



Cool Under Fire

FOR HIS LEADERSHIP, HIS TENACITY, AND HIS GRACE IN THE FACE OF AMERICA'S DARKEST HOUR, OKLAHOMA TODAY NAMES BLACKWELL NATIVE JOE ALLBAUGH THE 2001 OKLAHOMAN OF THE YEAR.

BY ADAM BUCKLEY COHEN

WHEN JOE ALLBAUGH'S PLANE TOUCHED DOWN AT LAGUARDIA AIRPORT on September 12, all he could think of was an old war movie. He'd seen it as a kid. A black and white film from the Fifties. The lead character was a submarine officer.

As Allbaugh describes it, the officer is looking through a periscope. And then the perspective changes, and you're seeing what's he's seeing. It's a beach, and it's cluttered with vehicles. Except they're all abandoned. The periscope keeps panning the shoreline, searching for signs of life. But there's nobody, nothing.

Peering from the window of the C-5 military plane he'd just ridden up from Washington, D.C., Allbaugh couldn't shake the feeling that he was gazing through that periscope. No guys in bright orange vests waving the planes to their gates. No mechanics checking turbines and fuselages. Not even a baggage handler brutalizing a suitcase within an inch of its life. Only empty planes and baggage carts and fuel trucks. A day and a half before, LaGuardia had been a hive of activity, a bustling airport in the biggest city in America. And now it was a still life.

As a helicopter whisked Allbaugh from LaGuardia toward what remained of the Financial District, it all began to sink in. That thunderhead of smoke swallowing lower Manhattan was not hiding the World Trade Center towers. They were gone.

At ground zero, the firefighters staggered out of the rubble, black with soot, their eyes betraying the horrors they had seen. Allbaugh wanted to do something, anything. So he walked up to one of the firefighters, shook his hand, told him thank you. Then he did the same to another. And another.

Crews scabbled furiously at the ruins, searching for survivors. But Allbaugh already knew what few were willing to say: Chances were slim that rescue workers would pull anyone from the wreckage alive. Still, they would keep searching, hoping against hope.

Sometime late in the night, Allbaugh climbed into the shower at the W, a funky hotel near Manhattan's Union Square where the flat-topped, cowboy-booted Oklahoman stuck out like a sore thumb. The steamy air felt good on his throat, raw from the fumes, the asbestos-laced dust, and God knows what else he had breathed in at ground zero. He coughed, wheezed, spit up all sorts of stuff that had settled into his lungs. And as the hot water washed over his hulking body, this man, who had built a career around playing the heavy, cried.

Joe Allbaugh, who was named director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in February 2001, is responsible for coordinating the nation's recovery efforts in the aftermath of disaster. An OSU graduate and former chief of staff for Oklahoma governor Henry Bellmon, Allbaugh served as Governor George W. Bush's chief of staff in Texas as well as his campaign manager for the presidency. Allbaugh was photographed by John Jernigan at the Marriott Hotel in Oklahoma City on November 21, 2001.

HALF A YEAR EARLIER, THE MOOD HAD BEEN ANYTHING but somber as President George W. Bush swore in Allbaugh as director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The Blackwell native had helmed Bush's 1994 gubernatorial campaign, served as his chief of staff for the next five and a half years, and then managed the campaign that made him the country's forty-third president. In return, Bush had rewarded Allbaugh by selecting him to lead FEMA, the agency charged with coordinating the government's response to disasters both natural and man-made.

At the swearing-in, Bush poked fun at Allbaugh's lineman-like physique and got in a couple of digs about the new FEMA director's decidedly unfashionable coif. But this was no frat party. "When the worst happens anywhere in America," declared the President, "I can assure you, folks will be confident when Joe Allbaugh arrives on the scene...Joe will help Americans deal with the worst, in the best, most compassionate way possible." Over the next six months, Allbaugh did just that, providing emergency assistance to victims of tornadoes in Kansas, tropical storms in Mississippi, floods in Iowa, and more than two dozen other natural disasters across the country.

