

INTERVIEW —

Admiral Thad Allen, MPA '86 23rd Commandant of the United States Coast Guard

By Andrea Leung and Kaitlin Welborn

Admiral Thad Allen, the 23rd Commandant of the US Coast Guard, graduated from The George Washington University with his Master of Public Administration in 1986. Since that point, he has been in charge of the federal responses for Hurricane Katrina as well as for the Deep-water Horizon oil spill. Admiral Allen sat down with the Editor-in-Chief and the Managing Editor of Policy Perspectives to talk about lessons learned from his career, “dogs who hunt,” and the possibility of an Admiral Allen Twitter account.

Policy Perspectives: Thank you, Admiral Allen, for speaking with us. Did you always plan on going into public service?

When I was ready to graduate from high school, I applied to a number of colleges and also applied for appointments to the Naval Academy and to the Coast Guard Academy and I had a wide variety of opportunities. Most of them were academic scholarships. But, I played football in high school, and my senior year the coach decided to go with a youth movement and took all the seniors and put them all on the bench and play the new guys because we weren't winning that much. So I had a very unfulfilling senior year playing football. It occurred to me somewhere along the line that I was too small to play Division I football, so my final decision to go to the Coast Guard Academy was not based on the fact that my dad was in

the Coast Guard and I knew all about it but because I might have a chance to play intercollegiate football at the Division III level. So that was the final decision maker for me to go to the Coast Guard Academy. And it was successful; I walked on to Varsity as a freshman and played four years and was the captain my senior year. I had a five-year commitment to military service to pay back for my education and I stayed on after the five years. I kept hanging around and ultimately I became the Commandant. If ever I were to write an autobiography, I'd call it the “Accidental Admiral.”

PP: Do you think receiving your Masters in Public Administration helped your career at all?

It helped it quite a bit. I didn't go to graduate school till very late in my career.

PP: What made you decide to go to graduate school?

Well if you don't go to graduate school at some point - if you're going to stay in the service - you start to limit your promotion potential. And while early on I didn't know if I was going to stay in, I looked around and I had been in the service for 13 years and I had no staff assignments in Washington, and I thought, now at 13 years you might as well stay for 20. So I thought I better make an investment. I didn't want to be pigeonholed into a particular job, and in the Coast Guard,

there's a tendency that if you get an MBA, you're probably going to end up a budgeter or in a comptroller job. I looked around and a public administration degree would give me a graduate degree and give me more degrees of freedom of where I can work because of the general applicability of the degree and I wouldn't be stove-piped to a particular specialty in the Coast Guard. So I picked the Master of Public Administration. I picked GW because I'd never been to headquarters and I knew it was inevitable after coming out of grad school that they'd assign me to a staff job and I didn't want to move my family twice, so I wanted to pick a school in the Washington area. I did a little bit of searching and came up with GW and that's how I got here.

PP: Did you have a concentration?

Yes, Executive, legislative, and regulatory management. I'm not sure that exists anymore.

PP: So you probably learned quite a bit in graduate school, I would imagine. Or, if you didn't...

Shame on me...

PP: How did you apply what you learned in graduate school throughout your career - or did you apply any of it?

Well, I think it was more of a sequential process of learning when I came out of graduate school. As I told you earlier I thought I was going to be assigned to Coast Guard headquarters, but just before I'd graduated they had an unforeseen retirement of a planning officer in our regional command in New York City. So after all my planning to come here and then stay here, as a follow up assignment, I got relocated out of Washington and I became a planning officer at a place called Governor's Island.

I did all the long-reach planning for construction of buildings; I did all the

environmental compliance. I was involved in a lot of the human resource planning, budgeting, and things like that. So I immediately got involved in a lot of things I had just studied while I was getting my degree at GW. I think everywhere along the line you find another way to apply what you've learned. After that, I became a budget officer in our regional support command - even though I had tried to avoid being a comptroller type. But all the public budgeting courses I took here were very helpful there as well and I just kind of went that way through my career.

PP: It has been nearly a year since the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Looking back, what are the top three lessons you learned?

Number one: our political leaders are not prepared to understand the oil spill response doctrine and, therefore, it was hard to gain political support for it early on because it is different from responding to a hurricane. Number two...

PP: When you say they didn't understand, do you mean they weren't given the knowledge or the help to really help them understand or that they were stubborn and refused to understand?

