

All Coherence Gone: New Orleans as a Resilience Failure

Prof. Ron Westrum

Department of Sociology, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI 48108 USA
ronwestrum@aol.com

Multiple failures were involved in the response to Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding of New Orleans, Louisiana (and the surrounding Gulf coast). The flooding of the city of New Orleans in August and September 2005 was one of the great catastrophes that an American city has suffered in the last Century. A city renowned for its traditions, its creative culture, and its tourist attractions, New Orleans seemed a resilient American icon. Yet in only a few days of flooding following hurricane Katrina, the city of 450,000 people virtually fell apart. Governance, law enforcement, medical care, utilities, communications, all failed. The list of failures is long. And the city still has a long road to recovery.

The damages are immense. Much of the famous city has been destroyed. 1,500 people are dead, tens of thousands have lost their homes, billions of dollars of infrastructure has been lost. A million people descended on other communities, often overloading the local systems. Many of these people are permanently displaced. Reconstruction will take years.

Why was the city so unprepared, since the dangers were well known? Both scientific studies and simulation exercises (such as "Hurricane Pam") had shown these dangers.¹ Why was the information not translated into action? How did the failures of resilience originate, and what lessons can we learn from them? As we will see, there are many lessons that can be learned from this tragedy. I would see three principal ones:

- 1) Remove the latent pathogens while there is still time. When disaster hits, it will be too late.
- 2) Do not trust in a centralized bureaucracy. If the right people are not at the controls, it will not only fail to do its job but hamper others in their efforts.
- 3) Enable smaller groups and organizations to contribute. These include small foundations, faith-based organizations, and impromptu efforts by public-spirited citizens. While co-ordinating these efforts is desirable, co-ordination should not prevent these efforts from assisting.

LATENT PATHOGENS

Professor James Reason of the University of Manchester suggested that catastrophes often include unfixable problems that aggravate disaster and impede response. He called them “latent pathogens.” Many such pathogens were involved in the Katrina disaster.

I. Physical

The physical deficiencies of the New Orleans neighbourhood were well known previous to the catastrophe. Most of the city of New Orleans is built in a basin. In the event of a storm surge, a breach of the levees (dykes) from nearby Lake Ponchartrain to the north would fill this basin. Although the city had excellent pumps, they would be useless unless the breaches could be repaired. The levees had been badly constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers. Since the safety of the city absolutely depended on the integrity of these dykes—just as the Netherlands depends on its dykes---one would expect keen attention to them. Such attention was however long delayed. In the event, there were four breaches in the levees. These led to flooding of most of the city and contributed to flooding of much of the surrounding neighbourhood.

What was not so evident previous to the flood is that many of the key resilience facilities would also be damaged or submerged, and thus put out of order. These included most police facilities, (such as the armoury and the morgue), the National Guard barracks (whose rescue boats were also submerged), hospitals, power and communication centers. This meant that the city would not only lose power, but also much of its landline communications. (mobile communications, such as cellphones, had been lost when the hurricane knocked down the cellphone transmission towers). Power for the hospitals would become a major problem, leading to patient deaths. Getting around in the submerged city would require boats. All of these problems were inter-related, and so, when the electricity failed, so did most of the city’s ability to respond. Police radio mostly did not work. These failures also affected the city’s ability to communicate with the outside, such as with Washington and with other private and public groups that were trying to help the city. At one point, Acadian Ambulance, a large private firm, had the only working long-range communications system in the area, since it was based on satellite relays instead of towers.²

All of these constituted pre-existing problems, some known to all, some unknown. But the city, and in some cases the state of Louisiana, failed to address these issues. This laissez-faire attitude reflects a deep cultural habit for Louisiana and especially for the city known as “the Big Easy.” These failures to take action would cost many lives, and enormous misery and pain. Collectively they made the damage worse and longer lasting.

II. Personnel Failures

Having the right people at the controls is critical in an emergency. The central figure in the debacle was America’s President, George W. Bush. Bush failed to provide early leadership in the crisis. He was on vacation in Texas at the time Katrina hit Louisiana, and paid little attention to it at first. Only after aides put together a videotape for him on the crisis did he decide to act. His airplane, Air Force One, flew over New Orleans on

August 29, two days after the hurricane had hit the city. He looked down on the city, but continued on to Washington without stopping. Bush had an excellent opportunity to exercise leadership, by compelling action from the reluctant bureaucrats of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. He let the chance slip by. Even further, however, the two top federal officials involved had both been appointed by President Bush, who must bear some responsibility for their ineptitude.

Michael Chertoff, head of Homeland Security, was the single most important link that failed in the chain of command. Even though he kept his job after the crisis, many feel that he lost touch with events early on, and never caught up. He was responsible for not ordering the head of FEMA, Michael Brown, to get into action. Without the order to act, Brown was unable to commence operations. Brown, in turn, seldom made effective moves even when he had the power to do so, seeming to be more obsessed with his image in the media than his organization's effectiveness. Brown, was a person of few qualifications for the job, and was ultimately fired for incompetence. (Why this did not happen to Chertoff I do not know) As far as I can determine, his appointment was made entirely for political reasons. He was a friend of the previous FEMA director, who also possessed few qualifications, and was hired largely through political ties.

At the state level, Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco provided only ambiguous leadership. Although more capable than she appeared, she was not a good media manager. She did not convey command of the situation, and in some respects did not understand what she needed to do, to get the supplies and support she needed from the federal level. Even when supplies did become available, they were not used because of authority disputes or breakdowns in communication. The governor was also undercut because of politics. The President and the governor could not agree on who should be in charge (e.g. of the National Guard) so a stalemate resulted. One thing that Blanco did do, however, was to make sure that the 200 boats of the Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries were saved from the storm. This would save many lives.

In New Orleans itself the most striking single figure in the crisis was Ray Nagin, the mayor of New Orleans. Nagin committed a major failure when, before the hurricane hit the city, he failed to order a timely evacuation. Nagin was also far from the street level during the first days of the ensuing crisis. When the emergency generators ran out of fuel at City Hall, Nagin and fourteen of his top staff sequestered themselves in the nearby Hyatt hotel. When the communications at the Hyatt proved inadequate, the mayor and the police chief, Eddie Compass, raided a nearby Office Depot and got communications equipment—including a server ripped off the wall. When vandals threatened the Hyatt, the team retreated to the 27th floor and ran events from there. While people outside were struggling and dying, Mr. Nagin was high above most of the action in the hotel tower. The mayor was popular (and would be re-elected after the events) but showed little ability to lead a city in crisis. The city actually lost the keys to the buses that would have taken many of the poorer citizens away from New Orleans. When, after the crisis, relief funds became available, Ray Nagin still did not seem to know what to do with them.³

The Chief of the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD), Edwin P. Compass, also showed poor judgement in holing up with the mayor in the Hyatt, with his pregnant

wife (flown out on Tuesday), instead of being out on the street. (Some people speculated that he was out of town for two days) The NOPD faced an extremely demoralizing situation, and needed leadership they could see. Some deputy chiefs did exert control in their sectors, but typically police communications were short-range or non-existent. In the crisis, about 15% of the 1,600 person force deserted or were absent without leave.⁴ This included about 25 officers who quit while working at the Superdome or the Convention Center, both points of intense stress. At the Convention Center, pitched battles between law enforcement and criminals took place. Two officers committed suicide. Those who did stay faced tough situations

III. Failures in organization.

There were failures at all levels. The most serious were the failures of the federal government in response to predictive, early, and continuing signals of disaster. Ironically, many of the federal organizations that failed had been shaped by 9/11.

On many different levels the organizations tasked with emergency response in New Orleans were simply not ready. For instance, the police had issued an elaborate response plan for hurricanes in 2004, but there had been no NOPD-wide simulation or training exercise. It would appear that most commanders simply put the book on the shelf. Few officers spoken to by writer Dan Baum had even heard of it.⁵ The "Hurricane Pam" exercise run by FEMA in July 2004 had produced apparently useful results, and had involved officials from many of the parishes hit by the storm. But if the exercise changed anything in Louisiana, it is not apparent. Work had begun on an emergency command center, but it was not complete. In many other ways FEMA and its local counterparts were unready to respond to a catastrophe.

The New Orleans Police Department had long been known for its corruption, cronyism, and inefficiency. Although there had been periodic reforms, it had severe problems. When the storm hit, and flooding started many officers became demoralized. Many officers, required to live in New Orleans, lost their homes to the storm, and had to see that their families were moved out of the city on days when they were required to patrol the streets. Not surprisingly, many decided to take care of their families before they resumed patrol.

The breakdown of law enforcement was also due in part to the failure of police communications. While mayor Nagin and his staff were up in the Hyatt, police headquarters was underwater. The Vice and Narcotics Squads set up their operations in the parking lot of Harrah's Casino, which was in the unflooded French quarter. Daily operations in the city often took place in water that was close to waist-high, with extremely long hours, threats from looters, and very inadequate supervision and support. Mayor Nagin had told the NOPD to commandeer whatever they needed, and some police officers quickly decided to confiscate Cadillacs to carry out their duties. One-quarter of all police vehicles had been destroyed as soon as the levees were breached. Police disorganization and actual desertion by police officers would destroy public morale. Then many public officials exaggerated the failures on television, adding to the level of panic and to the breakdown of law and order.