On the morning of September 11, Allbaugh was in Montana, attending the annual meeting of the National Emergency Management Association. "I'd just given a speech on preparedness, weapons of mass destruction, first responders, fire service, law enforcement," he says. "We're pretty good at handling tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes. What we're not prepared to do as well as I would like is handle the unknown. Weapons of mass destruction—chemical, biological, radiological."

He was preparing for a private meeting with state emergency management directors to discuss funding and implementation for terrorism response programs when the events of the day overtook his agenda. "Someone walked up to me and said, 'Did you hear about the plane crash?'" recalls Allbaugh. Like much of the country, he watched helplessly as the second plane hit the World Trade Center. "I knew immediately it was terrorism."

He shifts in his chair, and the light catches the silver hairs that fleck his once-red mustache. "I was always fearful something like this would happen. I hoped and prayed that it wouldn't. But there was something in my stomach that told me that it's not if it's going to happen, it's when it's going to happen."

IT'S EASY TO SEE HOW ALLBAUGH, FORTY-NINE, EARNED a reputation as an enforcer. For starters, he's six-foot-four. Without the cowboy boots. He weighs somewhere well north of 250 pounds, and there doesn't look to be a lot of fat on him. He's got a flat top that would make any drill sergeant proud. He doesn't smile much. He doesn't say much, either. But when he does, he doesn't mince words.

"He's got two demeanors—somber and somberer," says White House senior advisor Karl Rove, who also served as a political advisor

to Bush in Texas. "Big-shouldered, tough jaw, straight to the point. A leader. He was a guy who as chief of staff called the shots and as campaign manager called the shots. And he made the trains run on time. Everybody got a chance to say their piece, but decisions were made, and people marched in the appropriate direction."

Allbaugh cracks a rare grin when asked about his penchant for playing the bad cop. "You need an enforcer. When he was governor, President Bush and I had such a unique relationship that I was comfortable being the go-to guy whenever things needed to be taken care of. I'm very good at it, and I don't lose a lot of sleep over it. You do what you have to do, then you move on down the road. Fortunately, I've got the hair and body to pull it off."

But the tough guy routine doesn't work with everybody. "Joe is fun to tease," says Rove. "I was once on an airplane flight with Joe. I was sitting next to him, and I turned to him and started saying"—Rove's voice shifts to a rough approximation of Alvin and the Chipmunks on helium—"Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet? And after about fifteen minutes, Joe turned to me and said, 'You say it one more time, and I'll pinch your head off.'" Rove giggles, clearly proud of himself. "Of course, it prompted me to say"—chipmunk voice again—"Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"

The oldest of Marvin and Peggy Allbaugh's three sons, Joe Allbaugh spent his early years on a wheat farm outside Blackwell, a little town about a hundred miles north of Oklahoma City. The Allbaughs had farmed the same plot of land since his grandfather settled it in the Cherokee Strip Run of 1893, but when Peggy Allbaugh discovered a rattlesnake

in a dresser drawer, the family moved to town overnight.

Marvin Allbaugh continued to grow wheat, and he often enlisted Joe to help out. Joe, however, preferred the football field to the wheat fields. A big, strapping kid who loved to hit people, he dreamed of one day terrorizing quarterbacks for the Dallas Cowboys.

"Joe was a good player," says Bob Niles, Allbaugh's junior high school football coach. "Whatever you told him to do, he would do it, and he wouldn't ask questions." But Allbaugh's NFL dreams died early: At age fourteen, injuries forced him to have career-ending surgery on both knees. Fortunately, by the time his knees gave out, Allbaugh had already found another passion—politics.

When he was in seventh grade, Allbaugh's geography teacher challenged her students to get involved in an election. "She didn't care whether it was a county race or a state race," remembers Allbaugh, "so I thought, 'What the heck—let's start at the top.'" He went to the local Republican headquarters and volunteered to hand out leaflets for Barry Goldwater in his 1964 campaign to unseat President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Allbaugh, with the chief executive and his friend, President Bush, in October, above right. After the attack on New York, the marquee at Madison Square Garden, right, was changed to include the FEMA teleregistration number. To date, more than 36,500 people have applied for assistance using the toll-free number.



