

## The Limits of American Efficiency: The Case Study of a Hurricane

*Andr s Csillag*

On Monday, 29 August 2005, the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama was hit by a storm causing flooding and devastation of enormous magnitude. With some 1,800 victims killed and leaving the city of New Orleans in chaos, Hurricane Katrina was the most destructive American natural disaster in living memory, comparing only to a similar one striking Galveston, Texas (1900), and the earthquake of San Francisco (1906). No major city in the US had been forced to evacuate since Richmond and Atlanta during the Civil War. About 80% of New Orleans came under water, but Katrina also flattened or flooded a number of smaller towns along the coast, for example Gulfport, Biloxi or Mobile. As New Orleans lies mostly below sea level between the banks of the Mississippi and the massive Lake Pontchartrain, disaster was only a question of time and chance. The storm caused breaches in the city's flood-protection levees knocking out electric, water, sewage, transportation and communication systems. The historic French Quarter, the most famous part of New Orleans, was spared by the flood which, however, made hundreds of thousands of residents homeless and the city uninhabitable as a whole.

The lack of rapid response left people in the United States and all over the world wondering how an American city could look like Mogadishu or Rwanda. The news on television could not have been more shocking: despair in the midst of a refugee crisis, lack of leadership, reports of gunfire at medical-relief helicopters, stories of pirates capturing rescue boats, reports of police standing and watching looters or joining them. Also, there were pictures of thousands of people, mostly black and poor, thirsty and hungry, trapped in the shadow of the Superdome or waiting on rooftops to be rescued. And the most horrific: the photos of dead people floating face-down on the street or sitting in wheelchairs where they died. With this in mind, the objective of my paper is to give a critical assessment of some of the political and social repercussions of Hurricane Katrina that subsequently influenced the image of the United States negatively in the eyes of the world. To prepare this presentation, I relied on contemporaneous TV coverage of the event as well as on press reports that have appeared about the various problems and deficiencies.

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With nearly three quarters of all houses damaged or destroyed in New Orleans, Katrina certainly ranks among the costliest natural disasters in American history. Soon all levels of government were blamed for lack of preparedness and bungled relief efforts. Poor coordination between local, state and federal authorities raised some important questions about disaster preparedness. The mayor, the governor and the president all drew criticism for their response to Katrina. Most critics faulted the Federal Emer-

gency Management Agency (FEMA) for its sluggish handling of rescue and relief operations (*World Almanac* 2006, 5-6). A major seaport, cultural center and tourist destination, originally with a population of 462,000, New Orleans is geographically located in the middle of a hurricane zone. Still, its preparedness for a disaster proved to be insufficient. As the levees of Lake Pontchartrain gave way, it seemed pretty clear that those in charge of flood control had not lived up to the job. The floodwalls were vulnerable because of erosion and gradual sinking in the wet soil, and they let water in because they collapsed when the storm came.

The Army Corps of Engineers, the state and local officials knew that the levees needed repair but the work was delayed thanks to the federal government and a Republican Congress repeatedly cutting flood and hurricane protection programs. Also, the administration of George W. Bush systematically stripped power and money from FEMA, previously upgraded by President Bill Clinton, but a target of Republican "small government" advocates for a long time. Local officials had their shortcomings, too: as the *New York Times* Editorial reported on 7 September 2005, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin's comment earlier on the city's hurricane plan was merely to "get people to higher ground and have the feds and the state airlift supplies to them" (A.1). However, 'when push came to shove,' in the inevitable confusion of fast-moving events the plan was further corrupted. Partisan differences as well as federal/state divisions made cooperation for top leaders problematic. The conflict, especially between Gov. Kathleen Blanco, a Democrat, and the White House delayed the arrival of active-duty federal troops in New Orleans where reports of looting and violence prevented rescuers from retrieving stranded residents (Hsu, Warrick, and Stein A.10). A well-known conservative activist, Grover Norquist blamed the chaos on "looting in a Democratic city run by a Democratic mayor and a Democratic governor" (Wolffe 29). According to critics in the press, the federal government had access to resources that could have made a difference but were not mobilized in time. FEMA had been further downgraded by the appointment of an unqualified director, Michael Brown, shortly before. A commentary in *The New York Times* said, "the raw cronyism of that appointment showed the contempt the administration felt for the agency" (Krugman A.21). Clearly, FEMA did not live up to its job to coordinate disaster relief from the start. New Orleans was in chaos after the hurricane, and troops did not arrive in force to restore order until several days later. Brown was fiercely criticized for not ordering a complete evacuation or calling in federal troops sooner. But he answered that the storm made it hard to communicate and assess the situation. A few days later he was forced to resign as director (Rosenbaum and Hulse A.23).

