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Hurricanes, cronyism and the courts  
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Are you qualified for your job? You probably are. You may even be one of those overqualified people who could earn their paychecks in their sleep. It's no secret that after a certain amount of training, many jobs lack challenge.

But some jobs are different. They call for special skills, judgment and the utmost in effort and leadership. Finding the right person is critical when the job entails public safety, national security or the protection of core rights and liberties.

Fortunately, most high-level managerial employment in this country is based on merit. Serious efforts - including expensive, time-consuming national searches - precede hiring at the top.

Then there's Washington, where politics and cronyism can make a mockery of meritocracy. Cronyism ignobly rewards friendship and political loyalty. Cronies aren't necessarily unqualified. But when they are, the consequences are costly.

So what can we say about Michael Brown, John Roberts and Harriet Miers?

Brown, the former Federal Emergency Management Agency chief, completely botched the federal response to Hurricane Katrina. He was appointed to FEMA because he had buddies in high places. Moreover, he padded his r sum .

Prior to his appointment to FEMA, Brown had never held a position that involved managerial responsibility for disaster readiness and response. He had served as the administrative assistant (the equivalent of an intern) to the city manager of the small town of Edmond, Okla., from 1977-1980. He had never been "assistant administrator" as his r sum claimed.

Appointing poorly qualified allies to responsible positions should be regarded as a failure of professional ethics. It's equally unethical to accept an important position for which you are not well-qualified, or to stay in a job once you discover that its responsibilities are over your head.

Katrina's tragedies brought this into sharp focus. Mistakes can destroy lives. As a prime example, consider the people who died awaiting rescue at the New Orleans Convention Center. For the longest time, Brown and his agency did not even know anyone was there.

When the going got tough, Brown's lack of qualifications showed. He never should have been hired. Maybe he and his bosses honestly thought he had talent enough to run FEMA. To be sure, some jobs that officially require experience can be performed competently by people without it.

But when someone waves a high-status, big-bucks job in your face, it's easy to overestimate yourself and underestimate a job's responsibilities.

Stepping down quickly following the Katrina debacle was the right thing for Brown to do. Admitting personal responsibility would have been an even stronger show of character.

John Roberts, on the other hand, easily met the qualification bar to become chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court: an elite education, distinguished government service, a federal judgeship. Even Democratic opponents had to admit Roberts had a stellar r sum . You could disagree with his substantive views on issues of social justice and constitutional theory. But you had to admit that he was qualified - Republican insider, crony or whatever.

President Bush has since tapped super-crony Harriet Miers to be associate justice of the Supreme Court, replacing Sandra Day O'Connor. Not only is Miers the president's former personal attorney and his current White House counsel; she was also Bush's chief vetter of potential Supreme Court nominees.

At 60, Miers has never been so much as a judge of traffic court. Other non-judges have served on the court, including the late Chief Justice William Rehnquist. But is this particular non-judge well-qualified? Should she have been nominated, and more importantly, should she have accepted the nomination?

Imagine Miers saying: "Mr. Bush, the appearance of cronyism and conflicts of interest are overwhelming in my case. I decline." It takes a lot of guts to turn down an opportunity to make history or to embrace the ultimate professional challenge.

But being a woman, a prominent Texas lawyer and a friend of the president are not special qualifications for serving on the Supreme Court. The claim that Miers is a "trailblazer" is misleading. Since many law schools did not begin admitting women until the 1950s, every woman lawyer of Miers' generation blazed one trail or another. Many women have headed their state bar associations and been active in local government.

Miers is not "uniquely qualified," as White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan contended before a skeptical-sounding press corps when the nomination was announced. She is simply uniquely close to the president. Her gender and the absence of a paper trail of memos and scholarly writings clearly played a role in the nomination.

We'll have to wait and see how well this surprising nominee fares in the Senate and, if she's lucky, on the bench.