In an eerie foreshadowing to September 11, Allbaugh and John Magaw of the Office of National Preparedness speak to a Senate committee in May 2001 about the president's plans for federal domestic terrorism programs.

ALEX PLUMMER/FEMA

GREG SCHALLER/FEMA

LARRY LERNER/FEMA



“Comparing the two on a balance sheet, I was more philosophically in tune with Goldwater,” he says. “Holding people accountable. Big government is not always the answer. Throwing money at the problem is not always the answer. Trying to think outside the box.” Pretty sophisticated politics for a twelve year old. So was he crushed when his candidate carried only six states? “No, no, not really. I didn’t know enough to be demoralized. I mean, I was in seventh grade. I was looking forward to getting my driver’s license.”

His appetite for politics whetted, he volunteered for Richard Nixon’s presidential campaign in 1968 and Dewey Bartlett’s runs for governor and senator in 1970 and 1972. At Oklahoma State University, he majored in political science and had his sights set on law school. But that all changed when Henry Bellmon, then running for reelection to the Senate, offered Allbaugh a paid campaign job as his driver and aide-de-camp.

The pay? A whopping \$450 a month. No matter. “It was a shock,” Allbaugh says. “Someone was going to pay me money for what I enjoyed doing.” He took the job, leaving OSU two semesters short of graduation.

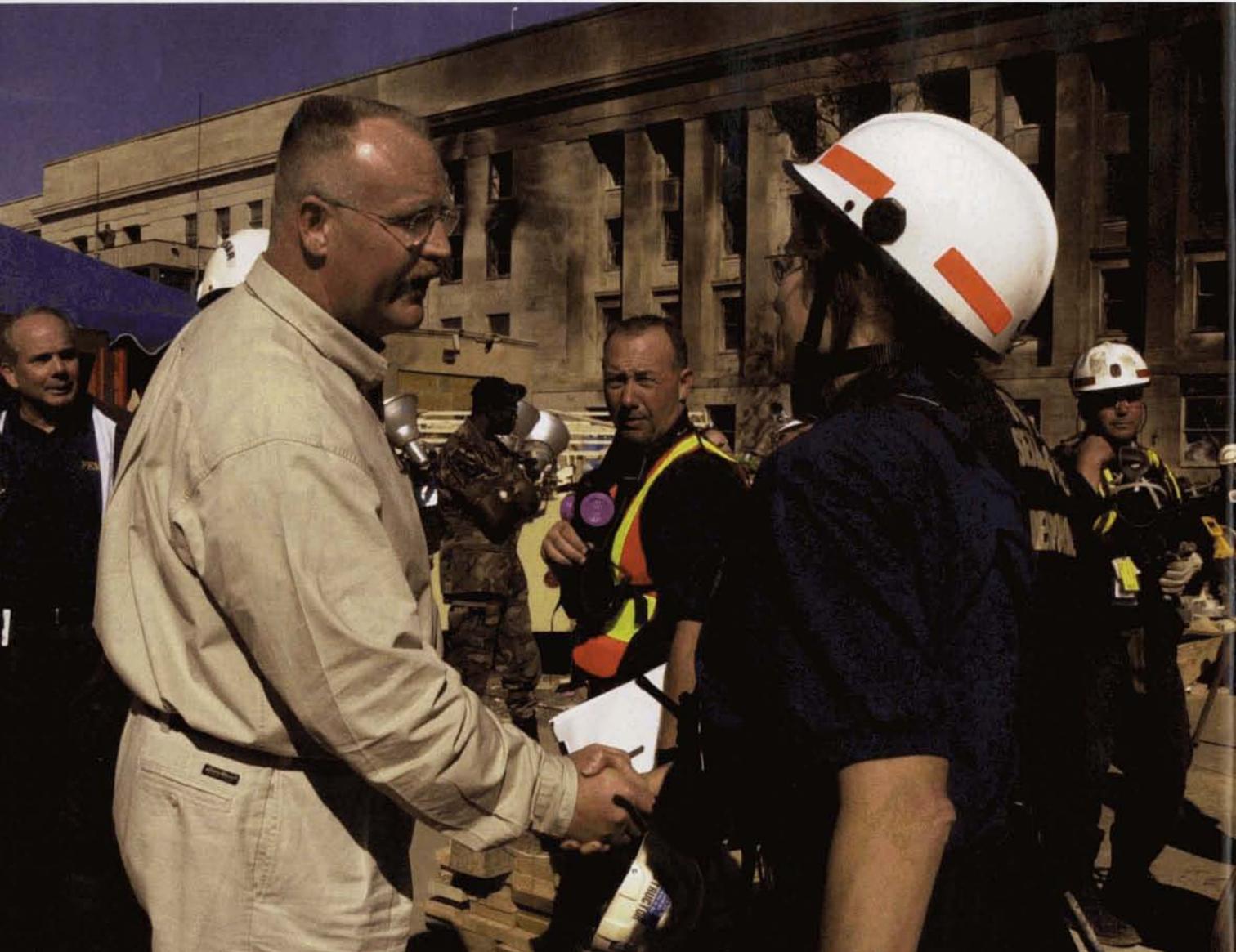
Even now, Allbaugh’s voice is tinged with reverence as he recalls

