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The Politics of Katrina in New Orleans: A View from Ground Zero

Christine L. Day and Marc R. Rosenblum

Abstract

What is New Orleans like today? What will it take to return the city to some semblance of normalcy? Stunned by the events and revelations of governmental incompetence since Katrina, we review Katrina's aftermath and chime in on current policy debates about the city's future. Our love for New Orleans may compromise our objectivity, but we find scholarly inspiration in three excellent articles in the last issue of *The Forum*.

Author Notes: Christine L. Day is a professor of political science at the University of New Orleans. Her major research areas include interest group politics, gender and politics, and political gerontology. As a one-time evacuee, she knows what it means to miss New Orleans. Marc R. Rosenblum is an assistant professor of political science at the University of New Orleans specializing in immigration, US-Latin American relations, and Latin American politics. He had the good fortune to leave New Orleans August 1, 2005 to begin a one-year fellowship as a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow. He is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Migration Policy Institute, and will begin working for the Senate Immigration Subcommittee beginning in February.

“Louisiana is dysfunctional,” Michael Brown testified before Congress shortly after he stepped down as director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency to spend more time with his family.

Indeed, here in New Orleans, piles of debris littered the streets; houses and storefronts stood boarded up and vacant; thieves and marauders terrorized residents; and City Hall remained paralyzed by bureaucratic ineptitude and corruption.

And that was before Katrina.

Brown’s only failure other than calling too few press conferences, he testified further, was his inability to unite Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin around a post-Katrina plan of action. Leadership failures can certainly be cited in both cases, and there was a long line of public officials at every level of government who displayed less than stellar performance, and poor coordination, in post-Katrina emergency management. Many of these shortcomings were outlined in broader theoretical perspective by Louise Comfort, Patrick Roberts, and Amanda Hollis, in three excellent articles in the last *Forum*.¹

But the most egregious dysfunctions occurred at the federal level, with FEMA Director Brown leading the parade. When FEMA’s lone official in New Orleans e-mailed urgent messages to Brown about the desperate need for food, water, and medical care in the city’s shelters—without which “many will die within hours”—his press secretary replied that Brown needed more time to eat dinner at a Baton Rouge restaurant. Brown later denied any knowledge of the grave conditions in the city during the days following Katrina, even as the rest of the nation watched the horror unfold on television. Emergency management, all three *Forum* authors agree, should require training, experience, expertise, and professional leadership. New Orleans and the Gulf Coast would have benefited from such leadership.

But FEMA’s problems, as the authors note, stretch far beyond the lack of professionalism at the top; they can be traced to changes at the agency following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Dropping FEMA into the massive new Department of Homeland Security, emphasizing terrorism over natural disasters, filling senior positions in the agency with political appointees lacking in emergency management experience, and alienating many of the experienced employees who were already there all contributed to the agency’s poor preparation for and response to Katrina’s devastation. Had Katrina struck in the 1990s, when FEMA drew high praise for its effective emergency management, New Orleans might have been spared much grief. None of this bodes well for federal response to any future disaster—natural, terrorist, or other.

¹ *The Forum*, Volume 3, Issue 3, 2005, articles 1-3.

“You’re doing a heck of a job, Brownie,” President Bush told his appointed FEMA director in the days following Katrina. What about the president himself? The White House did stay busy during Katrina’s aftermath—with its relentless effort to turn Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco into scapegoats for the tragedy.

Mayor Nagin’s primary response to the impending storm was to order, for the first time in the 287-year history of New Orleans, a mandatory evacuation of the entire city. Amazingly, 90 percent of the city’s residents fled, including a huge proportion of those with resources who have repeatedly asserted in the past that they “never evacuate.” Nagin failed to mobilize buses and other resources to get some of the city’s poorest out to safety; but locals also know that New Orleans’ complex race and class relations insured that many of these people would not have left other than at the point of a gun. Neither time nor political will would have supported a truly mandatory evacuation. In the aftermath of the storm, Nagin sounded a consistent theme: please send massive federal assistance now; we need your help.