There was one police official, however, who was superb at the rescue mission, Captain Tim Bayard of Vice and Narcotics. Joining the various citizen's efforts (see below), Bayard became an expert at launching rescue boats. After setting up his headquarters at Harrah's, Bayard got his troops to pitch in. "We were launching boats off I-10, off up ramps and down rescue ramps," he said. "We launched them off of bridges. We couldn't get to Claiborne—there was too much water—so we launched off of the St. Claude Bridge."⁶ There were, furthermore, many heroic officers who reported for duty even as their homes were being destroyed by the flood and their families were endangered. One heavyside female officer who could not swim, huddled on her daughter's desk all night, finally floated out of her home on a door, and then reported for duty.⁷

Criminal activities slowed down local response. Looting, murder, rapes, and robbery interfered with rescue operations and discouraged many citizens. Media coverage of the most gruesome aspects contributed to public terror. It seemed as if no one was in control. In a very real sense this was true. The police alone could not maintain public order, and only the arrival of outside troops allowed them to do so.

BUREAUCRACY FAILS

Before the storm hit, New Orleans managed to evacuate 80% of its population. Most of the 20% left behind, nearly 100,000 people, still remained to be rescued and gotten out of the city. This job was largely bungled by the major bureaucracy whose job it was to do it.

The overwhelming lesson to be learned from the Katrina failures is that centralizing decision-making only works when the people at the controls are competent. In the Katrina disaster, this competence was often absent. Although some federal organizations worked well (see below), the key organizational chain involved in providing relief was faulty. The Federal Emergency Management Agency failed to provide timely relief to the city, and actually interfered with many useful relief efforts. It is not an exaggeration to say that the incompetence of this organization resulted in many deaths. FEMA often stopped or diverted key assets away from the emergency, as those from outside tried to help, but were literally stopped in their tracks. In one incident, two trucks carrying thousands of bottles of water, were stopped ten miles from their destination because they didn't have a "tasker number."⁸ This incident is only one of dozens that frustrated responders to the crisis and infuriated those who needed the supplies. According to Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, "When the state of Arkansas repeatedly offered to send buses and planes to evacuate people displaced by flooding, they were told they could not go. I don't know why."

The most striking incident was FEMA's turning back the USS Bataan, a 844-foot ship, as it was sending supplies up the river to New Orleans. The Bataan, an amphibious assault ship used by the Marine Corps had helicopters, water supplies, six operating rooms and beds for six hundred patients. It had just dispatched a 135-foot landing craft (LCU-1656) up the Mississippi River toward New Orleans, the deck stacked with food and water. The landing craft was 40 miles from New Orleans when it was ordered to return, while the Bataan steamed instead toward the waters off Biloxi, Mississippi.

“It was a disappointment,” [Bill] Fish said, “I figured we would be a big help in New Orleans. We’ve got electricity, and the police could have charged up their radios. We’ve got water, toilets. We’ve got food.”⁹

One can speculate that FEMA was trying to get itself organized before allowing others to act. This fatal indecision had many serious consequences. Other states that were about to send response teams to Louisiana were told to wait until FEMA had figured out what to do with them. In some cases food, water, and medical supplies already on the road were held up while FEMA dithered. The most critical resource, buses to convey people to safety, did not become available in quantity until Thursday, when the Superdome and the Convention Center would finally be emptied.

The improvisation that led to using the Superdome and then the Morial Convention Center in New Orleans as holding tanks for refugees produced horrific scenes. Intended as a short-term disaster relief solution, the Superdome broke down under stress, and overflow to the Convention Center produced an even worse situation there. At one point the Superdome held 24,000 people, its electricity had failed, and temperature rose to 100 degrees. The smell of human waste and stench was overpowering. Ninety police officers were detailed to provide order, but they were barely enough. (They eventually received a 100-soldier reinforcement from the National Guard, just in the nick of time) The Convention Center was even worse. While the Superdome had been designated as a refuge for emergency use, the Convention Center was not intended as an emergency refuge, and those sent there after the Superdome became full were not searched for weapons. The result was that many criminals brought their guns. Several times Special Weapons and Tactics Teams had to “re-take” the Convention Center from criminal gangs.

“Captain Winn said that armed groups of 15 to 25 men terrorized the others, stealing cash and jewelry. He said that policemen patrolling the center had told him that a number of women had been dragged off by groups of armed men and gang-raped—and that murders were occurring.”¹⁰

In the end, 10 people died at the Superdome and another 24 at the Convention Center. Several babies died of dehydration. But many more in the city died before they could be rescued, typically by drowning, dehydration, and heatstroke. Many patients could not be sustained in hospitals, or had to be left behind.

SOME BUREAUCRACIES WORKED

The United States Coast Guard performed superbly. They had the boats and equipment to rescue people, and they did. They had also planned for the catastrophe by getting key assets ready to be used.¹¹ They were proactive, and above all they did not wait for orders to advance. They went and did the job.

“The Coast Guard was successful because Capt. Paskewich had gotten our assets out of New Orleans before the storm, we situated ourselves in Alexandria, and we threw away the playbook. We took all comers and didn’t wait for Type II Incident Management Teams. We winged it. We entered the game and stayed in the game until our job was done. Too much bureaucracy can be a big, big problem in a catastrophe.”¹²

The Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries also did an excellent job of rescuing those left behind. Under direct orders from the Governor, Wildlife and Fisheries before the storm removed 200 boats out of the way, so that unlike many of the National Guard boats, they were not submerged. When the levees breached, the LDWF boats got going early and rescued many people.¹³

LOCAL INITIATIVES

One of the strongest lessons to be learned was the viability of the response of small organizations and local initiatives. Not only did many small organizations respond effectively, but some were even created in the face of the disaster. For instance, several local groups formed their own boat rescue teams. A collection of individuals later dubbed “the NOLA Homeboys” rescued hundreds of individuals before FEMA even entered the scene. One person, Michael Knight, sometimes assisted by his wife Deonne, personally rescued some 250 people, using a Searay boat that would carry 20 people. Knight was a reggae singer who lived payday to payday, but rose above his status to save hundreds of lives.¹⁴

A lawyer in Lake Charles, Sara Roberts, inspired by a call from the governor’s office, called a local contractor who built chemical plants, to get some boats and personnel together to form a rescue team. Thus was born the “Cajun Navy,” with 18 boats and 35 people. The contractor personally financed the boats and used his employees as rescue team. They got directions from Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries and the NOPD and began rescuing people.¹⁵

Large numbers of local non-profit organizations sheltered those evacuated, along with the efforts of churches and other faith-based organizations. While the Red Cross received most of the money, nearly as many people were sheltered through the work of the faith-based organizations, though it took them four times as many shelters to do it.¹⁶ Furthermore local charities and foundations provided much unsung and often uncompensated relief. FEMA’s rules specifically excluded many of the churches that provided relief.

COMPARISON WITH 1906 SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE

The response to the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906 bears comparison with the events of Katrina. On April 18, 1906 an earthquake struck San Francisco, leading to a firestorm that burned down much of the city. In that event, with a comparable number of dead and homeless, the local and federal forces behaved superbly. Troops were on the streets within hours after the earthquake, ordered there by General Frederick Funston, acting head of the local military base. The mayor ordered looters shot, and notices to that effect were placed around the city. Troops were issued 20 rounds of ball ammunition to carry out this order. The Navy and the Revenue Cutter Service ran fire boats and relief ferries. The first relief train was sent from Los Angeles and arrived in Berkeley at 11 PM that same evening.

“By 4:00 am on April 19, William Taft, President Theodore Roosevelt’s Secretary of War, had ordered rescue trains to begin pounding toward the Rockies. One of them, assembled in Virginia, was the longest hospital train ever assembled.”¹⁷

Help poured into California as the Army dynamited buildings and put out the fires. Congress met immediately and voted emergency funds. The city began to rebuild.

Ninety-nine years later, it would seem that few of the lessons that might have been learned were embodied in organizations responsible for saving New Orleans. In the age of the jet plane, the computer, and the cell phone, the response was notably less effective. San Francisco was secured because General Funston and the mayor did not wait for orders, but did the right thing as they saw it. This kind of leadership was in scarce supply in New Orleans in 2005.

CONCLUSION

The organizations that were supposed to protect New Orleans largely failed. These failures occurred on all levels, and were aggravated by serious, pre-existing latent pathogens. If the spontaneous and self-organizing local responses had not taken place, the devastation would have been far worse.

The overwhelming lesson of this case study is that bureaucratic organizations, by centralizing decisions, rest the fate of communities in a few hands. Where the leadership is competent and active, large disasters can be brought under control. When leadership is not competent, however, large bureaucracies can impede rescue and relief.

There were, however, some bright spots. The U.S. Coast Guard response to disaster was a model of effective action. The leadership shown by the Coast Guard was in striking contrast to the other federal failures. This suggests that centralization works only when its leaders are competent. In the case of FEMA's response, they clearly were not. The Coast Guard had competent leaders. The personnel of the Wildlife and Fisheries similarly did a workmanlike job. Some of the NOPD's deputy chiefs did an excellent job of getting their officers into action, in spite of many police desertions and some criminal activity. Although he has not been mentioned, so did army Lt. General Russel Honore, who received general respect once the Airborne troops arrived.

However, the surprising and effective local initiatives---such as the NOLA Homeboys and the Cajun Navy were entirely left out of the planning, as were hundreds of smaller initiatives. Many private citizens and citizens' group outperformed the federal efforts in the early hours and days of the crisis. These small local efforts deserve consideration and far better support.

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