Two things to expect in a national crisis: media and politics.

Neither can be ignored, and to think otherwise is a losing move, said Admiral Thad Allen, SF ’89, the retired U.S. Coast Guard Commandant who led the response to last year’s Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Allen, in a frank conversation with John C Head III Dean David Schmittlein at Alumni Weekend in May, gave MIT Sloan alumni an inside look at the challenge of leading a coordinated response to an unprecedented set of problems.

Allen showed no great love for the political controversies and media uproars that accompanied each of his decisions. But he did not dismiss them, either.

“We live in a world right now where we will never have a major event that doesn’t have public participation,” Allen said. Failure to anticipate, include, and respond to criticism will only “impact the credibility of the response,” he added.

During the Deepwater Horizon crisis, Allen led proactive communications, launching an oil spill webmap on www.geoplatform.gov to put some of the government’s best information in the hands of the general public. He used the same map to brief President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden.

In the Gulf of Mexico, Allen and his team were tasked with closing the Deepwater Horizon wellhead, balancing input from a tremendous list of stakeholders: national politicians, six state governors, Louisiana parish presidents, government science entities, BP, traditional and social media, the fishing industry, and more.

Balancing all those interests requires a “cognitive diversity” that, when managed properly, can provide great gains in collective intelligence, Allen said.

The pressure was intense, but Allen is a veteran of disaster. He led the government response to Hurricane Katrina, was in Haiti soon after last year’s earthquake, and controlled the Coast Guard in New York Harbor after September 11. Before heading to the Gulf last year, he told his wife he was “not sure there’s a chance to succeed in this thing” and accepted the great possibility of being fired within a matter of weeks.

“You need to learn how to manage your own morale,” Allen said. He talked about emotional intelligence and the learned ability to monitor his own feelings in the midst of devastation and high-stakes response work.

Allen, now a senior fellow at RAND Corporation, has read senior lecturer Peter Senge’s organizational learning classic *The Fifth Discipline* seven times. He said MIT Sloan was a crash course in emerging technologies and team management, both of which served him well when dealing with complex engineering and science problems.