What about the governor? Blanco declared a state of emergency on August 26, three days before the storm struck, and she called up those members of Louisiana’s National Guard not already deployed to Iraq. Although the Guard’s response was hampered by the fact that half of its membership and virtually all of its heavy equipment remained in Iraq—after the army refused Louisiana’s request to release the latter—Blanco’s December release of more than 100,000 documents related to Katrina and its aftermath confirm that the governor did what we would expect: requesting federal assistance early and unambiguously.

The president responded, in fact, by declaring a state of emergency on the Saturday before the storm struck—accepting responsibility from that moment forward for minimizing Katrina’s damage. And then what? Not much. Bush remained on vacation for several more days, making side trips to California and Arizona to drum up support for the Iraq War and Medicaid reform; and he did not visit the disaster region until Friday, five full days after Katrina made landfall. Attempting to rehabilitate his image, the president gave a rousing speech on September 15 in Jackson Square in the heart of New Orleans, promising to “do what it takes ... stay as long as it takes” to restore the city. Yet the president has since backed off from supporting his own recovery package, creating what *The New York Times* called “a vast gulf between words and action.”

Federal responsibility for the post-Katrina flood that ravaged New Orleans is not limited to the Bush Administration. “Implicit in U.S. law and policy is the premise that the quintessential responsibility of government is to protect the lives and property of its citizens and to maintain continuity of operations for its communities,” Louise Comfort notes in her *Forum* article (p. 1). When it comes to hurricane preparation and flood control, Congress had explicitly charged the Army Corps of Engineers with responsibility for “works of improvement relating

to flood control” (US Code, Title 33, 701) including the system of levees and pumps designed to keep southeastern Louisiana safe and dry from the known threat of storms like Hurricane Katrina. The Corps warned repeatedly since the mid-90s that the levee system was in need of additional resources, and local officials have pleaded with the federal government to upgrade New Orleans’ levee system from its pre-Katrina capacity to handle a “Category 3” storm, to put in place Category 5 protection—the strongest there is. Yet in the four years prior to Katrina the Bush Administration and Congress accelerated budget cuts initiated in the Clinton years: cutting funding for Lake Ponchartrain levees in half and for the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project by two-thirds. This latest negligence was probably not decisive, however. Subsequent investigations by engineering teams, including one sponsored by the National Science Foundation, have found evidence of poor construction, design flaws, and possibly even fraud and criminal malfeasance on the part of the Army Corps and its subcontractors. Officials at local, state, and national levels are weighing litigation, and many homeowners are considering private and class action lawsuits against the Corps of Engineers as well as the Orleans Levee Board, charged with maintaining the levees.

Much of the country is shocked by these failures at all levels of government in the years before Katrina and in the days surrounding its landfall. Inevitably, new disasters occurred—including two more major hurricanes and the devastating Central Asian earthquake—and the US news cycle has moved on to cover Washington’s latest political scandals, the president’s declining poll numbers, and (at last) something resembling a debate over the Iraq war. Yet many victims of Hurricane Katrina continue to feel let down by our elected representatives, and in many cases that government officials are exacerbating our problems. Even well-educated middle-class victims of the storm find it difficult to navigate FEMA’s bureaucracy in order to request economic assistance, and requests for assistance with FEMA paperwork or for information about the status of our claims fall on deaf ears. Thousands of us have lost our jobs and as landlords and mortgage companies reached the end of their forbearance periods no government assistance or regulation has prevented summary evictions or the first round of house foreclosures. Many of us want to rebuild or renovate our houses, but we are prevented from doing so because neither FEMA nor the city of New Orleans will tell us what changes we will have to make to obtain flood insurance in the future—or whether houses on our land will be insurable under any conditions. And most importantly, New Orleans’ homeowners and businesses feel unable to make any concrete plans for the future until plans are announced regarding the future of the city’s levee system. Each day of congressional inaction forces some of us to make plans elsewhere, and threatens to guarantee that even heroic efforts in the future will prove to be too little, too late.