President Bush, who was vacationing at the time on his ranch in Texas, had been warned about the magnitude of the storm in advance. However, he remained unaware of the full extent of the levee breaches until Tuesday, the day after. Finally deciding to cut his vacation short on Wednesday, on his way back to Washington, he flew over the disaster zone in Air Force One. Later, he said in an interview in his defense for the delayed rescue effort: "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees" (Dowd

A 21; Lipton A.1). Part of the problem was that the states of Louisiana and Mississippi were unable to mobilize their own National Guard forces fully because many of their units happened to be far away, in Iraq. Also, a large number of police officers and fire-fighters got isolated in the flood and were unable to report for duty in the chaos.

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The lessons of Katrina, from a US image point of view, are numerous. One of them is related to the issue of poverty/race in the richest and strongest democracy of the world. When Mayor Nagin, reluctantly though, ordered the evacuation of the city on the Saturday before the storm, some one hundred thousand people chose to stay. As federal, state and local officials had failed to provide buses in advance, families without cars simply could not move. Those who were unable to leave New Orleans were told to go to the Superdome for safe haven from the storm. They were mostly residents living under the poverty line, a disadvantaged population, overwhelmingly African-American. (Several groups of sick and elderly people in hospitals and nursing homes were carelessly left behind, too.) The hurricane badly damaged the building of the large sports facility as well while much of the city was being inundated by surging floodwater. The people inside became refugees because at the end of the day they had no other place to go. For tens of thousands of people, it turned into a shelter-cum-prison situation for days, with hardly any supplies, no air-conditioning, running water or sanitation. Thanks to omnipresent TV cameras, the world could see their desperation as they were waiting for relief and evacuation, mainly to Houston, Texas. A 31-year-old man, a cook, who stood waiting in the blazing sun outside the Superdome in a crowd of thousands, was quoted by *The New York Times* as saying “We’re just a bunch of rats, that’s how they’ve been treating us” (“Quotation of the Day” A.1). A few days later, in an article *The New York Times Magazine* quoted a woman at the convention center who proclaimed on television: “We are American” (Ignatieff 15). She spoke with anger, reminding her fellow citizens and other viewers that they were not refugees in a foreign country. The political message of the scene was that black or white, rich or poor, American citizens were not supposed to be abandoned or failed by their government. This aspect of the United States—the inconsiderate exposure of citizens to jeopardy—was probably difficult for many foreigners to understand. Nevertheless, the hurricane did expose the inequalities of American society, especially poverty, while it revealed that the protection of the poor against a catastrophe was grossly neglected by the authorities.

Poverty rate in the Deep South is more than twice the national average, and most of the poor people there are black still today. Therefore, racism was clearly present in the aftermath of Katrina. For example, Internet news portals displayed two photographs (by Associated Press and Agence France-Press) showing people wading through deep water in the New Orleans area with supplies taken from grocery stores. One of them, a young black man was described as “looting,” while, according to the caption of the other picture, a white couple was “finding” food (“Loot Loops”). Over the course of two days, a white river-taxi operator rescued scores of people from flooded areas and

ferried them to safety. All were white. When asked by a *Newsweek* reporter, he answered: "A nigger is a nigger is a nigger." Then he said it again (Alter 24).

