

Sandy: Katrina Redux?

By [Stephen Lendman](#)

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On August 29, 2005, New Orleans was woefully unprotected. It wasn't accidental. It was planned.

In early 2001, FEMA predicted the three most likely US disasters. They included a terrorist attack on New York, a major San Francisco earthquake, and a hurricane and flood in New Orleans.

Shaped like a bowl below sea level, unprotected areas didn't have a chance. Predatory capitalism took full advantage. Vulnerable poor Black communities suffered most.

Levees were deliberately left weak. They were no match for hurricane strength winds. They reached landfall as a Category 3. Then Congressman Richard Baker said, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it but God did."

At the time, Common Ground Relief (CGR) co-founder Malik Rahim said:

"They wanted them poor niggers out of there and they ain't had no intention to allow it to be reopened to no poor niggers, you know? And that's just the bottom line."

Ethnic cleansing was long-planned. Katrina erased poor neighborhoods. Upscale condos and other high-profit projects on choice city land replaced them.

Developers took full advantage. Political New Orleans and Bush administration officials provided generous support.

Most displaced Blacks weren't allowed back. They were no match for corporate predators and complicit politicians.

Lower Ninth Ward residents drew national attention. Floodwaters displaced them. Much of the area remains desolate. Around 85% of the population was displaced. Other Black areas suffered the same way.

Choice areas were redeveloped. Others were left barren. Residents got little help. For-profit projects were prioritized.

In August 2012, Loyola University New Orleans Law Professor/Center for Constitutional Rights Legal Director [Bill Quigley](#) headlined "Katrina Pain Index 2012: Seven Years Later," saying:

New Orleans has the world's highest prison rate. "Louisiana imprisons more of its people, per head, than any of the other 50 states."

One out of every seven Black men is in prison, on parole or on probation.

New Orleans has the second highest US homeless and poverty rates in cities over 10,000 population. Income inequality is the highest in America.

The city murder rate is nearly two and a half times the national average. It also has one of the nation's highest crime rates. It ranks 11 on a scale of one to 100 (the safest).

Police abuse is notorious. Poor Blacks are most vulnerable. Justice Department data includes scathing findings.

Seven years post-Katrina, "35,700 abandoned or blighted homes and empty lots" remain. They represent 21% of residential housing.

A [Princeton](#) University study found many low income mothers still suffered post-traumatic stress systems in summer 2010.

Fewer bus routes now exist. Half of all Black households are "asset poor." They haven't enough savings to survive three months without income.

Around 65% of Black children are poor. Public school enrollment is way down. Charter school figures are the nation's highest.

Three years post-Katrina, Quigley said displaced residents got no rental financial aid. Rental homes weren't repaired. Unaffordable housing rose to 46%.

Destroyed or heavily damaged public housing wasn't rebuilt. Thousands of poor neighborhood homes were demolished to prevent residents from returning.

Half the city's public schools were replaced by charter ones. About 75% were for-profit. Whites were favored. Blacks were shut out.

Unionized school employees were fired. Selective rehiring offered less pay and few or no benefits.

Displaced Blacks were entirely disenfranchised. Four of the 13 city Planning Districts remained as vulnerable to floods as pre-Katrina.

About 25% of hospitals were lost. Around 38% fewer beds were available. Thousands still lived in temporary trailers. Many were displaced to other areas and not allowed back.

The city's Black population was halved. Thousands of Black kids never returned to school.

Quigley's Katrina Pain [Index 2010](#) said:

"(T)ens of thousands of (New Orleans) homes....remain vacant or blighted. Tens of thousands of African American children who were in the public schools (aren't) back, nor have their parents been able to return."

"The metro area lost over 140,000 people, the city itself over 100,000. Thousands of elderly and displaced people (were affected)."

“Affordable housing” is in short supply. Poor and low income people were most affected.

Supply shortages affect schools, medical care, jobs, public assistance, and affordable housing. Three-fourths of public apartments were gone.

Billions of dollars in promised aid never came. Funding instead went for luxury hotels, casinos, private clubs, the oil industry, and gentrification.

Post-Katrina New Orleans metaphorically represents the worst of disaster capitalism. Will New York and other Sandy-impacted areas be next?

Post-Katrina, the right-wing [Heritage Foundation](#) promoted predatory “free-market” ideas. They included:

- suspending Davis-Bacon Act law; it guarantees prevailing wages on federally funded or assisted construction projects;
- make flood-ravaged areas free-enterprise zones; let corporate predators exploit them for profit;
- make the entire region a deregulated, tax-incentivized economic competitiveness zone;
- free capital gains and dividends from taxes for two years;
- waive the estate tax for deaths from date of storm through yearend;
- repeal or waive environmental regulations;
- provide other business friendly tax incentives; and
- various other pro-corporate ideas; Heritage and similar right-wing groups want them made permanent.