Comprehensive and effective emergency management, the three *Forum* authors suggest, must include prevention, preparation and mitigation as well as response and recovery. Full recovery for the city of New Orleans must include hurricane-protection planning; without it, repopulation and rebuilding will be slow and investors reluctant. Thus we focus now on the post-disaster recovery efforts, which will preoccupy our city for years to come.²

More than four months after Katrina came ashore, most of the city resembles a vast wasteland and 80 percent of its inhabitants remain displaced. Homes and businesses stand damaged and empty for miles and miles, many with their contents still out on the curb in huge piles of ruined furniture and appliances and sodden Sheetrock. Mountains of garbage, dead refrigerators, and thousands of dusty, rusted vehicles and battered boats line the streets and median strips. The garbage in the streets, only a fraction of which has been collected, represents 34 normal years' worth, and may take years to be cleared away. And many houses have yet to be gutted or bulldozed. At night the streets are pitch black.

Along the rim of the bowl-shaped city, especially along the Mississippi River from Uptown past the French Quarter, about 20 percent of the city stayed dry after the levees broke. There, the lights are on, many restaurants, clubs, and other businesses have reopened, and the streets bustle with life. To go from there to the rest of the city is like switching from color to black-and-white; it's like penetrating a war zone; it's like entering a Mad Max movie. With few schools open, there are almost no children. In a city where children normally fill the streets and playgrounds, laughing and running, shooting hoops, catching Mardi Gras beads, the dearth of children may be the weirdest thing of all.

What can be done to restore New Orleans? With 300,000 residents and 160,000 jobs gone, and 110,000 homes damaged, in a city of half a million pre-Katrina residents, this will be the biggest urban rebuilding effort in U.S. history. Decisions we make now about the size and direction of disaster relief will determine whether our city retains its population base, its economic viability, and its unique cultural heritage.

Helping People Return and Rebuild. The trick here is to strike a balance between rebuilding quickly and rebuilding wisely. People are eager to return to their homes, salvage what they can, and replace what they cannot. They must be allowed to do so while the momentum is still high. At the same time, unregulated

² We focus on New Orleans because of its unique situation following Katrina—most of the damage there and in neighboring parishes was due not directly to the hurricane, but to water and mold damage after the levees breached and flooded the city—and because New Orleans is our home. Our intention is not to ignore the plight of all the other communities along the Gulf Coast in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama that were ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, as well as all the communities in Louisiana and Texas that were pounded just four weeks later by Hurricane Rita. Many of our comments and suggestions for rebuilding apply to those areas as well.

and scattershot redevelopment, especially in the lowest-lying areas, could leave homeowners stuck in unsafe houses on largely abandoned streets devoid of property value. Many property owners are caught in a trick bag: They don't want to abandon their properties, but they are reluctant to jump into home rehabilitation without clear and accurate information on building codes, flood plain elevations, utility restoration, garbage collection, mold abatement, city inspectors' home assessments, and insurability. Local and federal agencies need to establish rules and guidelines and to provide a central clearinghouse of such information, for example on the city's web site. Meanwhile, there is an acute need for temporary housing, and FEMA has been slow to respond with trailers or other interim solutions.

Many homeowners have federally-underwritten flood insurance, but because flood policies are not typically written with a total loss in mind, benefits are only high enough to pay off existing mortgages, not to put down-payments on new homes. Thus, in a city with one of the country's lowest home-ownership rates, tens of thousands of citizens are threatened with an unexpected exit from the "ownership society." Congress should prevent this outcome by mandating that flood victims be allowed to draw on homeowners' coverage or by requiring that banks write off portions of the existing loans. Unchecked private land speculation in devastated neighborhoods could shut out many lower- and middle-income displaced residents. Alternatively, better planning could turn the city's long-time renters into first-time owners.

