

“KATRINA’S UNNATURAL DISASTER”

Part I of a Two-Part Series

Dr. Manning Marable
“Along the Color Line”

Unquestionably, the recent Hurricane Katrina was the largest natural disaster in U.S. history. Yet, contrary to the assertions of President George W. Bush that no one could have “anticipated the breach of [New Orleans’s] levees” and the massive flooding and destruction of one of America’s historic cities in the wake of a major hurricane, the catastrophe we have witnessed was widely predicted for decades.

A 2002 special report of the New Orleans Times-Picayune, for example, warned, “It’s only a matter of time before South Louisiana takes a direct hit from a major hurricane. . . . Levees, our best protection from flooding, may turn against us.” The Times-Picayune predicted that such a disaster might “decimate the region” from flooding, and that in New Orleans, “100,000 will be left to face the fury.” That same year, in a New York Times editorial opinion, writer Adam Cohen predicted coldly, “If the Big One hits, New Orleans could disappear.” A direct major hurricane strike, Cohen estimated, would certainly force Lake Pontchartrain’s waters “over levees and into the city . . . there could be 100,000

deaths.” Thousands “could be stranded on roofs, surrounded by a witches brew of contaminated water.”

A natural disaster for New Orleans was statistically inevitable. But what made the New Orleans tragedy an “unnatural disaster” was the Federal government’s gross incompetence and indifference in preparing the necessary measures to preserve the lives and property of hundreds of thousands of its citizens. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), established in 1979, has been plagued for years with financial mismanagement, administrative incompetence, and cronyism.

The litany of FEMA’s bureaucratic blunders has been amply documented: its insistence that vital supplies of food, water and medical aid were impossible to deliver to thousands of people stranded at New Orleans’s downtown Morial Convention Center, though entertainers and reporters easily reached the site; its inability to rescue thousands of residents marooned on the roofs and in flooded houses for days; the failure to seek deployment of active duty troops in large numbers until three days after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast region.

But the incompetence goes deeper than that. FEMA Director Michael Brown actually instructed fire departments in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama not to send emergency vehicles or personnel into devastated areas unless local or state officials communicated specific requests for them – at a time when most towns and cities lacked working telephones, fax machines and internet access.

Florida's proposal to send 500 airboats to assist rescue efforts was blocked by FEMA. Thousands of urgently needed generators, communications equipment, trailers and freight cars of food went undelivered for weeks. Meanwhile, hundreds of dead bodies floated in New Orleans's streets and rotted in desolated houses. Millions of desperate Americans who attempted to phone FEMA's 800 telephone number for assistance heard recorded messages that all lines were busy, or were disconnected.

Even before Katrina struck, it was obvious that the overwhelming majority of New Orleans residents who would be trapped inside the city to face the deluge would be poor and working class African Americans, who comprised nearly seventy percent of the city's population. As the levees collapsed and the city's Ninth Ward flooded, tens of thousands of evacuees were herded into the Superdome and Convention Center, where they were forced to endure days without toilets and running water, food, electricity and medical help. Hundreds of black evacuees seeking escape on a bridge across the Mississippi River were confronted and forcibly pushed back into the city. One paramedic witnessing the incident stated: "I believe it was racism. It was callousness, it was cruelty."

As the media began to document this unprecedented tragedy, the vast majority of New Orleans's victims were "the faces at the bottom of America's well – the poor, black and disabled," as reporters Monica Haynes and Erv Dyer of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette observed. "The indelible television images of mostly black people living in subhuman conditions for nearly a week have prompted

some to ask whether race played a role in how quickly or how not-so-quickly federal and state agencies responded in [Katrina's] aftermath.”

It was governmental incompetence, and bureaucratic mismanagement and its refusal to channel resources to the region's truly disadvantaged that turned Hurricane Katrina into an unnatural disaster of race and class destruction.

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