Television usually dislikes images of poverty and destitution, but they were present during the coverage of Katrina. It took a hurricane to lay bare society's massive neglect of its least fortunate. A renewed debate about the increase in poverty started in the news media asking why part of the richest country on earth looked like the Third World. Columnist Nicholas D. Kristof of *The New York Times* explained: "The United States—particularly under the Bush administration—has systematically cut people out of the social fabric by redistributing wealth from the most vulnerable Americans to the most affluent. It's not just that funds may have gone to Iraq rather than to the levees of New Orleans; it's also that money went to tax cuts for the wealthiest rather than vaccinations for children" (A.27). The left blamed a system tilted to the rich. The right blamed a debilitating culture of poverty. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who disputed any suggestion that storm victims had somehow been overlooked because of their race, had this to say: "It's hard to watch pictures of any American going through this. And yes, the African-American community has obviously been very heavily affected" (qtd. in Purdum A.1). It was true, the more so because many of the most vulnerable neighborhoods were largely occupied by African-Americans losing their homes.

Former President Bill Clinton, who helped raise money for the victims, also argued that the storm highlighted class divisions in the country that often played out along racial lines. "It's like when they issued the evacuation order," he said, "that affects poor people differently. A lot of them in New Orleans didn't have cars. You can't have an emergency plan that works if it only affects middle-class people up" (Shenon A.21). No doubt, the Bush White House was facing another serious political crisis and the worst domestic emergency situation since the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001. Sharp criticism was leveled at the president from many directions in the media. *The New York Times* wrote about "a failure of leadership" and remarked: "He would have noticed if the majority of these stricken folks had been white and prosperous. But they weren't. Most were black and poor, and thus, to the Bush administration, still invisible" (Herbert A.21). "Katrina has posed a challenge to the White House and the country regarding the great divide, which is race and class in America," said the head of a coalition that represents black churches (Bumiller A.21). Brian Williams of NBC, the highest-rated TV news anchor in the US, started talking about the repercussions of Katrina the way Walter Cronkite once did about Vietnam.

Preoccupied by war and the specter of terrorism, the president finally admitted at a press conference: "Katrina exposed serious problems in our response capability at all levels of government, and to the extent that the federal government did not fully do its job right, I take responsibility" (Bumiller and Stevenson A.1). In order to re-establish his image as a leader, seven days after the hurricane, Bush paid a repeated visit to New Orleans and made a speech televised prime-time from the French Quarter's main square. The president directly addressed the suffering of the evacuees at the

Superdome and convention center: “We have also witnessed the kind of desperation no citizen of this great and generous nation should ever have to know—fellow Americans calling out for food and water, vulnerable people left at the mercy of criminals who had no mercy, and the bodies of the dead lying uncovered and untended in the street” (Bumiller A.1). He also tackled the issues of race and poverty that had caused even Republicans to question the administration’s commitment: “As all of us saw on television, there is also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well. And that poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action. So let us restore all that we have cherished from yesterday, and let us rise above the legacy of inequality.” He added: “There is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again.” President Bush promised that the federal government would “learn the lessons of Hurricane Katrina” (Bumiller A.1). He was now faced with an unprecedented task: housing hundreds of thousands of homeless/displaced people, making sure their children can go to school, and eventually getting them a start on a new life. A year later, however, reconstruction and helping the poor was still lagging behind. In the opinion of an influential black congressman, Elijah Cummings, aiding the poor was just a brief priority after Katrina. “I’ll never forget the night the president gave that speech from Jackson Square,” the representative said, “he talked about stamping out poverty. He talked about things that showed the compassionate side of his compassionate conservative stance. Since then, what I’ve found is that he has been long on conservatism and short on compassion” (Fletcher A.4).