The city and state should present a unified vision to Congress. Both Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin have appointed commissions to develop a comprehensive plan. The governor and the mayor are not exactly the closest of friends, and intergovernmental coordination could be tighter. Further, although both chief executives exhort their advisors to "think outside the box," their commissions are heavily weighted toward wealthy business interests that have flourished under the status quo. (No surprise there.) Happily, though, interaction between the two commissions has improved in recent weeks, and both have received excellent advice from professional planning organizations: Encourage high-density mixed-income neighborhoods by combining market-rate and subsidized housing in the higher, safer areas of town. Turn some of the low-lying unsafe areas into green space that could withstand occasional flooding, compensating property owners in those areas at pre-Katrina market rates. Backward-looking respect for New Orleans' unique architectural heritage should be combined with forward-looking city planning to create mixed-income neighborhoods anchored around naturally integrated schools, places of worship, and community centers.

Economic Development. Rebuilding and modernizing the Port of New Orleans, situated as it is near the mouth of the Mississippi River, serves the

national economy and therefore deserves federal financial support. Likewise, tax credits and bridge loans to help small businesses recover will benefit the national as well as the local economies. The oil, gas, and chemical industries are already deeply invested in the area's economy, but their extravagant profits could be better distributed toward further development of the area's ecology and workers' well-being.

Reconstruction itself can be a boon to the local economy, especially if New Orleans is rebuilt by local businesses and by local workers who are paid decent wages. Hundreds of millions of dollars in federal rebuilding contracts were quickly awarded to well-connected multinational corporations such as AshBritt Environmental, a client of Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour's high-powered Washington lobbying firm and major contributor to Republican federal candidates, and Halliburton, which needs no introduction. Only after public criticism did FEMA announce plans to reopen many of those contracts to competitive bidding; but the rebidding has yet to take place and to date only seven percent of federal rebuilding dollars has gone to companies in Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama. The largest local company to receive Katrina contracts is Baton Rouge-based Shaw Group Inc., whose CEO chaired the Louisiana Democratic Party until a few weeks ago, pals around with Governor Blanco, and contributes handsomely to federal candidates of both parties including President Bush. Meanwhile, one of Bush's first actions after Katrina was to suspend Davis-Bacon provisions requiring that federal contracts pay workers the prevailing wages in their communities. Again, only after public criticism and under congressional pressure did Bush reinstate the Davis-Bacon wage rules in late October.

New Orleans arguably leads the world in musical talent per capita, and boasts an astoundingly rich history of musical innovation and incubation. There is no reason why other aspects of the music business, including recording, production, and distribution, could not be developed locally into a world-class industry. Further, with two major schools of medicine and public health, those affiliated with Louisiana State and Tulane Universities, the health care and biosciences sector could be developed into another strong economic force in the city. In a state with one of the highest proportions of uninsured residents, more comprehensive coverage and more emphasis on preventive health care would also be cost-effective for the state and city.

Tourism has long been a major feature of the local economy due to New Orleans' unique indigenous culture and its incomparable ability to show people a good time. Redevelopment must carefully preserve the authenticity of its cultural mélange—Creole, Cajun, Caribbean, Mediterranean, indigenous, exotic, everything but the banal—and the idiosyncratic spontaneity of its everyday life. Planning is good, but too much planning runs the danger of turning this tourist

mecca into a Disneyesque Gumboland or Jazz World—or even into a semitropical casino district, a proposal forwarded by Mayor Nagin in a moment of madness weeks after the storm and then hastily retracted under a storm of criticism.

Hurricane and Flood Protection. Neither repopulation nor economic development is likely to progress very far unless residents and investors feel safe from future catastrophes. Category 3 hurricane protection will require not only reconstructing the levee system but also correcting the errors and omissions that led the levees to buckle under Katrina's Category-3 force. Category 5 protection would require a more extensive network of levees and floodgates, as well as perhaps water reservoirs and green space within the city that could alleviate the flooding. The Corps' plan for Category 5 protection also includes steps to shore up the eroding coastline, an important part of protecting the city and the entire region. Much of the wetlands and many of the barrier islands along the Gulf have disappeared in recent decades, and with them, we have lost a good deal of natural protection against the force of hurricanes as they slam into the coast.