That's a great question. I think in the first few years of this administration, whether or not they should have been listening when we were trying to tell them or we should have told them harder, it didn't matter. There was a gap between the doctrinal way to respond to an oil spill and their understanding of what they thought should have been done. Because everyone understands what happens in a hurricane, but it's different in an oil spill. In a hurricane, state and local responders have the authority and we just help them with resources. In an oil spill the government has federal preemptive authority and we manage the spill at the local level and that was not well understood by everybody.

PP: That is disconcerting, as you would imagine that one, there've been oil spills before so there would have been some documentation or some know-how, and two, it is dangerous to have such a disconnect of information like that.

When this administration came in we listed several things that they needed to understand in case that were to happen: mass migrations in the Coast Guard, massive search and rescue cases, and a large oil spill. Oil spills are not prosecuted under the same set of statutes as everything else. Six weeks before the rig blew up, we had a spill of national significance exercise in Maine and no senior political leaders participated in it. Maybe we should have pressed harder, maybe they should have been there, I don't know, but the fact of the matter was I don't think the political leaders were prepared to deal with an oil spill.

PP: Is there anything that you regret looking back? Or no?

Knowing what I know now, the minute the administration came into the door, I'd press them and say you'd have to sit down and understand how we're going to do an oil spill if it occurs. If you don't do that they're going to start acting politically because they feel they need to and that creates a potential for having people go different directions, which is not what you need to create a unity of effort.

PP: And having said that do you feel hopeful that the next administration or whoever takes over will take preparation for an oil spill more seriously?

Well my recommendation is that next year they take an oil spill exercise and get everybody involved and run through it just in case it happens again.

PP: Both in your acceptance speech for the Colin Powell Public Service Award and in your class, you have

talked quite a bit about your "dogs that hunt." Could you explain that concept and, for future people who are looking to be in those kinds of positions, what do you look for in staff when you're managing complex organizations?

Well there's a colloquial phrase used down South when somebody's not getting the job done, they'll say "that dog don't hunt," like a hunting dog that doesn't hunt very well. When I was called up for Hurricane Katrina and I was on my way to the airport, I called four or five people that used to work for me and I told them to find me in New Orleans because I knew they were people I could depend on. As we went through the buildup of our staff down there, they did such an excellent job that I gave them the nickname "the dogs that hunt."

So it's people you call on, that you depend on, that show up and do a good job. Part of the things we've talked about in the class that I'm teaching right now is the need to have people around you that can give you that kind of support. They don't need to be obsequious and they don't need to be kowtowing; they're not there to be your personal servants. They're there to give your frank and honest feedback and to help run the entire organization, and it's critical you have dogs around.

PP: Did you find that it was easy to find those go-to people, and, if so, were they the people you want to continuously rely on?

Well for that particular situation I needed a couple of particular skill sets, so I went back to people I'd been stationed with before during crises that handled different portions of it that I knew I'd need in New Orleans. I got involved in a lot of very intensive media scrutiny when I was in Miami over illegal migrant interdiction. I was the one that ordered Elian Gonzalez into the country and there was a lot of public concern about migrant operations

and migrant laws, so the public affairs officer that I worked with in Miami was the one that I called to go to New Orleans with me to do public affairs. The person that I deployed to the New York harbor after the attacks of 9/11, since we had shut down the harbor to supply water-side security with our deployable team, I called him to go down there to be my chief of staff in New Orleans. So those are the kinds of people I pick.

PP: Are the qualities of people you look for in a crisis different than the people you look for in your normal every day staff?

Well if I were putting together a task force to look at a rewriting of a regulation or to look at an organizational change, or a specific event that was coming down the line, let's say the waterside activities associated with the Summer Olympics, I might pick a different set of people than I would if I knew I was going down for a hurricane response or an oil spill response. You try to match the competencies and the skills your staff has with what the situation demands. So while there are some people you'd always pick for everything, because they're *that* good, after you get those two or three people, you look for some specific competencies that apply to that particular task that you're going to be undertaking.

PP: Of all the things that you've done, what do you think will leave the most lasting impact?

Well I guess I would ask the question, with whom? I think with the American public they're obviously going to remember the hurricane and the oil spill. However, I have been involved in some other significant operations. For example, as I noted earlier, I was involved with the issues with bringing Elian Gonzalez on board. There were a significant number of things I did inside the Coast Guard in relation to business processes and performance measurement, all this stuff that you, that public administrators, do

that did not get a lot of media visibility or publicity. We tend to look at the operational things that you do, but the fact of the matter is that I've been a public administration practitioner for decades and what I try to do is take the things that we talk about and actually apply them to the organization. Things like performance measures, removing material weaknesses, trying to get a clean audit, understanding the best ways to run programs, and how to evaluate programs.

