

Katrina Redux

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Renamed and back, but first a personal note. Post-Katrina, writing about “The New Orleans Aftermath and (its) Ugly Glimpse of the Future” turned this retiree into a writer and radio host.

Now three years later, Gustav threatened and, on August 30, got New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin to hype the risk, scare the public, and order a dusk-to-dawn curfew and evacuation of the city’s 239,000 residents ahead of what he called “the mother of all storms.” Many hundreds of thousands more along the Gulf coast. “Nearly two million people from Texas to Alabama,” according to an August 31 New York Times report. Thankfully without cause as “the storm of the century” made landfall as a Category 2, weakened to a tropical depression on September 2, and Louisianans were spared the worst of their fears.

According to The New York Times, New Orleans’ levees “were tested by a heavy storm surge but held, even though the repair and reconstruction work from Hurricane Katrina, is far from finished....waves pounded against a floodwall on the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, considered a particularly weak link. Though water lapped over the wall for hours, (it) was only ankle-to-knee deep....on the edge of the (Katrina-hit) Ninth Ward.” Overall, no serious flooding or major damage occurred, and the Army Corps of Engineers expected no levee breaks. No thanks to its shoddy work as discussed below.

Over the weekend, nonetheless, Mayor Nagin was insistent and suspiciously over-eager to evacuate the city. Those staying behind, he said, were making “one of the biggest mistakes” of their lives because no emergency services were offered and no “last resort” shelters arranged like for Katrina – inadequate though they were. Case in point – residents weren’t allowed near the heavily guarded Superdome and Convention Center.

Then on Monday night with the threat passed, Nagin refused to say when residents would be allowed back. Now he’ll allow it on September 4 but kept a dusk-to-dawn curfew in place, and warned about power outages and lack of sanitation. Earlier, Governor Bobby Jindal stated that return would be delayed until roads and bridges were inspected and debris cleared. A worrisome sign that something’s up. Just like post-Katrina. Many evacuees may be denied reentry. One-fourth of them had no transportation and were bussed out. New Orleans poorest and mostly black. How they’ll get back isn’t clear. And the fact that DHS chief Michael Chertoff was in town is another reason to be suspicious.

As well as thousands of National Guard forces and USNORTHCOM contingents from across the country. Militarizing the city along with local police and other security forces. Mobilized in place to crack down. DHS and FEMA also and reports about Blackwater Worldwide and other paramilitaries.

Very likely reliable as post-Katrina, Blackwater mercenaries were deployed on New Orleans streets and in neighborhoods. Protected by immunity, they came in full battle gear right after the storm hit and spread out into the city's chaos. Their cover was to provide hurricane relief, but they functioned as vigilantes. Empowered by federal, state and local authorities. Terrorizing local residents. Removing them from choice areas for development. Assuring they couldn't return. A part of America's "war on terrorism" that's heading for cities everywhere.

They patrolled the Crescent City like Gestapo. Threatening in SUVs with tinted windows and their logos on the back. Others in unmarked cars with no license plates. Menacing in full battle gear. Wearing flak jackets. Carrying automatic weapons with extra guns strapped to their legs. Licensed to use them and kill. Their role as "the world's most powerful mercenary army (employing) some of the most feared professional killers in the world accustomed to operating without worry of legal consequences (and) largely off the congressional radar," according to author Jeremy Scahill in his book on the company. Part of a scheme to militarize America with New Orleans the first test case. Making its streets resemble Baghdad and perhaps back now for an encore.

Earlier the National Hurricane Center (NHC) called Gustav "extremely dangerous" but remained cautious about the threat. Powerful nonetheless at Category 2 (with winds around 110 mph) when it made landfall on September 1 - downgraded from its expected Category 4 strength the preceding weekend. NHC said it struck land at Cocodrie, LA, about 70 miles southwest of New Orleans, so the city was spared a direct hit. Nonetheless, rainfall was intense, flooding occurred, and along with it damage to add to Katrina's fallout.

It was more powerful with winds up to 130 mph and a storm surge topping 27 feet, far above Gustav's eight foot level with some forecasts that it could reach 14 feet. Katrina also made a direct hit on the Mississippi coast while Gustav skirted along Louisiana's shoreline at "a more gentle angle," according to the National Weather Service. Nonetheless, widespread power outages and flooding were reported from Texas to Mississippi, and earlier the storm killed up to 100 people in the Caribbean as it roared across Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, the Cayman Islands, and Western Cuba.

Reports from Kingston cited 11 deaths and "massive damage to roads, bridges and utility lines as a result of mudslides and flooding." The Dominican Republic at least eight more. Haiti, however, fared worst - 66 or more dead, at least 10 reported missing, dozens hurt, and many thousands displaced and their homes destroyed. Schools and other buildings also. Roads cut. Bridges submerged and villages inundated in the most vulnerable country in the Hemisphere.

Cuba was best prepared the way it always is with tens of thousands evacuated in time. No deaths were reported (nor in the Caymans), but widespread damage from wind and flooding in the western part of the island near Havana. Guantanamo is far to the East and was out of the storm's path.

