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W knew Kat was 'big one'

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An explosive videotape indicates President Bush and his homeland security chief were painstakingly briefed before Hurricane Katrina on worst-case scenarios - contradicting Bush's later assertions that no one could have guessed New Orleans' levees would fail.

The video obtained by The Associated Press, along with transcripts of six days of meetings, shows Bush was told of possible levee breaches, impending disaster for evacuees at the New Orleans Superdome and other "grave concerns" about the approaching storm, which experts warned was the "Big One."

The video records Bush and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff at the President's Crawford, Tex., ranch, participating in the teleconference on Aug. 28 - the day before Katrina hit - with then-Federal Emergency Management chief Michael Brown and other disaster officials in Washington.

Despite the detailed forecast of doom, Bush said at a poststorm news conference, "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees."

But the videotape differs with Bush's recollection.

"I don't think any [computer] model can tell you with any confidence right now whether the levees will be topped or not but that is obviously a very, very grave concern," the National Hurricane Center's Max Mayfield tells Bush, Chertoff and the others.

On the video, Bush asks no questions. But after sitting in on the teleconference, the President assured soon-to-be-swamped Louisiana officials, "We are fully prepared."

A White House spokesman urged the public last night not to read too much into the video. "I hope people don't draw conclusions from the President getting a single briefing," spokesman Trent Duffy said.

Surprisingly, most of the warnings Bush and Chertoff received came from Brown, who has borne the brunt of the blame for the government's slow response to the disaster. He resigned in disgrace after being relieved of key responsibilities.

In the video, Brown voices worries about the Superdome being 12 feet below sea level and thus susceptible to flooding. He also asks if the arena's roof would hold.

"We're going to need everything that we can possibly muster, not only in this state and in the region, but the nation, to respond to this event," he tells the President at one point.