his early days with Bellmon. “The guy was a tank commander who had seen action on Iwo Jima, Tinian, Saipan. He was a Marine, and he’d won a Silver Star. Just driving around with him was amazing—the stories he could tell. He became a second father to me.”

Bellmon taught Allbaugh lessons he would carry with him throughout his political career. Speak your mind, he told his charge, regardless of whether it’s politically palatable. Be honest with the electorate—the public can see through a phony in a heartbeat. And perseverance wins elections. This last one would prove crucial to a presidential campaign a quarter-century later.

Despite the post-Watergate fallout that unseated many Republicans that year, Bellmon campaigned tirelessly and eked out a victory over Ed Edmondson, a popular Democratic representative. With that victory came the spoils for Allbaugh—a position as a field representative in Bellmon’s Enid office. But before the aspiring politico could come aboard, Bellmon insisted that he return to Stillwater and finish his degree.

After becoming the first male in his family to graduate from college, Allbaugh spent two years working for Bellmon in Enid, then one year as political director of the Oklahoma Republican party, and the better part of the next decade working for the Republican



National Committee and numerous Republican candidates across the country. Along the way, he managed Ed Noble's unsuccessful 1980 Senate bid and served as deputy political regional director for Ronald Reagan's landslide reelection effort in 1984.

"My life used to begin and end the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years," says Allbaugh. "What draws me to campaigns is that there's something always happening every five minutes, something new. I like the idea of putting all the marbles on the table. Winner take all is very exciting to me."

Still, the grind of working on campaigns in thirty-nine states eventually took its toll on Allbaugh. "It was tough," he says quietly. "It cost me my first marriage."

But in 1983, he met the woman who would become his second wife. Diane Allbaugh, an Oklahoma City native who attended Cameron University and later graduated from OU Law School, remembers her first impression of Joe. "Tall," she says, laughing. "A huge presence. Attractive smile. I don't know how to describe it. He was someone special from the very beginning." They were married two years later. Together, they had a daughter, Taylor, who joined Joe's son, Chase, and Diane's son, David. "We have yours, mine, and ours, but they're all ours," says Diane.

In 1984 or 1985, Bellmon called up his one-time driver. "He said, 'You know, I'm thinking about running for governor again,'" says Allbaugh. "And I said, 'Good, count me in.'" With Allbaugh as his campaign manager, Bellmon defeated David Walters in the 1986 race. Allbaugh stayed on for eighteen months as Bellmon's legislative director.

"We counted on [Joe] to get votes, to move our legislation along, and he did very well," says Bellmon. "He had a talent for working with people across party lines." Allbaugh left the public sector in 1988 to join an investment banking firm, but he returned three years later to become Oklahoma's deputy secretary of transportation.

In early 1994, Bellmon, by then retired from government, received a phone call from George W. Bush, who was at the time running for governor of Texas. Bush told Bellmon, an old acquaintance, that he was looking for a new campaign manager. A former Bellmon staffer had recommended Allbaugh to Bush, and Bush wanted to know what Bellmon thought of his former campaign manager and legislative director. "I described Joe as a take-charge guy, a no-nonsense, hard-driving sort of person," says Bellmon. "And George's immediate reaction was, 'That's exactly what I'm looking for.'"

Bush soon called Allbaugh, who was still serving as Oklahoma's

deputy secretary of transportation. Allbaugh remembers the day he got the call on the state House floor. "The guy says, 'Joe, this is George Bush. What are you doing?'" Allbaugh recalls. "And I said, 'Yeah, right.'" But Allbaugh soon figured out this was no prank call. "He said, 'Look, I'd like you to come down and visit with Laura and myself. As you know, I'm running for governor. And I'm not happy with the way my campaign is taking place.'" Allbaugh arrived in Austin on March 8—the day of the primary—and took over as Bush's campaign manager.

Bush had undertaken what many believed was a futile attempt to unseat popular Democratic incumbent Ann Richards. But by May, Allbaugh was convinced his man would win the race. "Governor Bush—George—articulated his vision very well: juvenile justice, welfare reform, education reform. And he wore everyone slick beating that home." In November, Bush took the Austin statehouse with more than fifty-three percent of the vote. He named Allbaugh his chief of staff.

In Austin, Allbaugh oversaw two hundred staffers but shunned the limelight. At gatherings, he was sometimes mistaken for a member of Bush's security detail. He developed a reputation for integrity, straight talk, and unswerving loyalty to Bush.

Their offices were ten steps (ten Allbaugh steps, that is) apart.

Bush and Allbaugh became fast friends. The governor enjoyed giving Allbaugh a hard time. Of course, there was the hair. The WWF body. And Bush loved bestowing nicknames on Allbaugh: Big Country, Pinkie, Are We There Yet? Sometimes the staff would even launch into a chorus of "Oklahoma!" when Allbaugh entered a room.

But there was the serious side, too. Allbaugh, Rove, and press secretary Karen Hughes formed Bush's fabled "Iron Triangle"—his innermost circle of advisers. Bush, says Rove, "has depended on Joe for a long, long time. He has the utmost confidence in Joe."

"Joe listens," Hughes told the *Washington Post* in 1999. "Both Karl and I talk a lot. Joe does not. He's quiet. But when he speaks, it's always well thought out. Joe's very fair and very balanced. He gets things done."

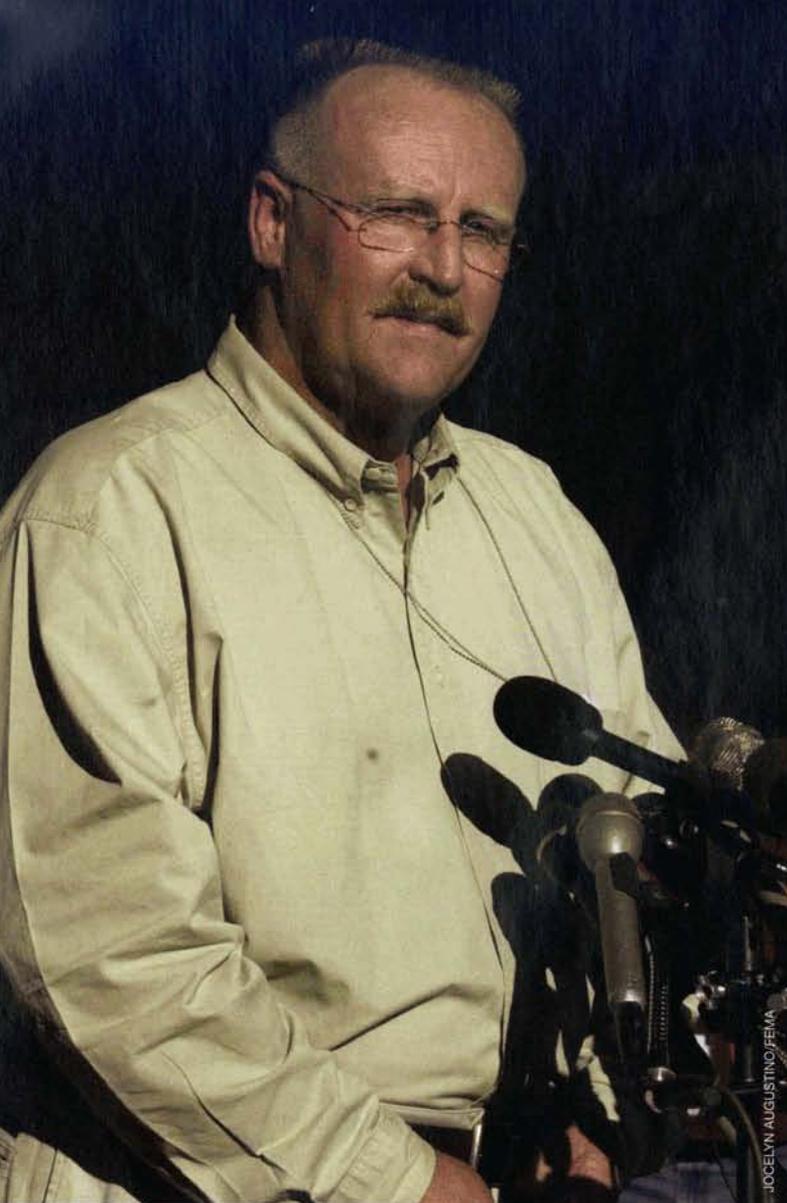
In 1999, Bush tapped Allbaugh to run his presidential campaign. Yes, there were a few rough spots along the way: the drubbing in the New Hampshire primary by John McCain, the much-maligned appearance at Bob Jones University in South Carolina, the Florida recount debacle. But on January 20, 2001, after the chads had finally cleared, it was Bush—not Al Gore—with his right hand on the same King James Bible on which George Washington had sworn his oath of office 212 years earlier. Once again, the wheat farmer's son from Blackwell had worked his magic.