Remembering Katrina

On August 29, 2005, it hit the Gulf coast and flooded New Orleans. A city below sea level. Shaped like a bowl, and woefully unprotected in areas housing poor blacks. Targeted for removal through forced ethnic cleansing to let developers swoop in and take over. Federal, state and local authorities complicit with corporate predators and ready. The city militarized

with police, National Guard, and Blackwater mercenaries. Licensed to kill and they did. Making New Orleans safe for capital. Ready now for an encore. What some observers call “disaster capitalism.” Exploiting security threats, “terror” attacks, economic meltdowns, competing ideologies, and national disasters like Katrina and Gustav.

New Orleans is a metaphor for capitalism’s most savage form – outside of war zones like Iraq and Afghanistan. In summer 2005, Katrina wiped out public housing. Erased communities, and let developers replace them with upscale condos and other high-profit projects on choice city real estate. Gentrification writ large. Disneyfication of one of the country’s most desirable tourist destinations. Removing poor blacks to make it possible. Assuring most would never return. Remaking New Orleans for profit. Long planned and awaiting a storm to do it. Taking full advantage when it hit.

The Bush administration was heartless with other things on its mind abroad and busy cutting social services budgets at home. It refused emergency funds for public sector salaries so 3000 city workers were fired. Charity Hospital had to close and remains shut. Public transit was gutted and lost half its workers. Most public housing was targeted for removal. Some sits on prime land close to the French Quarter. Developers want it for luxury properties. Katrina (and now Gustav) remade New Orleans to make it possible. It’s a window on America’s future and business as usual no matter who wins in November. Hopeful optimists be prepared. Disappointment is the operative word for 2009. “Fooled Again,” according to Mark Crispin Miller. Democracy here is for the privileged. The rest are to be exploited by neglect and abandonment, then forgotten.

Rules are being hardened. New Orleans is a domestic version of what Iraq pioneered. Creating an open field for capital. Giving administration favorites like Halliburton and Bechtel big contracts. Providing nothing to the poor, disadvantaged and displaced. Importing cheap undocumented labor instead of local workers. Suspending Davis-Bacon Act law that assures prevailing wage rates must be paid on all federally funded or assisted construction projects. Letting developers pay poverty scale instead and deny benefits. Suspending environmental regulations, and dispensing with unwanted people in the way. Assuring the inevitable by leaving New Orleans unprotected, and ignoring FEMA’s early 2001 prediction of the three most likely US disasters:

- a terrorist attack on New York;
- a major San Francisco earthquake; and the one considered most likely and catastrophic
- a hurricane and flood in New Orleans.

Experts cited a city below sea level. Vulnerable on the nation’s Gulf coast. With inadequate evacuation routes. Poor levy protection. A deteriorating ecosystem from overdevelopment. A catastrophe waiting to happen. Little recollection of when Betsy (in 1965) buried New Orleans under eight feet of water. It at Category 4 entering the Gulf, then downgraded to Category 3 when it struck the city. A future Category 5 one will be disastrous and sure eventually to come.

The city is a bowl ringed by levees, protecting it from the Mississippi to its south and Lake Pontchartrain in the north. At its bottom depth, it lies 14 feet below sea level. Pumping out routine rainfall draws water from the ground. That dries and sinks it deeper. A problem called “subsidence.” The city continues to sink. When big storms hit, the bowl fills, and

there's no place for water to drain.

Louisiana loses 25 square miles of land a year through erosion. Wetlands are disappearing. Solutions involve huge remediating efforts so far not made. Rebuilding the protective delta. An adequate levee system replacing poorly designed floodwalls not built to standard. Totally overhauling years of planned neglect. Waiting for a chance like Katrina and now Gustav to change the face of New Orleans forever, displace its majority black population, and make the city whiter.

Three years post-Katrina, nearly three-fifths of them aren't back. Most never will be with developers remaking the city into a tourist playground. Housing the wealthy in luxury condos. Keeping out poor blacks in the way. Upgrading New Orleans for profit. "Revitalization" according to city authorities.

Low-cost housing is being phased out. Public transportation as well along with public schools and health facilities that low-income people depend on. FEMA is now exploiting a tragedy and making it worse. Kicking people without homes out of trailers and stranding them on their own.

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In an August 26 article, he wrote about the "Katrina Pain Index: New Orleans Three Years Later" and explained the way the city looks today. Some of his data and more are covered below.

- No Louisiana renters are getting financial aid under the Louisiana Recovery Authority's (LRA) handling of the \$10 billion post-Katrina federal Road Home Community Development Block Grant; it's directed to 116,708 homeowners instead and excludes most blacks.

- No rebuilding plans are in place for the 963 St. Bernard Housing Development units demolished.

