

New Orleans: Maximizing Disaster

By [Murray Dobbin](#)

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Canadian philosopher Ursula Franklin uses a series of questions to test the worthiness of public policies. One of them is “Does it maximize gain or minimize disaster?” Nothing in recent memory serves to highlight this question as much as the events that unfolded last week in New Orleans.

Deregulated coastal development, massive funding cuts to disaster response, and political cronyism allowed for maximum private gain at the price of an unprecedented public disaster. New Orleans’ experience may also explain why religion plays such an enormous role in American politics.

When you have cut every public service to the bone you had better pray that nothing out of the ordinary happens. The mix of emotions generated by watching the growing human misery in New Orleans is hard to grapple with. Heartbreak, disbelief, anger, contempt – each of them visited and revisited as we alternately view the desperation of ordinary Americans, the breathtaking arrogance of their president and the sheer idiocy of their governor.

The inability of Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco to articulate even the most basic human response was hard to credit. Her most memorable statement regarding the plight of her citizens was her shoot-to-kill orders for the troops sent into New Orleans. “These troops are fresh back from Iraq. 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.”

Cronies in charge Years of ‘downsizing’ of democratic governance in the US – both ideological and fiscal – means that for millions of Americans the only public service they can truly count on is to be shot dead by the National Guard. For twenty years, neo-cons and the religious right have attacked the notion of ‘entitlement’, the alleged abuse by citizens of the public purse. This is the now unacceptable notion that citizens actually have the right (independent of the charitable whims of pop stars) to an education, health care, and clean water. And, as it turns out, help from a devastating hurricane.

In 2001, George Bush appointed Joe Allbaugh, one of his Texas cronies, as the new head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA. He had no experience in disaster management. Almost immediately, Allbaugh declared FEMA would be downsized: “Many are concerned that federal disaster assistance may have evolved into an oversized entitlement program. . . .” The next head of FEMA was Allbaugh’s former college roommate, Michael Brown, who also had no experience in disaster relief. That background goes a long way to explain the clueless statements Brown made in the midst of the Katrina’s aftermath: that he did not know thousands of evacuees were waiting at the convention centre, that he thought, despite what was being reported on an hourly basis, the security situation was “pretty darn

good” and the evacuations of the hospitals had gone “very well”.

The history of FEMA is also the history of America’s systematic attack on its own government and it provides a lesson for Canadians: ideology – government bad, free market good – makes you stupid and when combined with power it makes you dangerous.

In 2003, FEMA was downgraded from a cabinet level position and absorbed by the Department of Homeland Security, its mission refocused on fighting acts of terrorism. FEMA’s preparation and planning functions were all but eliminated. The next year, FEMA denied Louisiana’s pre-disaster mitigation funding requests, at the same time as the Army Corps of Engineers budget for levee reinforcement in New Orleans was slashed. In 2005, funding for the New Orleans district of the Corps was cut by a record \$71.2 million. Especially hard-hit was the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project. Every individual for himself The horror of New Orleans is rooted in the extremes of American individualism. With lots of advanced notice of the terrifying category five hurricane about to hit the city, what did elected officials do? They announced that everyone should evacuate. Full stop.

There would be no help. People would have to devise their own private way out of the disaster area. Yet, 35 percent of African American families in New Orleans had no cars. Not for America a collectively organized, ‘forced’ evacuation as in Cuba where last year 1.3 million people were evacuated in advance of a similar category five hurricane. Not a single person died. And when Cuba evacuates people it also evacuates their most valuable possessions so they aren’t destroyed. There was one glimmer of hope for American democracy in this horrific tale. Journalists began telling the real story, after a predictably uncritical first take. Looking at what was facing them on the streets of New Orleans, how could they not? These were not the embedded, insulated journalists of Iraq and the White House could not control their coverage.

Slowly, story by story, American reporters and news anchors began doing their job. For the sake of Americans, and their democracy, let’s hope it becomes a habit.

After a summer break, Murray Dobbin’s ‘State of the Nation’ column appears twice monthly on The Tyee.

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