Much of the public debate about Katrina recovery has rightly focused on whether improvements to New Orleans' and southeastern Louisiana's levee systems are worth the cost, which the Corps of Engineers has estimated to be \$3.5 billion and \$32 billion, respectively, spread out over ten years. Can the nation afford to spend \$32 billion in one small region at this time of record deficits? These numbers are hard for most people to get a handle on: \$32 billion is slightly more than twice the budget for the US Department of Education (\$14 billion); it is one third the annual budget for US loans and aid to other countries; it is the amount the United States will spend in the next four months on the war in Iraq; it is 1.2 percent of the 2005 US federal budget, and (without other offsets and without accounting for the fiscal benefits associated with new construction) assuming the cost of the entire levee expansion would increase the US federal debt by 0.4 percent. \$32 billion is also far less than the estimated \$250 billion in losses caused by Katrina.

Thus, while \$32 billion would be a large expense, it is not out of scale with projects the federal government undertakes, and the decision about whether or not to fund major levee upgrades will turn on political will, not fiscal capacity. For this reason, we should consider a broader set of pros and cons. On one hand, as Patrick Roberts points out in his *Forum* article, increasing investment in hurricane and flood protection runs the danger of risk homeostasis: increasingly risky production and behavior that outruns the safety technology. Many environmentalists are rightly concerned about any steps to encourage individuals to return to below-sea level housing even as ever rising temperatures and sea levels make these areas increasingly vulnerable. At a minimum, levee upgrades must therefore be accompanied by public education and careful evacuation planning; and individual responsibility must be supplemented with plans for

information dissemination, public transportation, temporary housing, and evacuation routes that will not be gridlocked death traps.

On the other hand, restoring the wetlands also has many benefits besides hurricane protection, including preservation of the region's ecology, the seafood industry, and the homes of coastal residents. Taking steps to retard global warming—one cause of coastal erosion—also carries many well-known benefits, not least of which is reduction of future potentially powerful storms. Yet the most important argument in favor of upgrading New Orleans' levees to protect against a future Category 5 storm is that the city's survival depends on the restoration of its residents' confidence in our safety. In fact, warmer oceans and a period of more frequent hurricane activity suggests that New Orleans may well be hit by another major hurricane—including perhaps a Category 4 or 5—in the near future. And more importantly, traumatized residents and business owners will inevitably over-estimate this risk, and pin their return on the government's willingness to err on the side of caution. This is why, in the wake of the once-every-500 year Dutch flood of 1953, that country responded by building a flood protection system designed for floods on a once-every-10,000 year scale.

Environmental Safety. The environmental impact of the post-Katrina flooding is still uncertain. How many toxic chemicals and germs were spread by the flood waters? Despite numerous tests of the soil, water, and air in and around New Orleans, there are conflicting reports about the types and amounts of toxins that are present and the amounts that are potentially harmful. Only the area near the Murphy Oil spill in that part of St. Bernard Parish, to the east of New Orleans, is clearly toxic by all accounts. Further information needs to be clarified and disseminated by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality. These agencies should also establish ongoing efforts to measure and report on soil, air, and water quality. Emphasis should be placed on environmentally friendly construction, mass transit, bike and walking paths, and shared access to community resources, in order to enhance the city's long-term environmental safety.

Public Education. Public K-12 education in New Orleans was already a catastrophe before Katrina. There has never been a better time to shake up the status quo. Most schools in the Orleans Parish system expect to remain closed for the remainder of the academic year due to a lack of funds as well as physical damage to facilities. Some of the city's few successful schools are defecting to become charter schools. Congress should earmark necessary funds to reopen successful Orleans Parish schools immediately, and New Orleans should become a laboratory for well-funded and innovative public schools. At the risk of sounding self-interested, we contend that the city's universities also need and deserve public financial support to remain viable through the uncertainties of the near future.