In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Allbaugh extensively surveyed disaster areas in Washington, D.C., and New York City, above, and met with firefighters and urban search and rescue workers.

MICHAEL RIEGER/FEMA

As FEMA director, keeping up morale with handshakes and pats on the back is as important as meeting the resource needs of the men and women who labor at the sites.



ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 11, ALLBAUGH started activating search and rescue teams from all over the country. When the teams arrived at the site where the Twin Towers once stood, they were met by mountains of rubble, twisted steel beams as long as football fields, fire trucks scattered like matchsticks. And thick, white dust covered everything.

The rescuers climbed into garbage can-sized holes in the wreckage, hoping they would again see daylight. In the darkness, they found beams so hot they burned through their coats. They found pieces of carpet and file cabinets and human fingers. But after the first day, they didn't find anybody alive. Still, for weeks and weeks, twelve hours on, twelve hours off, they kept searching.

Within a week, Allbaugh had imported more than six thousand federal workers—Coast Guard personnel, the Army Corps of Engineers, Small Business Administration employees, technicians of every imaginable stripe—to assist in New York alone. All told, disaster medical assistance teams treated nearly ten thousand patients at clinics within blocks of ground zero. As of early December, more

than 700,000 tons of debris had been removed from the twenty-acre World Trade Center site. Only two-and-a-half months after the attacks, FEMA had already paid out more than \$500 million in disaster assistance in New York alone, the funds going for everything from housing grants to individuals to reimbursement to the city for debris removal.

And still there is more.

By year's end, fires in excess of 900 degrees still burned underneath the World Trade Center rubble. Nearly three months after the attacks, searchers had recovered only 225 of the roughly 3,000 people killed at the World Trade Center. Carbon monoxide is everywhere, so thick that even with respirators, workers can only last twenty minutes before it overtakes their systems. Rubble removal will likely take the better part of another year to complete. Once all that is resolved, there's the rebuilding, which, by the end of the year, was projected to cost the federal government more than \$11 billion.

Allbaugh has presided over this massive disaster—the largest this country has ever seen—with aplomb. He has secured significant additional funding from the president and Congress both for the relief efforts and to improve terrorism preparedness in the future. With Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge, he has developed a comprehensive plan for assessing emergency responsiveness at the

On September 15, Allbaugh speaks to the media in Washington, D.C., above left, about FEMA's role in the recent attacks. In addition to making his rounds to disaster sites, Allbaugh's job includes meeting with victims at Disaster Assistance Service Centers such as this one, above right, in lower Manhattan.



