

## Synthesis

### Hurricane Katrina: The Political Storm

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the Gulf Coast Region of the United States. The storm, a Category 3 by the time it reached U.S. shores, wreaked havoc upon the coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi and unleashed pure fury on the city of New Orleans. The storm burst through the levees that once protected the city's below sea-level location between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River. More than 450,000 people called New Orleans home, but soon after Hurricane Katrina had passed, nearly 80% of the city had flooded and reports of widespread looting and violence were reported by media outlets worldwide (Bush 308). All eyes turned to the government, particularly Washington and President George W. Bush, for guidance in maintaining order, rescuing survivors, and beginning the recovery effort. Instead of the swift, heartfelt response that victims of Hurricane Katrina longed for, they were forced to suffer the severe consequences of their leaders' inability to work together across partisan lines. Politics plays an enormous role in disaster preparation, recovery, and rebuilding, but when it is put before the safety and well-being of hundreds of thousands of people, as it was during Hurricane Katrina, money is wasted, resources are poorly utilized, and lives are lost.

Four days had passed since Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, when President George W. Bush posed the question to New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, "Who's in charge of security in New Orleans?" (Bush 308). The worst disaster in recent memory had just struck the United States and the top three government officials involved in the crisis were trying to deflect the blame. Their meeting was a disheartening debate taking place in the comforts of Air Force One, high above the soggy bayou where hoards of people were struggling just to survive. In his 2010 memoir *Decision Points*, President Bush described the tense

atmosphere of the meeting where he pressed Governor Blanco to “authorize the federal government to take charge of the response,” but she insisted that she needed twenty-four hours to think it over and refused to give an answer (Bush 309). This response delayed the deployment of a much-needed National Guard presence, and begs the question of why Blanco was unwilling to act. Mayor Nagin, on the other hand, agreed with Bush regarding the federalization of recovery efforts, and he conceded that no one was in charge on the ground (Bush 309). He asserted the need for a chain of command, which could have brought stability to the city of New Orleans. Unfortunately, any progress towards establishing a chain of command had stalled.

It can be assumed that both President Bush and Governor Blanco wanted to expedite disaster relief in New Orleans, but for some reason they were unwilling to work together to make it happen. After delving into the political backgrounds of the Governor and the President, a likely cause for their struggle to reach common ground surfaced: Bush was a Republican and Blanco was a Democrat. One would hope that during times of crises, political boundaries would be mitigated, but that was not the case during Hurricane Katrina. According to documents released by Governor Blanco in December 2005, and chronicled by Spencer S. Hsu of *The Washington Post*, the governor requested “40,000 troops on August 31,” yet it took until after her meeting with the President on Air Force One (a full three days after Blanco’s initial request) for Bush to deploy a mere 7,000 troops (Hsu 2). This lack of response by the President could have led to Blanco’s apprehension towards federalizing Katrina response in New Orleans in the first place. Since Bush was unwilling to send troops without law enforcement powers until the sixth day after the storm hit, was his response simply too slow to warrant the governor’s time?

President Bush’s delayed deployment of troops is likely one of the major factors that led to Governor Blanco’s refusal to federalize the response to Hurricane Katrina. He could have sent in troops without law enforcement powers from the start, but why did he choose not to? In his memoir, he claimed “[his] instincts told [him he] needed to get federal troops into New Orleans to stop the violence and speed the recovery. But [he] was stuck with a resistant governor, a reluctant Pentagon, and an antiquated law” (Bush 321). This law was the Posse Comitatus Act, which prevents the Federal Government from

deploying federal troops equipped with full law enforcement powers unless a state of insurrection was declared. It appears that he was aware that invoking a state of insurrection in New Orleans would be political suicide, but he claimed that his only move was to persuade the governor to change her mind (Bush 321). Bush's closest staff wasted no time in doing so. Terry Ryder, Governor Blanco's executive counsel, claimed that White House senior adviser Karl Rove wanted Blanco to "explore legal options to impose martial law 'or as close as we can get'" (Hsu 1). Another White House aide called this the beginning of a "legal, political, and personal campaign by White House staff" to coerce Blanco into yielding control of Louisiana to the National Guard (Hsu 1). Blanco's people seemed to feel as if the White House was trying to force the Governor's hand so that the President would look decisive and reestablish credibility with the American people. Louisiana's Republican Senator David Vitter disagreed, but acknowledged that Rove's martial law assertions may have fueled the political battle between Blanco and Bush. Perhaps if the President had sent some troops when Governor Blanco first requested them, tensions would have simmered down and the two leaders might have worked together to help the people of New Orleans.

