

An Unnatural Disaster: A Hurricane Exposes the Man-Made Disaster of the Welfare State

An Objectivist Review

by Robert Tracinski | The Intellectual Activist

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It has taken four long days for state and federal officials to figure out how to deal with the disaster in New Orleans. I can't blame them, because it has also taken me four long days to figure out what is going on there. The reason is that the events there make no sense if you think that we are confronting a natural disaster.

If this is just a natural disaster, the response for public officials is obvious: you bring in food, water, and doctors; you send transportation to evacuate refugees to temporary shelters; you send engineers to stop the flooding and rebuild the city's infrastructure. For journalists, natural disasters also have a familiar pattern: the heroism of ordinary people pulling together to survive; the hard work and dedication of doctors, nurses, and rescue workers; the steps being taken to clean up and rebuild.

Public officials did not expect that the first thing they would have to do is to send thousands of armed troops in armored vehicle, as if they are suppressing an enemy insurgency. And journalists--myself included--did not expect that the story would not be about rain, wind, and flooding, but about rape, murder, and looting.

But this is not a natural disaster. It is a man-made disaster.

The man-made disaster is not an inadequate or incompetent response by federal relief agencies, and it was not directly caused by Hurricane Katrina. This is where just about every newspaper and television channel has gotten the story wrong.

The man-made disaster we are now witnessing in New Orleans did not happen over the past four days. It happened over the past four decades. Hurricane Katrina merely exposed it to public view.

The man-made disaster is the welfare state.

For the past few days, I have found the news from New Orleans to be confusing. People were not behaving as you would expect them to behave in an emergency--indeed, they were not behaving as they have behaved in other emergencies. That is what has shocked so many people: they have been saying that this is not what we expect from America. In fact, it is not even what we expect from a Third World country.

When confronted with a disaster, people usually rise to the occasion. They work together to rescue people in danger, and they spontaneously organize to keep order and solve problems. This is especially true in America. We are an enterprising people, used to relying on our own initiative rather than waiting around for the government to take care of us. I have seen this a hundred times, in small examples (a small town whose main traffic light had gone out, causing ordinary citizens to get out of their cars and serve as impromptu traffic cops,

directing cars through the intersection) and large ones (the spontaneous response of New Yorkers to September 11).

So what explains the chaos in New Orleans?

To give you an idea of the magnitude of what is going on, here is a description from a Washington Times story:

"Storm victims are raped and beaten; fights erupt with flying fists, knives and guns; fires are breaking out; corpses litter the streets; and police and rescue helicopters are repeatedly fired on.

"The plea from Mayor C. Ray Nagin came even as National Guardsmen poured in to restore order and stop the looting, carjackings and gunfire....

"Last night, Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco said 300 Iraq-hardened Arkansas National Guard members were inside New Orleans with shoot-to-kill orders.

"'These troops are...under my orders to restore order in the streets,' she said. 'They have M-16s, and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill and they are more than willing to do so if necessary and I expect they will.' "

The reference to Iraq is eerie. The photo that accompanies this article shows National Guard troops, with rifles and armored vests, riding on an armored vehicle through trash-strewn streets lined by a rabble of squalid, listless people, one of whom appears to be yelling at them. It looks exactly like a scene from Sadr City in Baghdad.

What explains bands of thugs using a natural disaster as an excuse for an orgy of looting, armed robbery, and rape? What causes unruly mobs to storm the very buses that have arrived to evacuate them, causing the drivers to drive away, frightened for their lives? What causes people to attack the doctors trying to treat patients at the Super Dome?

Why are people responding to natural destruction by causing further destruction? Why are they attacking the people who are trying to help them?

My wife, Sherri, figured it out first, and she figured it out on a sense-of-life level. While watching the coverage last night on Fox News Channel, she told me that she was getting a familiar feeling. She studied architecture at the Illinois Institute of Chicago, which is located in the South Side of Chicago just blocks away from the Robert Taylor Homes, one of the largest high-rise public housing projects in America. "The projects," as they were known, were infamous for uncontrollable crime and irremediable squalor. (They have since, mercifully, been demolished.)

What Sherri was getting from last night's television coverage was a whiff of the sense of life of "the projects." Then the "crawl"--the informational phrases flashed at the bottom of the screen on most news channels--gave some vital statistics to confirm this sense: 75% of the residents of New Orleans had already evacuated before the hurricane, and of the 300,000 or so who remained, a large number were

from the city's public housing projects. Jack Wakeland then gave me an additional, crucial fact: early reports from CNN and Fox indicated that the city had no plan for evacuating all of the prisoners in the city's jails--so they just let many of them loose. There is no doubt a significant overlap between these two populations--that is, a large number of people in the jails used to live in the housing projects, and vice versa.

There were many decent, innocent people trapped in New Orleans when the deluge hit--but they were trapped alongside large numbers of people from two groups: criminals--and wards of the welfare state, people selected, over decades, for their lack of initiative and self-induced helplessness. The welfare wards were a mass of sheep--on whom the incompetent administration of New Orleans unleashed a pack of wolves.

All of this is related, incidentally, to the apparent incompetence of the city government, which failed to plan for a total evacuation of the city, despite the knowledge that this might be necessary. But in a city corrupted by the welfare state, the job of city officials is to ensure the flow of handouts to welfare recipients and patronage to political supporters--not to ensure a lawful, orderly evacuation in case of emergency.

No one has really reported this story, as far as I can tell. In fact, some are already actively distorting it, blaming President Bush, for example, for failing to personally ensure that the Mayor of New Orleans had drafted an adequate evacuation plan. The worst example is an execrable piece from the Toronto Globe and Mail, by a supercilious Canadian who blames the chaos on American "individualism." But the truth is precisely the opposite: the chaos was caused by a system that was the exact opposite of individualism.

What Hurricane Katrina exposed was the psychological consequences of the welfare state. What we consider "normal" behavior in an emergency is behavior that is normal for people who have values and take the responsibility to pursue and protect them. People with values respond to a disaster by fighting against it and doing whatever it takes to overcome the difficulties they face. They don't sit around and complain that the government hasn't taken care of them. They don't use the chaos of a disaster as an opportunity to prey on their fellow men.

But what about criminals and welfare parasites? Do they worry about saving their houses and property? They don't, because they don't own anything. Do they worry about what is going to happen to their businesses or how they are going to make a living? They never worried about those things before. Do they worry about crime and looting? But living off of stolen wealth is a way of life for them.

The welfare state--and the brutish, uncivilized mentality it sustains and encourages--is the man-made disaster that explains the moral ugliness that has swamped New Orleans. And that is the story that no one is reporting.