- No data is available to evaluate privatized charter schools; Katrina destroyed half the city's public school buildings; scattered tens of thousands of students and teachers across the country; federal and local authorities jumped on the chance; millions in federal funding went to convert public schools to charter for-profit ones with no debate, input or even knowledge of parents and teachers; all unionized city school employees were fired; then selectively rehired at less pay and fewer or no benefits; New Orleans schools were handed to business; the remaining poor, mostly black population, was disenfranchised; consigned to under-funded schools and denied the education they deserve; 40% fewer special education students (needing extra help) now attend charter schools compared to underfunded public ones; most city schools today are for-profit; plans are for all of them to be.

- Virtually no rental homes were repaired - 82 out of a projected 10,000 in need.

- New Orleans ranks first in the nation in percentage of vacant or ruined housing units.

- Four of the 13 city Planning Districts are as much at flood risk as before Katrina.

- Only 11% of hard-hit Lower Ninth Ward families have returned; pre-Katrina, it was one of

the country's richest cultural communities; one community leader said it had an "atmosphere of engagement;" in dialogue, music, words and history; a Make It Right Stakeholders Coalition promotes rebuilding and helps residents return to the neighborhood; federal and city authorities are committed to obstructing them.

- Experts estimate it will take 20 to 25 years to rebuild New Orleans at the current pace of reconstruction.
- There are 25% fewer hospitals in the metro area than pre-Katrina; 38% fewer hospital beds.
- One-third of city neighborhoods have less than half their pre-Katrina households; ones where poor black people live.
- Rents have risen 46% making housing unaffordable for poor and low income people.
- 81% of city homeowners got insufficient funding to repair their homes.
- post-Katrina, 10,000 homes were demolished.
- thousands are still in temporary trailers; FEMA is slowly displacing them.
- the homeless population doubled post-Katrina.
- 32,000 children never returned to public schools; their population is half the pre-Katrina total.
- 39,000 Louisiana homeowners applying for federal repair and rebuilding aid never got it.
- 46,000 fewer black voters were eligible in 2007 than 2003.
- there are nearly 72,000 vacant, ruined or unoccupied city houses.
- the city's population was reduced by 214,000 and is now 239,000, according to the latest US Census Bureau estimate; and
- billions of FEMA damage and repair funding has yet to be made available to city and state residents; it likely never will be.

Meanwhile, three years post-Katrina, \$15 billion in New Orleans hurricane protection construction has barely started even though the US Army Corps of Engineers says 20% of it is completed. All of it is supposed to be by 2011, and the Corps claims New Orleans "now has the best flood protection in its history."

Point of fact - it's woefully inadequate. The city remains vulnerable, especially in its eastern poorer areas. Too little is being done to prevent another Katrina disaster that's inevitable from a powerful future storm. If a Category 5, it'll be disastrous, and a shocking April 24 WWL-TV report provides evidence.

It's headlined: "4 Investigates: Floodwalls stuffed with newspaper?" "It blows my mind," according to St. Bernard parish president Craig Taffaro showing videotape evidence on-air. An indictment of a US Army Corps of Engineers hired contractor. A resident said two years ago he witnessed the expansion joint opening between floodwalls being stuffed with

newspapers. “The whole length” of it. And when he confronted the contractor he was told “when Congress sends down the money, it would be repaired the proper way.”

It wasn't as Gustav approached, and WWL asked a local American Society of Civil Engineers member to investigate. A man ASCE named Louisiana's outstanding civil engineer in 2003 – Subhash Kulkarni. He said: “I cannot even comprehend that somebody would stuff some newspaper in there.” Floodwall expansion joints have three lines of defense:

- an elastic strip to help keep out water;
- waterstops in the middle that's most important; the St. Bernard floodwall has them; and
- rubber joints in between to keep out foreign objects; St. Bernard floodwalls lack them; newspaper was used instead; Kulkarni called it “very serious; it doesn't take a lot of stress to cause the failure of these floodwalls; we don't know after two or three years how the main joint will perform; this is the first line of defense.”

For its part, the Corps of Engineers defended the work and denied any of it was shoddy, but a Corps emailer disagreed. He told WWL that “sponge rubber” is required next to waterstops – the same areas where newspaper was used instead. Ecron Corporation did the work. Contractually it was obliged to do it right. The company president didn't respond to WWL's “repeated requests for a comment,” and the station discovered that his company “is not even licensed by the state's board for contractors.” Apparently not a problem with the Corps of Engineers. Or with the Bush administration and its corporate allies who crave another chance to make New Orleans even whiter and free up more choice real estate for high-profit development.

A total city makeover with billions in federal and local funding to assist. Welcome to America's future. Upscale tourist destinations. Luxury accommodations for the privileged. Gated communities for the wealthy. Every amenity imaginable. For most others and the nation's poor – exploitation by neglect and abandonment. Growing numbers on society's fringes ignored and forgotten. A two-party duopoly assuring it. Militarizing the country for enforcement. Planning an unfriendly future by making America into a police state. Replicating the model everywhere. New Orleans and Iraq are incubators. Not the kind of country for young people to inherit. High time that enough of us realize it's our job to prevent it.

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