

Hurricane Katrina: Racial and Classist Motivations of Federal Disaster Relief

Jessica Lopez

Burkburnett High School, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the events of Hurricane Katrina's impact on New Orleans and the lack of response from the government. New Orleans is well known for having a large Black population and having some of the highest poverty rates in the US. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's response to the disaster has been widely regarded as slow and incompetent, and there is reasoning to infer that New Orleans' racial and class makeup might be why. Poll responses and statements by African Americans were used to support the claim that the lack of response to Hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans area was potentially racially motivated. This paper aims to provide another perspective to motives and issues in American federal disaster response.

Introduction

Much generations' knowledge of Hurricane Katrina is limited to the large numbers and statistics of victims, news stories of bodies plucked from trees, high floodwaters, and reports of evacuations. Especially to those who have not lived it, it was merely a storm; however, this storm has revealed deadly incompetency and indifference to poor, Black American lives in the federal government. America continues to live the trauma of this disaster today. Under the surface, Hurricane Katrina is more than a natural disaster and arguably one of the biggest human rights crises of the United States.

Overview

On August 23, 2005, a category 1 tropical storm began in the Bahamas, east of Florida. Four days later, its title changed to a category 3 hurricane; two more days later, it was now labeled as category 5, the highest category of the Saffir-Simpson scale based on wind speeds, indicating catastrophic damage (Britannica Editors). Leading to its category 3 title, its winds had grown to a seemingly high rate of seventy mph, but as it strengthened exponentially, it would reach further devastating highs of over 150 mph (Britannica Editors). In time, it reached landfall in Florida and tore through Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana, and the once vibrant city of New Orleans bore the brunt of the damage. By August 30, two days following Mayor Ray Nagin's evacuation order, 80 percent of the city was underwater; the levee system had failed, and tens of thousands refused to leave (Britannica Editors). It is now, at over 100 billion USD, the costliest storm in America's history. This disaster became named Hurricane Katrina, the famous hurricane that plowed through the Gulf Coast in 2005, but it has also become widely seen as a social disaster due to lack of federal response. Supplies were stretched severely while lives were in danger, and major federal response was not made until days after landfall. 25,000 evacuees were stranded on the Superdome for days in heat and humidity (US Senate 37), many suffering skin infections and diarrhea due to the high amount of sewage, chemicals, oil, and E. Coli bacteria mixed to create a "witch's potion" of floodwater (Miller 64-65).

Failure to manage Hurricane Katrina

Thousands of Americans and animals were failed under the federal government and FEMA's failure to manage disaster relief consequential to the Bush Administration's decision to prioritize terrorism over natural disasters; the Bush Administration's priorities can be highlighted when comparing the \$2 billion grant given to local governments for terrorism versus the \$180 million given for disaster funding (Manjoo); this is a 166.97 percent difference.

Attention was not placed on preparation and training for natural disasters, and the price was paid in lost lives and nationwide criticism. "[W]hen Bush declared a state of emergency in Louisiana on the Saturday before Katrina struck the Gulf, he made a promise to residents that he would respond ... People died because they didn't deliver on their promise," former FEMA official George Haddow says (qtd. in Manjoo). After the storm, Bush's approval rating dropped to 38 percent, and Congress hearings were scheduled (Miller 51). Government response became criticized heavily for its slow response time and lack of preparedness; many would agree it was, overall, a failure of leadership.

Federal officials had known of a potential hurricane of Katrina's caliber for years; although it was predicted to leave over 100 thousand residents stranded and deprive resources heavily, no measures were taken (US Senate 366). Transportation, supplies, and communication became limited due to a lack of preparation. In fact, many emergency personnel had to use runners as their only means of communicating with victims (US Senate). Still, multiple offers of help were declined. Stories of FEMA and the House of Representatives' Department of Homeland Security refusing offers of over 300 staff from Chicago's police, fire, public health, and sanitation departments in exchange for one truck, preventing Red Cross from entering New Orleans with food, and declining the help of 500 Florida air boaters surfaced, proving serious incompetency (Manjoo). Poor, Black citizens, the majority of New Orleans, had been failed; Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, but above all, it was a social disaster that reinforced indifference towards Black lives (Kilpatrick). In a 2005 ABC News/Washington Post poll, 71 percent of African Americans agreed that New Orleans "would have received better flood protection and emergency preparedness resources if it had been a wealthier city with more whites," and 63 percent believed "problems with the hurricane relief effort are indication of racial inequality in this country" (Disaster Preparedness). Media coverage also portrayed these Black victims negatively. Once federal aid entered New Orleans, their first focus was charging at Black victims and labeling them as thugs, looters, and criminals (Miller 42), and the media was found to be faking reports against them for rape and murder in their time of crisis (Moody).

Black Victims Speak Out

The poor, Black victims of New Orleans are still struggling emotionally and financially. Many African Americans have begun to speak on their views of the government and FEMA's reasons for allowing the hurricane victims stranded without food for days, as well as deliberately blocking rescue efforts. Even Ray Nagin, the mayor of New Orleans during its time of disaster, has argued "I, to this day, believe that if that would have happened in Orange County, California, if that would have happened in South Beach, Miami, it would have been a different response," to the National Association of Black Journalists (qtd. in Kilpatrick). Victims also underwent serious physical and mental distress, many still recovering from them to this day. They lost support groups, family, pets, homes, important documents, and education. In a study conducted by UCLA on psychosocial impacts of Hurricane Katrina, the average amount of traumatic experiences among participants was 5.2 (Weems et. al 5). The study shows "the residents of the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina were subjected to a large number of traumatic events and experienced a number of psychological symptoms in the relatively immediate aftermath of the hurricane" (Weems et. al 8).

Conclusion

Hurricane Katrina was ultimately both a natural disaster and human rights crisis that hit poor and Black Americans hard. The federal government failed to protect its people properly and lives were lost as a result. This disaster continues to open questions about the safety of Black lives in the hands of the government in America. These issues should be discussed, and African American voices and experiences should be amplified to ensure the safety of all American citizens.

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