PP: Now that you're teaching a class here, do you feel like you've learned anything from your students?

As I told my students, we're in the part of the course right now where they're giving presentations and we're talking about things and they're teaching me in the class. So I spend part of the time teaching and they spend part of the time teaching and we spend part of the time teaching each other and I think you need that balance. I think if you're going to be in a classroom, it needs to be a two-way street. The most successful classes we've had are when about a third, or halfway through the class, I'm not the one doing the talking anymore and that's generally what happens.

PP: So, if you weren't in the Coast Guard and being a real-life super hero, what did you see yourself having done instead?

Well, first of all, I'm not a super hero. When I was thinking about leaving the Coast Guard after the first five years, when I could legally, I didn't know at that point that things were going to happen to me that they did. What I was looking at, at that point, was coming out and becoming a Drug Enforcement Agent.

PP: Why is that?

Two reasons. At that five-year period I was assigned as a commanding officer at a small Coast Guard detachment in Thailand right at the end of the war in South

East Asia, so I was familiar with the issues over there regarding the tremendous amount of opium, morphine, and heroin production in that area. Probably the reason I would do it more than anything else though, and it's not generally known although I'm not trying to keep it a secret, is that I had an older brother that died from an overdose of heroine while I was at the Coast Guard Academy.

PP: What would you say are the greatest challenges for people in public service moving forward?

Well, I think people who work in public service, or people who are public administrators, need to understand that the world is changing, probably more rapidly than our regulatory/statutory framework and even the administrative theory that surrounds how we govern. We've talked a lot about this in the class that's going on right now - the rapid changes in technology and the need to be able to create a whole of government response or create unity of effort when a single agency doesn't have the single authority or resources to do it. That requires you to collaborate and network beyond boundaries and I think, in general, the federal bureaucracy and public administration itself has some catching up to do.

PP: What advice can you give to those studying public administration and public policy in order for them to embark on meaningful careers?

First of all, government is not as monolithic as it used to be. We live in a much more diversified world; we live in a global economy; nongovernmental actors have become more prevalent. If you're going to be successful and operate in the government for a long period of time, first of all you need to be flexible and agile. You need to understand that you're going to have to partner and collaborate to be successful. You need to understand that with the rapid change in technology you

can't rest on what you learned a couple years ago, because it's going to change with technology. I've said repeatedly that great leaders are great learners. You need to actively pursue lifelong learning, to keep refreshing your skills and your knowledge. Go back, take some courses, but continually learn and increase your intellectual skill and capacity. My favorite definition of leadership is the ability to reconcile opportunity and competency. And the more competent you are to understand the opportunities that present themselves, the more successful you're going to be. That means you're going to have to keep making an investment in your own intellectual growth.

PP: You've mentioned several times the idea of technology constantly changing and improving. You're saying essentially that students should take the initiative to learn how to operate and use that technology too, as it only gets better over time?

When I attended GW, getting my MPA, the very first idea of a PC was not even being widely sold. People were still doing term papers on typewriters. That's in my lifetime. There are still some people in my age group that really aren't computer literate or understand what's going on with technology. You have to continually evolve and continually change.

PP: So can we look forward to seeing an Admiral Allen Twitter account?

There was one! The whole time I was Commandant there was a Twitter account. I had a blog, and that blog had an RSS feed, a Twitter account, a Facebook account, and every photo that was taken we put on Flickr. It was all out there. Since I'm not the Commandant anymore, I can't act like I'm the Commandant, but I did have my own Twitter account for the Commandant. At this point, I'll probably wait a while before I

go out and establish a Thad Allen Twitter account, but I wouldn't rule that out in the future. I know how to do it. I have my own accounts that I get the feeds off of and the way I manage information is my own iGoogle account. I set up my Google Reader and I've got my widgets, so I look at my one sheet – that's my home page – so I get my blast of what I need for the day. It's anywhere from what's going on in the Coast Guard to what *Politico* just posted the night before. I look at all that as I go about my day.

PP: What's your favorite blog?

For the things that I do?

PP: Both. You can have a profes-

sional favorite blog and a personal favorite blog.

I fit everyone on a Google page. So you have a continuous listing of what's going on and you pick what you want as they're coming in. The two blogs that I look at everyday are maritime and maritime policy blogs, so I know if something's happening with piracy or oil spills or offshore oil development. Those are the types of things that I look at. But, some of the other stuff I look at is *Politico* and the *Huffington Post* – stuff that everybody does.

PP: Thank you Admiral Allen for speaking with us. We appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule.