for the performance of the response, because that adds anxiety, angst, frustration, and disappointment to what is already almost a public grieving process over the event itself,” Adm. Allen says.

The admiral's experience managing disaster response in the region helped him better understand the social and economic conditions of the Gulf community.

“I think it's hard for the rest of the country to understand that to them this was not an oil spill, this is a second or third in a series of things that have been catastrophic in the region and...the oil spill directly threatens their way of life.”

As the spill trudged on, some questioned whether the event would tarnish the admiral's reputation. New Orleans' daily newspaper published an editorial in July contrasting Katrina and the spill, stating that area residents “will always be grateful for the heroic performance of the U.S. Coast Guard after Hurricane Katrina” but “have a different opinion of the Coast Guard's job as the federal agency in charge of responding to the BP oil spill.”



*Adm. Allen releases a rehabilitated sea turtle into the Gulf in August with Jane Lubchenko, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.*

*Adm. Allen picks up a tar ball with a pen as he tours Fouchon Beach in Port Fourchon, La., in May.*



AP PHOTO/GERALD HERBERT

AP PHOTO/PHIL SANDLIN



*The admiral shares his perspective on the spill during a discussion with Lisa Jackson, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator, and moderator Ron Carlee, executive in residence at the International City/County Management Association, at a Sept. 24 event at GW.*

The admiral, however, says he stays focused on the big picture.

"I am a strong believer that if you are going to work in this town and be successful and keep your sanity, you can't be captured by what I call the 'tyranny of the present'...you've got to be able to lift yourself above that and figure out where it is you're at and what it is you are trying to do and to achieve."

When Adm. Allen reached his retirement date in June, he continued serving as the national incident commander as a civilian. His position was disbanded Oct. 1 as another Coast Guard admiral took on the responsibilities. Up until the final days of his post, Adm. Allen was discussing the work ahead.

## Rising Through the Ranks

Adm. Allen grew up with the Coast Guard—his father was a chief petty officer. The admiral's attendance at the Coast Guard Academy, however, was not as intentional as it may seem.

"I thought at the time that I was too small to play Division I football," says Adm. Allen, explaining that the Coast Guard Academy is a Division III athletic program, which he thought increased his chances of making the team. "So in my final decision, that's what tipped that scale."

He played on the varsity football team as a linebacker all four years of college and served as the team's captain his senior year. Clearly, choosing the academy turned out to be beneficial for more than his athletic career.

He quickly rose through the ranks of the Coast Guard, serving aboard three Coast Guard cutters before being tapped for the high-profile crisis-response roles he is known for. His reflections now on these challenging assignments show the perspective gained from a long career.

"One of the things I try to do is separate out the cause of the event from the response. For instance with this oil spill, if you get so consumed with what happened out there on the rig, and if you get so consumed with where you stand on offshore oil production and moratoriums and things like that, it becomes very easy to become distracted from what you are trying to do, which is help people solve a problem."

"I actually forcibly carve out time to think about the future and contemplate what's going on. If you can't do that, no matter

how hectic the current pace is, I don't think you are really doing your job right."

In addition to being calmly focused on the future, Adm. Allen has also been noted for his ability to speak comfortably with many different populations—from presidents and members of Congress to disaster victims.

"If you are going to be effective responding to a crisis you better be able to put yourself in the shoes of the people who have suffered dramatically, whether it's from a hurricane, oil spill, tsunami, earthquake, or whatever. And if you can't do that, then you can't be an effective face of the federal government providing support."

He also cites being "bureaucratically multilingual" as an essential skill—something he credits to GW.

"The MPA degree I got there in 1986 has served me tremendously well over my career. It helps you better understand all of the federal agencies. I've often said that to be successful working across government, you have to be bureaucratically multilingual. You have to be able to project up through your superiors about what it is you're trying to do and trying to achieve, but never become disconnected from what you are trying to do for the American public."

## A Character and a Hero

On Sept. 24, Adm. Allen took the stage at GW's Jack Morton Auditorium to talk about his experiences. Comfortably standing in the middle of the stage instead of behind the podium, Adm. Allen discussed the major lessons he has learned.

"Folks, it's not easy. It's not easy because we are a democracy. And we were created messy," he started off.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson was also at the event to discuss her perspective on the oil spill and praised the admiral, who she worked with during the spill response.

"The city loves characters and they love heroes. And Thad Allen is both," said Ms. Jackson, a New Orleans native.

Outlining lessons learned from events and applying them to the future is one of the admiral's trademarks, and a quality that should serve him as he joins the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration faculty this spring.

At the event, Adm. Allen also received the second annual Colin Powell Public Service Award, a recognition he says he is honored to receive because of his admiration for the former secretary of state and GW alumnus.

"That was a surprise and an honor as well. Colin Powell is a good friend of mine," Adm. Allen says. "I seek his counsel and he has mentored me on occasion, so it makes it doubly rewarding to receive this award."

He added that he has spoken with Gen. Powell about retirement and received some tips from him.

"He said keep it simple and don't try to do too much," says Adm. Allen, who joined RAND, a think tank, as a senior fellow in October. The admiral says retirement will allow him to "continue dealing with public policy and public administration issues at a more thoughtful, maybe less hectic, pace." **GW**