

No New Orleans Resident Left Behind? Notes toward a Social Autopsy
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These notes place specific questions about emergency management into a broader context of the relationship between government and communities and the overall failure of public responsibility in the United States. They draw extensively on Eric Klinenberg’s brilliant analysis of the Chicago Heat Wave (*Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. University of Chicago Press, 2002).

The impact of the natural disaster in New Orleans and the gulf region was greatly magnified and human suffering was needlessly amplified and prolonged for two related reasons:

1) Government authorities failed to implement a comprehensive disaster plan (the immediate cause of the situation we see in the news). 2) Resources had been withdrawn and positive government functions dismantled already prior to the hurricane (an underlying condition of a growing disconnect between government and the people).

Finally, at the end of these notes, I will argue that the mismanagement of the Katrina emergency is part of a larger pattern of government failure in the United States.

Part I: Immediate Causes.

Material Causes: The Failure to Maintain Infrastructure:.

There was a failure to repair and improve the levee infrastructure. After some funding was allocated in the late 1990s, little or nothing was actually done after 2000 and 2001. According to some sources, there was a 44% reduction of funds (amounting to \$71.2 million) for Army Corps of Engineers levee construction in New Orleans. This failure has already been discussed at length in the media, and I only list it here. There is also a related engineering/environmental issue of large toxic sites located near such a densely populated area.

Questions about Emergency Management:

These are specific questions about emergency management that many Americans—including journalists and legislators—are asking.

1. **Was there an emergency plan at all?** “Get in your car and leave.” That’s not an evacuation or emergency management plan! So was there in fact a plan in place that did not get implemented coherently? The *Times-Picayune*, among others, claims that planning was inadequate. Last year, an exercise called “Operation

- Hurricane Pam” took place, but it is unclear what was learned from it (BBC, September 6). In this regard, it is worth mentioning that disaster plans have to be disaster specific; hurricanes, floods, terrorist attacks, and so on all have unique characteristics and require specific management strategies.
2. **Co-ordination:** Was there co-ordination among federal, state, and local government before and during the emergency? If so, who was involved—which agencies and individuals? Was there a coherent and coordinated structure of authority and division of labor for implementing emergency management among federal, state, and local authorities before and during the disaster?.
 3. **Expertise:** What types of expertise were available at various levels of government? Emergency management is not an amateur sport, and we know that Michael Brown at FEMA had no personal background in emergency management. Did he draw on available expertise and qualified individuals for FEMA staffing? How were decisions made about staffing state and local agencies? What kind of training was provided at all levels?
 4. **Evacuation Basics.** Why was there disorganization in three basic phases of emergency management? These phases are: a) Reaching people in the neighborhoods to mobilize them for evacuation; b) moving everyone—including people without cars, the destitute, and the frail and ill-- out of flood zones in an orderly, humane, and logical fashion; c) pre-positioning supplies, shelter, and medical attention at definite destinations to which evacuees can be directed (if they are mobile) or brought (if they require assistance). In short, an evacuation plan means moving people out, getting them to safe destinations, and providing help and support services at those destinations. An effective plan involves reaching into neighborhoods (the most difficult part), helping people to leave, making sure they have somewhere to go and a way of getting there, and providing food, water, medical help, shelter, and supplies at the destinations. These basic functions appear to have either not been carried out at all or carried out in a haphazard way.
 5. **Security and Martial Law:** Should martial law have been declared earlier and security provided more effectively? Government officials apparently failed to declare martial law at the same time that the mandatory evacuation announcement was issued. Is martial law *sine qua non* for effective policing and social control during a crisis or emergency? It means that police and other security forces are deployed in the hardest hit areas to secure public safety and protect property--not only or primarily large stores, but residents’ lives and belongings. Residents being evacuated need to feel that their homes and possessions will be safe while they are gone, that they themselves will be safe as they evacuate, and that the sites they are going to are safe. Furthermore, a declaration of martial law sets the stage for government mobilization (with compensation, of course) of private resources (vehicles, motel rooms, supplies, etc.) to address public needs.
 6. **Resource Mobilization and Deployment:** Who was involved in planning the delivery of resources—water, food, shelter, clean clothes, medical attention, etc. to people leaving the disaster zones? What decisions were made about how to obtain resources and how and where to deploy them? Some observers might conclude that government officials issued an edict—mandatory evacuation—but

failed to provide resources to make it work. (Yes, that does sound like “No Child Left Behind.”)

