

# **Rebuilding New Orleans -- and America**

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September 6, 2005

The physical devastation caused by hurricane Katrina has painfully revealed the moral devastation of our times that has led to mass looting in New Orleans, assaults on people in shelters, the raping of girls, and shots being fired at helicopters that are trying to rescue people.

Forty years ago, an electric grid failure plunged New York and other northeastern cities into a long blackout. But law and order prevailed. Ordinary citizens went to intersections to direct traffic. People helped each other. After the blackout was over, this experience left many people with an upbeat spirit about their fellow human beings.

Another blackout in New York, years later, was much uglier. And what has been happening now in New Orleans is uglier still. Is there a trend here?

Fear, grief, desperation or despair would be understandable in people whose lives have been devastated by events beyond their control. Regret might be understandable among those who were warned to evacuate before the hurricane hit but who chose to stay. Yet the word being heard from those on the scene is "angry."

That may be a clue, not only to the breakdown of decency in New Orleans, but to a wider degeneration in American society in recent decades.

Why are people angry? And at whom?

Apparently they are angry at government officials for not having rescued them sooner, or taken care of them better, or for letting law and order break down.

No doubt the inevitable post mortems on this tragic episode will turn up many cases where things could have been done better. But who can look back honestly at his own life without seeing many things that could have been done better?

Just thinking about all the mistakes you have made over a lifetime can be an experience that is humbling, if not humiliating.

When all is said and done, government is ultimately just human beings -- politicians, judges, bureaucrats. Maybe the reason we are so often disappointed with them is that they have over-promised and we have been gullible enough to believe them.

Government cannot solve all our problems, even in normal times, much less during a catastrophe of nature that reminds man how little he is, despite all his big talk.

The most basic function of government, maintaining law and order, breaks down when floods or blackouts paralyze the system.

During good times or bad, the police cannot police everybody. They can at best control a small segment of society. The vast majority of people have to control themselves.

That is where the great moral traditions of a society come in -- those moral traditions that it is so hip to sneer at, so cute to violate, and that our very schools undermine among the young, telling them that they have to evolve their own standards, rather than following what old fuddy duddies like their parents tell them.

Now we see what those do-it-yourself standards amount to in the ugliness and anarchy of New Orleans.

In a world where people flaunt their "independence," their "right" to disregard moral authority, and sometimes legal authority as well, the tragedy of New Orleans reminds us how utterly dependent each one of us is for our very lives on millions of other people we don't even see.

Thousands of people in New Orleans will be saved because millions of other people they don't even know are moved by moral obligations to come to their rescue from all corners of this country. The things our clever sophisticates sneer at are ultimately all that stand between any of us and utter devastation.

Any of us could have been in New Orleans. And what could we have depended on to save us? Situational ethics? Postmodern philosophy? The media? The lawyers? The rhetoric of the intelligentsia?

No, what we would have to depend on are the very things that are going to save the survivors of hurricane Katrina, the very things that clever people are undermining.

New Orleans can be rebuilt and the levees around it shored up. But can the moral levees be shored up, not only in New Orleans but across America?

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