

An American Tragedy

How the U.S. failed the city of New Orleans in its greatest hour of need

By **NANCY GIBBS**

NEW ORLEANS LIVES BY THE WATER AND fights it, a sand castle set on a sponge nine feet below sea level, where people made music from heartache, named their drinks for hurricanes and joked that one day you'd be able to tour the city by gondola.

A city built by rumrunners and slave traders and pirates was never going to play by anyone's rules or plan for the future. So as Katrina, wicked and flirtatious, lingered in the Gulf with her eye on the town, many citizens decided they would stay, stubborn or stoic or too poor to have much choice. As for the ones packing up to go, officials told them to take a look around before leaving, because it might never be the same again.

By the time President Bush touched down in the tormented region, more than just the topography had changed. Shattered too was a hope that four years after the greatest man-made disaster in our history, we had got smarter about catastrophe. Is it really possible, after so many commissions and commitments, bureaucracies scrambled and rewired, emergency supplies stockpiled and prepositioned, that when disaster strikes, the whole newfangled system just seizes up and can't move?

It may be weeks before the lights come back on and months before New Orleans is mopped out, a year before the refugees resettle in whatever will come to function as home, even without anything precious from the days before the flood. But it may take even longer than that before the nature of this American tragedy is clear: whether the storm of 2005 is remembered mainly as the worst natural disaster in our history or as the worst response to a disaster in our history. Or both.

Watching helpless New Orleans suffering day by day left people everywhere stunned and angry and in ever greater pain. These things happened in Haiti, they said, but not here. "Baghdad under water" is how former Louisiana Senator John Breaux described his beloved city, as state officials told him they feared the death toll could reach as high as 10,000, spread across Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

No matter what the final tally, the treatment of the living, black and poor and old and sick, was a disgrace. The problem with putting it all into numbers is that they stop speaking clearly once they get too big: an estimated half a million refugees, a million people without power, 30,000 soldiers, up to \$100 billion in damage. "This is our tsunami," said Mayor A.J. Holloway of Biloxi, Mississippi.

Around the country, people watched the scene in growing horror, as babies and old people and diabetics and those worn out surviving the storm died on live television for all to see. Churches started assembling comfort kits; Red Cross volunteers prepared 500,000 hot meals a day.

The private response was all the more urgent because the public one seemed so inept. Somehow Harry Connick Jr. could get to the New Orleans Convention Center and offer help, but not the National Guard. Bush praised the "good work" on Thursday, then called the results "not acceptable" on Friday. By then, 55 nations had offered to pitch in—including Sri Lanka, whose disaster scars are still fresh.

But it was in New Orleans where the cameras converged, a city that had braced for the worst, then briefly exhaled when it looked as if the threat had passed. Several hours after the storm moved through on Monday, August 29, some streets were



essentially dry. Then shortly after midnight, a section almost as long as a football field in a main levee near the 17th Street Canal ruptured, letting Lake Pontchartrain pour in. The city itself turned into a superbowl, roadways crumbled like soup crackers as the levees designed to protect them were now holding the water in. Engineers tried dropping 3,000-pound sandbags, but the water just swallowed the bags.

The levee breach left 80% of the city immediately submerged and 100,000 people stranded. Canal Street lived up to its name. As the temperature rose, the whole city was poached in a vile stew of melted landfill, chemicals, corpses, gasoline, snakes, canal rats; many could not escape their flooded homes without help. Among those who could, only a final act of desperation would drive them into the streets, where the caramel waters stank of sewage and glittered with the gaudy swirls of oil spills. A New Orleans TV station reported that a woman waded down to Charity Hospital, floating her husband's body along on a door.

For the first time ever, a major U.S. city was simply taken offline, closed down. Food and water and power and phones were gone; authority was all but absent. Most of the people left to cope were least equipped: the ones whose Social Security checks were just about due, or those who made for the Greyhound station only to find it already closed, or those confined to bed or who used a wheelchair. "We're seeing people that we didn't know exist," declared Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) director Michael Brown in a moment of hideous accidental honesty. Rescue workers could hear people pounding on roofs from the inside, trapped in attics as the waters rose. The lucky ones were able to cut holes with knives and axes to reach the open air. Emergency workers hovered from house to house, plucking out the living, leaving bodies behind.

The seething center of the angry Crescent City was the Superdome, refuge of utterly last resort for 25,000 people who had waited out the worst of the storm while the sheet-metal roof peeled like fruit, letting the rains pour in. Soon there was no light, no

air, no working toilets. Reports came that four of the weakest died that first night. Members of the city's EMS team made their way there only to find anarchy. "We tried to start triaging and getting the special needs in one section," a technician recalls, but his team was overwhelmed by the hungry crowd and retreated with armed guards to Army trucks.

Only by Friday did some palpable help arrive, in the form of thousands of National Guard troops and lumbering convoys of supplies. Virtually alone, Lieutenant General Russel Honore, commanding Joint Task Force Katrina, seemed to be moving pieces into place. He was out in the streets with his troops, directing convoys and telling anxious Guardsmen to keep their weapons pointed down.

Americans sometimes ask what the government does and where their tax money goes. Among other things, it pays for all kinds of invisible but essential safety nets and life belts and guardrails that are useless right up until the day they are priceless. Following Katrina, furious critics charged that the government had not heard the warnings. Instead, it cut the funds for flood control and storm preparations and mangled the chain of command. An angry debate opened about how much the demands of the Iraq war, on both the budget and the National Guard, were eating into the country's ability to protect itself at home. Just one month after Katrina struck, Hurricane Rita devastated portions of Louisiana and Texas, causing an estimated \$9 billion in damage. (*Read more about Rita and hurricanes on pages 26 and 27.*) Republican Congressman Jim McCrery of Louisiana argues that Katrina and Rita have revealed how much doesn't work. "Clearly," said McCrery, "with all the money we've spent, all the focus we have put on homeland security, we are not prepared for a disaster of this proportion whether it's induced by nature or man." ■

Was Katrina the worst natural disaster in U.S. history—or the worst response to a disaster? Or both?

Questions

1. What event caused by Hurricane Katrina led to the massive flooding in New Orleans?
2. According to critics, what did Katrina reveal about decisions made by the government?