7. **Evacuation Logistics: Decision-making and Destinations.** Who was responsible for the logistics of evacuation? Did government authorities fail to use public and private resources effectively to back up the mandatory evacuation order? What choices were made in terms of the logistics of the evacuation, and why were these choices made? For example, people without cars could have been directed to local schools or police/fire stations to be picked up by vehicles (school buses, municipal buses, and, if necessary, private resources such as trucks and private carriers such as Greyhound mobilized by government agencies). Schools, colleges, fire-stations, and churches in surrounding communities on higher ground could have been identified as shelters and residents directed to them in an orderly way.. It is mystifying why people are being bussed to and packed into a stadium in Houston, rather than being housed in dispersed facilities located closer to their homes. The evacuation plan had to specify, at least in a general way, to which communities and areas people were to be evacuated. People had to be directed in the evacuation process in a logical, planned way, with specific destinations established and facilities set up or pre-positioned at those destinations as soon as the announcement was made, so that the facilities and resources would be ready when the “refugees” arrived. Of course, people should be at liberty to go elsewhere on their own initiative, but they also need to be informed accurately where support services are being pre-positioned and where help will be available. Rational planning of destinations, offering people help as close to their own communities as possible, and pre-positioning basic supplies and support services of course requires “hard work” (effort beyond merely than telling people to get in their cars and leave on an entirely individualistic, laissez-faire basis). In a very interesting NPR interview (4:14 CST, September 5), Congressional Representative Taylor (4th District, Mississippi) indicated that in Mississippi, FEMA tried to concentrate people in mass facilities (at considerable taxpayer cost) rather than providing more dispersed services, closer to people’s homes, in facilities that offer more security, privacy, and personal attention than mass sites like a stadium.. The questionable choices made in evacuating people would appear to be related to the absence of a comprehensive disaster plan, noted above. In Europe and elsewhere, evacuees from earthquakes and other disasters are typically housed in tents or trailers relatively near the disaster site, with the expectation that they will eventually return to and rebuild their communities. Was any thought given to the possibility of using State parks and state or federal land in Louisiana to house refugees in tents or trailers? This arrangement would give more privacy and better support to family units than the mass facilities in stadiums and sports arenas. Evacuees could be housed relatively near the affected gulf area until such a time that they could safely return to the communities, find support services in the communities, and begin the assessment of damage and repair of their homes and businesses.
8. **Envisioning the Process: Anticipating Needs and Problems:** What caused the failures of government agencies’ imagination—the failure to anticipate needs and problems, when these needs and problems were visible even to the casual

observer? To take two examples: herding 40,000 people into a sports arena (the Superdome) or convention center for more than a few hours was bound to cause problems with sanitation and social control. It would have been better to immediately move evacuees out of the Superdome into more decentralized (suburban?) locations or perhaps to have directed them to such locations in the first place. If decentralized evacuation was not possible, it was essential to bring water, food, medical teams, and security personnel to the Superdome and the convention center very quickly. Second example: Many people streamed over the bridge to Gretna and Jefferson Parish—yet authorities provided no water, food, medical care, shelters, etc. at this location (as Elizabeth Brackett’s brilliant reporting made clear), as though it had not occurred to them that pedestrians might be crossing the bridge and looking for help at the foot of the bridge in these areas. These cases appear to be failures in the ability to envision and anticipate obvious problems.

9. **To Help, Not to Punish: Respecting Evacuees:** Why was the underlying stance towards New Orleans residents so callous and punitive? For example, BBC interviewed a doctor who commented that there were far more security personnel in the area than medical staff (September 6). Authorities are more worked up about looting than providing help, as though property protection rather than human life and health were their major concern. There is a very punitive spirit to many pronouncements, and the attention to looting looks like an effort to distract attention from government failures. In some locations, looting was a result of government failures because resources have not provided and authorities basically abandoned the city. These callous, punitive attitudes show racism at work, not necessarily at a conscious level but at an unconscious level of not treating African Americans with respect as fellow citizens. Once again, there is a parallel to “No Child Left Behind”—a lot of punitive action (school closings, firing of teachers and principals), but no coherent plan or resource allocation to remedy the problems; and this orientation is also evident in the War on Drugs with its emphasis on punishment rather than prevention and treatment.
10. **What is the long-term plan for New Orleans and gulf region reconstruction?** The assumption should be that people can, will, and want to return to their communities as soon as possible and need support in this process. Ultimately a Marshall Plan with mixed private-public partnerships needs to be developed in which displaced residents can be hired to participate in reconstruction and the rebuilding and resettlement of their own communities. Or will residents be left permanently displaced and dispersed while reconstruction is focused on private real estate development of a **New New Orleans** in which speculators enjoy a *tabula rasa* of urban renewal carried out by an “act of God”? Will the New New Orleans be a Disneyland Dixieland, inhabited by tourists, yuppies, and ghosts?

Part II: The Disconnect between People and Government:

The preceding list of specific questions about emergency management needs to be discussed within a broader context of the growing disconnect between government in the United States and communities—especially poor communities and people of color, but to

some degree, all communities. The long process of privatization and governmental withdrawal from positive functions meant that many New Orleans residents had little contact with government and that there was little government presence in neighborhoods. This lack of presence had a number of consequences once the disaster struck: poor communication, impeded information flows, suspicion of government, and a lack of confidence in police and other authorities.