Watch for similar schemes promoted now. Some already surfaced. The [Heritage Foundation](#) criticized a [New York Times](#) editorial headlined “A Big Storm Requires Big Government.”

It called it “a shameless attempt to politicize” Sandy. The Times grossly exaggerated Obama administration federal disaster aid. New York coastal area residents got little.

Two weeks after Sandy struck, hundreds of thousands lack power, heat, and other public services. Cost-cutting, under-investment, poor infrastructure, and indifference bear responsibility.

One report called Staten Island “the forgotten Borough.” Residents say it closer to hell than any of them ever saw. A local firefighter called the island “a dump.” An area nurse said people will die from lack of heat and proper shelter.

Another resident asked “where’s FEMA or the Red Cross? Down here, it’s people helping

people.” The Times claimed Obama restored FEMA to “working order.” Neglected New Yorkers haven’t seen it.

Heritage, of course, wants most government functions privatized. Other than major disasters, it wants no federal involvement post-“tornadoes, fires, floods, snowstorms, severe storms,” and similar events having “no national impact.”

FEMA “lacks key capabilities,” said Heritage. Budget cuts and federal disinterest explain why. Obama wants FY 2013 disaster relief cut by \$1 billion.

Part of what’s cut he wants allocated to state and local programs. They’re also cutting back. Most functions face reductions. Budget-cutting is de rigueur nationwide.

On October 31, The Citadel visiting scholar in entrepreneurship [Russell Sobel](#) headlined “The Free Market Can Do a Better Job,” saying:

FEMA and other federal initiatives don’t work. At issue is “central planning. Fixing disaster relief is simple:” privatize, privatize, privatize. Business works better than government so let it.

“Government should stick to law enforcement and major public works repairs.”

Sobel advocates regulatory-free, tax incentivized free trade zones. So-called NGOs also have a role, he says. Most profiteer for themselves. They’re predators, not humanitarians.

Nearly all have entrenched bureaucracies. Their officials are highly paid. Their operating rules are secret. Their financing sources and amounts aren’t disclosed.

They all claim non-profit status, yet operate unethically. They collude with governments or business interests. They profiteer handsomely, own unrelated businesses, and exploit people they claim to serve.

Government should get largely out of the way, says Sobel. It should protect law and order, deregulate prices, secure property rights, decentralized markets, and let business operate freely.

The Competitive Enterprise Institute’s (CEI) [Iain Murray](#) headlined “Hurricane Sandy, and the Invisible Hand of Recovery,” saying:

“(D)isaster response provides an excellent example of how the invisible hand of the market works to alleviate suffering and bring quick relief to those in need.”

After getting the lights back on, let business take over. Emergency supplies are needed. Let Wal-Mart, Target, and other big box stores supply them. “Mom-and-pop stores can’t do what (they) can in these circumstances.”

Big government “get(s) in the way.” Environmental and other regulations, David Bacon, union rules, and similar impediments interfere with business operations and profits. Murray wants them scrapped.

What about FEMA, he asked? Instead of helping, “its bureaucracy and empire-building get in the way.” Murray’s solution is cut it down to a shadow of its current form.

He and likeminded ideologues feel the same way about all government functions. Grover Norquist is notorious. He wants government shrunk in size to where he “can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”

Murray stresses lean and mean. So do others like him. Freedom, they think, depends on it. Cut these people enough slack, and it’ll disappear altogether.

Only wealth and power matter. Ordinary people are to be used, abused, and discarded when not needed. It’s the American way.

Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago and can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net.

His new book is titled “How Wall Street Fleeces America: Privatized Banking, Government Collusion and Class War”

<http://www.claritypress.com/Lendman.html>

Visit his blog site at sjlendman.blogspot.com and listen to cutting-edge discussions with distinguished guests on the Progressive Radio News Hour on the Progressive Radio Network Thursdays at 10AM US Central time and Saturdays and Sundays at noon. All programs are archived for easy listening.

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Articles by: [Stephen Lendman](#)

About the author:

Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago. He can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net. His new book as editor and contributor is titled "Flashpoint in Ukraine: US Drive for Hegemony Risks WW III."

<http://www.claritypress.com/LendmanIII.html> Visit his blog site at sjlendman.blogspot.com. Listen to cutting-edge discussions with distinguished guests on the Progressive Radio News Hour on the Progressive Radio Network. It airs three times weekly: live on Sundays at 1PM Central time plus two prerecorded archived

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