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Besides the unpreparedness and incompetence of the government for major natural disasters as well as the painful neglect of the poor, yet another aspect of Katrina must be mentioned. In the wake of the hurricane, according to the *Daily Mail* of London, the flood, violence and looting “humbled the most powerful nation on the planet,” and showed “how quickly the thin veneer of civilization can be stripped away” (“Humbling of a Superpower” 1). While the Gulf Coast situation was compared to Bangladesh or Baghdad, European newspaper headlines used words like “anarchy” and “apocalypse” for what some saw as an American failure to live up to its professed ideals. British political scientist Timothy Garton Ash, elaborating on the comment by the *Daily Mail* in the 8 September issue of *Los Angeles Times*, argued that “Katrina’s big lesson is that the crust of civilization on which we tread is always wafer thin.” If the basic elements of organized society are removed, “people cease to be civilized and become barbaric. Katrina tells us about the ever-present possibility of decivilization” (Garton Ash).

Due to the sheer magnitude of the catastrophe and the delay in relief operations, the United States invited and accepted foreign aid in an emergency for the first time in a period of at least one hundred years. Prior to this event, it had an image only as the largest donor among the nations of the world. As a token of solidarity, more than one hundred countries, including NATO and several other international organizations

worldwide, offered to send some form of quick aid ranging from money to technical equipment and rescue teams (Hungary also contributed). The Defense Department designated an Air Force base in Arkansas to receive deliveries from overseas and then the Agency for International Development (a State Department agency) was asked to work with FEMA on distribution. However, there was some bureaucratic confusion over how to handle the emergency supplies, military assistance and \$126 million in cash that poured in from foreign countries. FEMA later could not provide documentation that the goods ever reached hurricane victims or emergency workers. In an investigation, State Department and FEMA officials testified that the United States, at least in modern times, had never received such a large outpouring of international donations and no formal process existed to evaluate the offers (Lipton, "Hurricane Relief" A.20).

The American Red Cross was widely criticized on account of badly miscalculating the number of refugees. Some black community leaders contended that shelters and aid-distribution centers were set up out of reach for black populations ("Re-Examining the Red Cross" 11). Although Congress designated \$110 billion for the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast, when the hurricane ended, probably nobody imagined that a year later there would still be no citywide rebuilding plan for New Orleans. On the first anniversary of the disaster, much of the Big Easy was still uninhabitable and about half of its pre-storm population was absent. Some eighty-five victims remained unclaimed or unidentified, with a lot of pessimism lingering in the air. TV and newspaper reports from the ghost town were still quite dramatic: there was little sign of recovery in the badly affected lower-lying areas where one could sense "silence like a funeral," "the reminders of death are everywhere, and the emotional toll is now becoming clear" (Barry A.1; Horváth 3; Saulny A.1; Whoriskey A.1).

The regrettably negative image generated by Katrina in connection with the US was made darker by further discrepancies in the relief work carried out by FEMA. More than five million dollars in emergency payments went unchecked to people who had provided post office boxes or cemeteries as the addresses of their damaged property. Even prison inmates received money intended for displaced people. Accusations of abuses in issuing recovery contracts were leveled at the agency in the summer of 2006. It also came under intense criticism for the mismanagement of 10,000 mobile homes that were unsuitable in the flood plains of the Gulf Coast. They cost more than \$34,000 each and were later sitting empty at an airfield in Arkansas at an enormous storage cost whereas they could have been used by needy families elsewhere (Lipton, "Study A.1, "The Disaster" A.20; Witte; Hsu D.1).

Owing especially to the coverage of CNN and BBC World, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath were closely watched by many viewers overseas. Those interested could also follow the developments by reading the large American newspapers and weekly magazines of international reputation or their online editions. As a rule, much of their reporting was taken over by the local press and TV channels of foreign countries as well. Thus, the shocking exposures by the news media, including revealing how little

progress was made even after a year, caused significant damage to the global image of the United States. Some pundits argue, the only way to really save New Orleans would be the way they protect Rotterdam in Holland: with giant outer-zone floodgate barriers that block a storm surge before it gets anywhere near the city. As it is in need of change, too, maybe the image of the land of democracy and efficiency could be repaired in a similar fashion—with renewed inspirations and efforts emanating from within.

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