Fighting Poverty. Images of poverty in New Orleans have been an eye-opener to much of middle-class America in the wake of Katrina. The U.S. government has slashed social services and gutted federal disaster agencies; inequality has increased in a country that already had the highest level of poverty and inequality in the industrialized West. And New Orleans has one of the highest poverty rates, and lowest car-ownership rates, in the country. The predictable results: an economically depressed state and city lacked the resources to respond effectively to a major emergency; most well-off and white people escaped; many poor and black people were left behind. As one African-American federal agency employee, working in New Orleans after the storm, put it, “If it was white soccer moms, they would have picked them up... Maybe people will wake up.”

This, then, is our post-Katrina wish list for New Orleans. What is actually being done? As local and state officials struggle to craft a unified and comprehensive plan, partisans in Congress have split in predictable ways. Republicans envision their president’s “Gulf Opportunity Zone” as a vehicle for still more tax cuts for the wealthy, as well as for school vouchers and other forms of privatization. Democrats push for New Deal-type government investment in jobs and reconstruction projects. All are laboring under the burden of Bush-era record budget deficits.

Restoring New Orleans is costly. Some powerful figures have suggested that the cost is prohibitive: House Speaker Dennis Hastert wondered shortly after the storm whether much of the city “could be bulldozed”; Senator Ted Stevens asked a New Orleans couple who lost their home why they would want to rebuild in such a place. Is it really worth it, rebuilding a poverty-stricken vulnerable city lying largely below sea level?

The risks of rebuilding New Orleans are glaringly obvious, and make it easy to make a case against doing so. Yet how can the greatest country in the world fail its citizens so miserably? The city of New Orleans has existed in its present location for 287 years. And the United States government has accepted responsibility—has promised—to protect New Orleans against predictable weather events like Hurricane Katrina since 1890. Our city and our homes were destroyed not because Katrina was “the big one,” but because the federal Army Corps of Engineers failed to build the levees they were mandated by law to provide. Will our government let us down again? Will other cities be abandoned, rather than rebuilt, when they are struck by future storms, earthquakes, and terror attacks—attacks which the 9/11 Commission continues to describe as inevitable?

Protecting its citizens is government’s first and most fundamental task. The United States failed to protect the residents of New Orleans against a predictable disaster, and we as a nation share a responsibility to restore that city, not stand by and watch its gradual demise. We believe this basic responsibility should be a given for any disaster approaching this scale.

Yet if we are really to pick and choose which cities we save, will we really abandon New Orleans, one of the world's truly unique cities and arguably America's greatest cultural treasure? We have already mentioned the economic value of New Orleans to the rest of the nation: the port activity and the shipbuilding indelibly linked to the city's location at the mouth of the Mississippi; the capital investments of the petrochemical industries; the tourism; the music.

But to really understand the value of New Orleans, come with us as we take a tour of the city. Gaze at the exceptional *mélange* of architectural wonders, from the wrought-iron balconies of the French Quarter to the magnificent antebellum mansions and Creole cottages and funky shotgun houses. Dine on the country's most original and divine cuisine, and then wake up to steaming *café au lait* and beignets. Visit the places where jazz was invented, where Louis Armstrong blew into his first trumpet, where countless musical genres from blues to funk to Cajun and zydeco and more have been conceived, honed, and expanded, and then choose from several spots where you can groove to that same music, every night of the year. Follow a second-line: scores of people dancing and jumping through the streets behind a lively brass band. Join the Halloween parade of New Orleanians costumed as stinky refrigerators or as houses with blue tarps on their heads and water lines across their foreheads. Stroll among the Spanish moss-draped trees in Audubon Park. Marvel at the exceptional diversity in the nation's only truly integrated city since long before the Civil War.

Feel the warmth of the smiles and hugs of the many people—friends, neighbors, total strangers—who approach you every single day with that ubiquitous question: “How'd you make out?” You'll see the pain in the eyes of those who are not coming back to live—not yet anyway; the money isn't there, they have no place to go. You'll see the joy in the eyes of those who are staying, determined to return and rebuild, because there is no place on earth even remotely like New Orleans. And we think you'll agree: Yes, it's worth it.