Regardless of how and when troops were sent to New Orleans, some questions linger from before and after the storm hit. President Bush had implored Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin to issue a mandatory evacuation order, but they neglected to get it done early enough and orderly enough to give all 120,000 people without cars an adequate chance of evacuating before Katrina made landfall (Klein 516). Was this the fault of the state government or the federal government? According to Naomi Klein in her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, many of the shortcomings leading up to Katrina can be directly attributed to the State of Louisiana, such as the "underfunded public transit system" or the levees that were left unrepaired (516). The city of New Orleans even passed out DVDs explaining that in the event of a hurricane, citizens should evacuate (Klein 516). While the state government is undoubtedly at fault, the federal government is not off the hook. In the summer of 2004, "the State of Louisiana put in a request to FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) for funds to develop an in-depth contingency plan for a powerful hurricane" (Klein 516). This request was denied, yet just a few months later FEMA awarded

a contract for remarkably similar work to a private company (Klein 517). FEMA ran out of money to do a follow-up after the contractor's report was filed, so by the time Hurricane Katrina made landfall, none of this report's recommendations had been implemented (Klein 517).

It is likely that if New Orleans was allowed to develop their own contingency plan, as they requested, it would have been implemented in time to be effective during Hurricane Katrina. Regardless, President Bush still believed that FEMA was up to the task and "could handle anything" (Bush 312). Katrina quickly disproved this theory.

A few weeks after the storm hit, the immediate response had gotten underway and the water began to recede, but a new challenge lay ahead for the city of New Orleans: the rebuilding effort. Buildings, schools, homes, and levees were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, and the city could use as much help as it could get. Unfortunately, the same politics that plagued the disaster preparation effort and the immediate response to it played a major role in the rebuilding effort as well. Much of this effort was privatized by the government, and, as Naomi Klein put it, "no opportunity for profit was left untapped" (520). The merit of privatization is often debated, but as long as the job is done correctly for a fair price, it likely does not make a difference whether the work is privatized or not. Problems only arise when jobs are awarded for political means and the costs are out of control, which is exactly what occurred post-Hurricane Katrina.

One of President Bush's largest campaign donors, Service Corporation International's Kenyon division, was hired shortly after the storm hit to retrieve corpses from homes and streets (Klein 520). Even though Kenyon's work was excruciatingly slow and cost roughly \$12,500 per body, emergency workers and volunteers were forbidden to help because this would infringe upon Kenyon's jurisdiction (Klein 520). In addition to Kenyon, various other companies with ties to the White House were contracted to join the rebuilding effort, such as Blackwater and Halliburton (Klein 519). How were these companies awarded such lucrative contracts without opposition? Just days after the storm hit, the entire area affected by Hurricane Katrina was designated by President Bush as an "economic competitiveness zone" which did not require open bidding on contracts (Klein 518-519). The President also secured \$126 billion designated as rebuilding funds and created a position to ensure that "the money

was spent wisely” (Bush 328). Naomi Klein would argue that this job failed, as congressional investigators found “significant overcharges, wasteful spending, or mismanagement” on contracts valued at \$8.75 billion (Klein 519). Regardless, the fact that any of these outside companies were hired is in direct contrast to President Bush’s promise to the American people just eighteen days after the hurricane struck, where he spoke about “the return of businesses and the hiring of local workers” in New Orleans (Bush 327).

The issue of politics during natural disasters raises many other interesting questions. If the President was so serious about bringing back commerce and jobs, why did he outsource the recovery efforts to major contractors instead of putting the newly homeless and jobless people of New Orleans back to work? Why was FEMA unwilling to fund the disaster preparedness plan proposed by New Orleans, but spent considerably more on a private plan that never was implemented? Why did the evacuation order take so long to come down, and more importantly, why didn’t the government provide citizens with the means to evacuate? Why did the Bush Administration waste so much time and energy trying to convince Governor Blanco to sign off on federalizing the response to Katrina rather than working with her to get the job done? Why was a chain of command not in place before the storm hit? As a result of the partisan divide that plagues today’s political culture, it is clear that when politics is put in the way of doing what is necessary during times of crisis, money is wasted, resources are poorly utilized, and lives are lost.

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