

Thoughts of Hurricane Katrina – 15 Years Later

I found myself glued to the Weather Channel and CBS News watching and listening to video and reports of the devastation in New Orleans and Biloxi left by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. While anthropologists and sociologists have found that people come together during times of disaster, what I observed of New Orleans strongly contradicted the researchers' claims. I was left wondering about the slow response and how it could be explained. By slow, I mean that more than three days after the category 5 hurricane, the city of New Orleans resembled a refugee enclave in a developing country.

Three days after Hurricane Katrina left devastation in its wake, people in New Orleans were sitting on rooftops waiting for help to arrive. Others were wading through waters in the town with expressions of wonderment on their faces. Hundreds, young and old, were sitting on a bridge in the hot, sweltering sun and heat waiting for help to arrive. No one on the bridge had even tasted food or water for over two days.

Clearly parched from the heat and lack of water, one woman held a baby reportedly two weeks of age. Two toddlers were huddled together in a stroller, obviously afraid. There were elderly people with Alzheimers seemingly unaware of what was happening around them. Nearby, their family members were clearly concerned about their care.

One man reportedly jumped to his death preferring it to this unknown existence. The husband of an elderly woman died at her feet as she tried desperately to seek police help. She said she was told by officers in a passing police unit that they "couldn't help" her. "They kept going," she said. Police cars and military trucks passed by people but avoided stopping. A woman and a man walking alone waved one down and *were* able to hitch a ride.

The mayor of New Orleans reportedly reallocated police resources to control the looting of stores rather than continuing rescue efforts. Where functioning stores once operated, a policeman aimed a rifle at a man telling him to drop the bag of goods he allegedly looted from a store. The goods appeared to be clothing. In the middle of such chaos, the scene and images were ludicrous. The priorities of officials were grossly misplaced and their actions misguided.

As I watched these scenes throughout the day, I could not help but wonder about the absence of the nation's leaders. The mayor of New Orleans and governor of Louisiana were visible at podiums and appeared worse for wear - downtrodden and near their breaking points. Fatigued and emotionally distraught, they seemed to be doing everything in their power to manage the crisis. It was simply too much to bear and help was needed.

Houston's mayor appeared at a podium announcing that the city will "step up to the plate" and do its part to help its neighbors. He opened the Houston Astrodome to the estimated 25,000 people who had sought shelter in the New Orleans Superdome. The

stadium had been an option for residents before Hurricane Katrina tore off parts of the roof and flooded the facility, leaving no running toilets or electricity.

The governor of Illinois announced that he ordered 300 Illinois guards to New Orleans, along with 50 trucks to help in the recovery efforts. Yet I still wondered, ‘where is everybody?’ Where are the offers of help from other neighboring cities and states? Where is the National Guard with food, water, transportation, and medical assistance? Where are the U.S. senators and representatives for Louisiana, and where is the President, given the magnitude of this disaster? The scene struck of sheer chaos and benign neglect.

I am not naïve. I understood even then that it takes a while to mobilize resources to respond to a disaster of this magnitude. But we were purportedly the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth in terms of the quantity and quality of our human, organizational and economic resources. Yet, we did not seem to be putting these to use. I wondered if this apathy had anything to do with the race and social class of the overwhelming majority of people impacted by the hurricane.

The video images clearly depicted poor African Americans as the victims of the New Orleans travesty. It contrasted sharply with the images streaming from Biloxi of middle class Whites whose businesses and homes were destroyed by the hurricane. In contrast to New Orleans citizens, the people in Biloxi appeared relatively well-rested, cleaned, fed, and able to exercise the options that their class privilege afforded them. Some had already begun to rebuild.

The President was finally shown speaking from a podium about the years it would take to recover from the disaster. With his head down, he pledged, that “we will do all we can to help.” I found his statement to be flat and his expression and gesture as passive and insincere. As he was shown walking to the Marine One helicopter with his dog under his left arm, the President’s demeanor seemed to be one of ‘I don’t want to be bothered’ and ‘I am pissed that I had to leave my vacation early.’

The hurricane disaster seemed to be more of a nuisance to the President rather than one that demanded responsibility and determination to address the needs of the thousands of people displaced by it. This from the nation’s leader. This from the President who spoke repeatedly about freedom for the Iraqi people.

I was left quite confused about the president’s lack of commitment to fellow U.S. citizens. Did the well-being, freedom, and sense of security of African Americans matter? Were African Americans not seen as real Americans, but rather refugees? I hoped my thinking was wrong. I hoped this negligence and apathy could not be explained by what these questions suggest. But if I was wrong, then where was everybody? I still ask myself that question today – 15 years later. What would be the national response if such a hurricane hit a poor, Black community today?