Government authorities failed to communicate effectively with residents, and this is not just something that happened during the disaster, but appears to be a much deeper and longstanding problem. There is little sense (among the survivors interviewed by the media) that residents feel or felt that they could interact with government officials, that government officials are there “for them” and that there can be an ongoing dialog about needs, available resources, etc. (the kind of ongoing dialog that middle-class citizens have with elected officials). Government has to mean more than issuing orders and shooting lawbreakers; it is an interactive process in which citizens are in contact with a present, active, identifiable, and supportive set of elected and appointed officials. Government credibility in emergencies and citizen compliance with evacuation orders depend on a pre-existing, interactive relationship of trust and confidence.

There are many things we do not yet know about the social dynamics within communities in the hours leading up to the hurricane and the flooding. Did local institutions like churches or block clubs help residents cope with the situation and contribute to maintaining calm, order, and civility? There appeared to be a lack of basic know-how among a number of the evacuees about how to prepare for an evacuation (carrying water, food, a change of clothing, personal documents etc.). Violence, looting (other than obtaining basic necessities), shooting at helicopters, and so on suggest that the law-abiding majority (which is present in all communities, even very poor ones) had difficulty controlling anti-social individuals and groups through informal social pressure...The overall impression was that there was only a weak mobilization of indigenous social capital to support an effective, calm, orderly evacuation. Under the conditions of long-term government disengagement and an inadequate government emergency plan, limited community, family, and individual resources were strained to the breaking point. The fragility of community social capital in turn reflects a history of both class and racial marginalization, exactly as Klinenberg observed in North Lawndale during the Chicago heat wave.

The government failures listed above exacerbated weaknesses in civil society and in fact, dovetailed perfectly with them: Poor people with few private material resources and weak social capital were left to drift on their own both before the hurricane and once the disaster struck. An individualistic, laissez-faire approach might *appear* to work with middle class residents, although I would argue that even for the middle class, the haphazard, unplanned nature of the evacuation is likely to have long-lasting negative effects on New Orleans, gulf coast communities, and the refugees themselves. Certainly a casual, unplanned approach to emergency management was completely inappropriate for

residents who had no cars, no cash, no credit, and few social networks in receiving communities.

Dr. Bell (UI), comments that “poor people are off the radar screen” (Chicago Tonight, Sept. 1, discussion with Phil Ponce), and indeed this metaphor needs to be toughened—they were pushed off the radar screen from 1980 onward in the scramble to downsize and dismantle every positive function of government. One of the results, as Klinenberg already documented in *Heat Wave*, is an enormous vulnerability to emergencies—a “triple whammy” in which communities that have few private resources and dwindling public resources bear the brunt of the government’s inability to plan for crises.

All the elements of the heat wave disaster are again visible in New Orleans. The difference is that New Orleans is a poorer city than Chicago with an even longer history of race/class marginalization. In a post-9/11 climate there are yet fewer resources and less effective government functions than in 1995, the war in Iraq has absorbed resources and personnel, and Katrina was a larger natural disaster than the heat wave. So it is not surprising to see a repeat of the same needless human suffering as in the heat wave, but on a much larger scale.

Part III: Government Failure in the United States: The Crisis of Public Responsibility:

To end on a more long-term note: Privatization, individualization, mandates without resources, disorganization, and laissez-faire “solutions” to collective, public problems characterize U.S. government. Public issues are consistently changed into personal troubles and removed from government responsibility and public discussion. The disaster and tragedy of Katrina parallel in an extreme form the failures of the “No Child Left Behind” educational policies and the scandals of homelessness and over 40 million medically uninsured Americans. They also are related to the absurd failure of the federal government to develop an energy policy and a rational response to dependency on foreign oil, a failure that rising gas prices and Hurricane Katrina are once again bringing to the fore.. After ample warning signs in the 1970s, the U.S. government did practically nothing to address the problem. Jimmy Carter was excoriated and mocked for sensibly suggesting limits on heating and air conditioning levels, and by the 1990s, the fiasco of the SUV was permitted to take place. Americans have a lower standard of living than Western Europeans, yet use three to four times as much energy; longer driving distances in the U.S. do not explain the full magnitude of the gap.

The federal government in so many areas of American life reacts to a problem with childish denial, abdication of its public responsibility, refusal to stand up to private interests and protect the public interest, a shift of responsibility onto the most vulnerable people, a punitive rather than supportive orientation, and inability to engage in rational planning. We must restore the positive role of government in our society.

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Anderson, Terje. "Katrina: This is what America really looks like." (personal op-ed forwarded by Judy Auerbach, American Foundation for AIDS Research).

Cohn, Marjorie. "The Two Americas." At www.truthout.org, September 3. This short article reminds us that during Hurricane Ivan, over a million Cubans were evacuated to higher ground ahead of the storm with no loss of life, although 20,000 homes were destroyed.

Klinenberg, Eric. *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. University of Chicago Press, 2002.

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