MICHAEL RIEGER/FEMA

state and local level. Allbaugh has already begun to send teams out across the country, not only to evaluate city and state emergency response capabilities, but to fix any weaknesses—inadequately trained emergency personnel, insufficient stock of antibiotics, you name it—they might find.

Rove, for one, is not surprised Allbaugh has risen to the task. “Joe is one of these guys who will ride to the sound of gunfire. If there’s a battle, he’ll be there. I think America’s seen his superb ability during September 11 and its aftermath. He’s a talented leader who’s been able to inspire a lot of volunteers, to give comfort where it’s needed, and to provide tough leadership in the face of a very, very tough crisis.”

FOR ALLBAUGH, SEPTEMBER 12, 2001, FELT SADLY REMINISCENT of another day—April 20, 1995. That was the day Allbaugh visited the Murrah Building bomb site. “I was thinking immediately of the Mike Weavers, the Susie Ferrells, and a slew of other folks I knew who lost their lives in the Oklahoma City bombing,” says Allbaugh of his first visit to the World Trade Center site. “It was like I was reliving a bad dream.”

On September 11, Frank Keating called Allbaugh to offer any assistance he could provide. Six years earlier, Keating, like Allbaugh, was new to his job when he was thrust into a similar role—spear-

heading Oklahoma City’s recovery from the worst act of domestic terrorism this country had ever known. Now perhaps Allbaugh could benefit from Keating’s experiences as he sought to heal the country’s wounds in the wake of September 11.

Keating had known Allbaugh since 1995, when Allbaugh became Governor Bush’s chief of staff. The pair worked together on numerous projects during Bush’s tenure as governor, from economic development to facilitating the infamous OU-Texas football bet. “I’ve always known Joe to be bright, energetic, tenacious, tough—all of the cardinal virtues,” Keating says. “I have tremendous respect for his integrity, for his excellence.”

Keating believes that the country is in good hands with Allbaugh leading the recovery efforts. “He may not look like a FEMA administrator—he has that big, tough look about him—but he is extraordinarily willing to make decisions, to make good things come from bad events.”

When Allbaugh returned Keating’s September 11 phone call, the governor was immediately struck by Allbaugh’s “humility and open-mindedness.” Here he was, the director of FEMA—the man charged with coordinating the responses of all twenty-six federal agencies, the man who answers directly to the President—and he was asking Keating if there was anything he was doing wrong, if there was anything he should do differently. “I told him,” recalls Keating, “In my judgment, you’re doing it right.”

Since that call, Allbaugh and Keating have kept in contact. On several occasions, Allbaugh has sought the governor’s advice on the post-September 11 recovery efforts. “He’s willing to focus on small details,” Keating says. “And that focus helps a lot of people.”

Bellmon believes that his protégé’s success has much to do with his Oklahoma upbringing. “He learned to be a hard worker on his father’s farm, and he learned to accept responsibility. Because when you’re working out in the field and something breaks down, you don’t have any choice but to fix it.”

Indeed, the wheat fields of Blackwell hold special meaning for Allbaugh. A few years back, he purchased part of that original tract of land that his great-grandfather staked more than a century ago. “It’s not that Joe will ever go back and actually till the land itself again. It’s something else, something deeper than that,” says Diane Allbaugh. “He wants to pass that land on to our children. He wants to pass on to them the significance of what it took to be a pioneer, to actually leave your family and go out and settle the wild West.”

“I’m very proud to be from Oklahoma,” says Allbaugh. “We have a rich history and tradition of doing and of helping others. And I’d like to think that in a small way, I’m continuing that tradition.”

He unfolds his long frame from the chair. Enough of talking about himself. Enough of the spotlight.

It hasn’t been half an hour since he cried, telling of the friends he lost on September 11. But you’d never know it to look at him as he shakes hands—firmly, of course—then strides away purposefully, his ground-swallowing steps echoing through the hotel lobby. Time to get back behind the curtain. Time to make things happen.

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