Can The United States Survive This Catastrophe?

So the narrative has settled down to the following:

President Bush and his friends **need slaves** in order to remain rich. The **slaves** are the unemployed [sic], the poor, illegal immigrants, and black people. President Bush and his friends have herded these people into environmentally vulnerable areas like New Orleans because they would rather they died. Then they caused hurricanes by **not adopting the Kyoto Protocol**. They also prevented the city and state governments from evacuating the unemployed, poor, and non-whites from New Orleans as the hurricane approached, and later prevented the survivors from being rescued, in part by **sending the National Guard overseas to an immoral and illegal war**, which itself is being fought in order to enrich President Bush and his friends. When they were finally sent in, it was to **murder** the black people. No wait, actually the war is being fought at the behest of Israel via a **Jewish cabal** who **seized power** through an illegal election and other sinister machinations, but don't get us started on that.

That a substantial constituency in the United States and throughout the world embraces or sympathises with this idiotic conspiracy-theoretic fantasy is a global catastrophe. We hope that the United States, and the world, can survive it.

Sun, 09/04/2005 - 14:28 | **digg** | **del.icio.us** | **permalink**

Catastrophe

As you know, the United States will certainly survive this catastrophe and we will be stronger as we learn to handle situations like this more effectively in the future. What else can we do?

The story that is not being told, however, except on Fox news, is interesting.

Many survivors of the hurricane could not be evacuated into hundreds of waiting boats that arrived immediately after the storm to help with evacuation efforts. Thousands of fellow Americans, wishing to risk their own lives to help the victims just as the storm ended, had their boats indefinitely detained outside the disaster area, because it was not deemed safe to be in open water around

the city. The boats could not enter the ports because (get

this)snipers were shooting at the passing rescue vessels in the harbors! "Citizens" of New Orleans stole a generator from a hospital, and the hospital, too, was taking incomming sniper fire. Helicopters that tried to evacuate citizens from rooftops were attacked from citizens on the ground. It was not safe for days for buses to enter parts of the city to evacuate refugees in need, not because of high water, but because of carjackings!

Obviously the vast majority of the citizens of New Orleans were brave and decent, even as they suffered horribly. But I can't imagine that if a tragedy of similar scope had happened in South Dakota or North Carolina, that rescue workers and fellow citizens would have been attacked with such zeal.

One of the lessons that does need to be learned is that in certain areas of the United States, when disaster strikes, the military and national guard need to be called in first to secure the area. And aid agencies, no matter how well intentioned or needed, must wait until the areas are secured. As it happened, the aid agencies arrived first but had to wait days, because no one imagined that such thuggery and lawlessness would break out in America after a tragedy, when Americans usually band together in times of crisis.

But the fact of the matter is that in cities like New Orleans, different sorts of disaster plans need to be in place. The national guard and military should be called in first, even if this too would lead to criticism.

"You're treating us like criminals, not victims," would be heard.

Only after an area is secured can aid agencies legitimately do their jobs. At this time it is no ones fault because we did not know, but next time we should hold our government responsible. There was insufficient law enforcement, because no one imagined that certain Americans would behave so horribly during a tragedy.

Unfortunately, it is not only in the Middle East that people shoot at those trying to rescue them. It pains me greatly to say that tribalism is alive and well in (a few areas of) the United States, as well.

by a reader on Sun, 09/04/2005 - 16:16 | **reply**

Re: Catastrophe

Indeed. But is it tribalism? Is it not the conspiracy-theoretic world view that made people contemptuous of cooperation and provided the sanction for their trying to kill and hurt and blame their way out of a problem instead? It is the prevalence of this world view, not the hurricane, that is the catastrophe we were referring to.

by **Editor** on Sun, 09/04/2005 - 17:51 | **reply**

Problems

It's hard to know for sure, but I suspect that only a very small

percentage of the american people actually believe anything close to the theories you describe. A larger percentage like to spew stupid things to signal to their cohorts that they are bona fide members of their groups.

I see no evidence that those who were shooting at rescuers were motivated by anthing like these theories. What was motivating them is, indeed, a problem. But, I suspect it's a different one.

But, we shouldn't forget that governments failed spectacularly in their fundamental responsibilities of maintaining law and order and facilitating people helping each other. Not through malice; but through incompetence, stupidity, corruption, institutional bickering and rigidity.

Giving these people more resources, responsibility, and power would be a terrible failure to learn from this tragedy.

Gil

Incompetence

Instead of overanalyzing conspiracy theory and the city of New Orleans, why not forthrightly call it incompetence, confusion, and short sightedness and leave it at that. There's plenty of that to go around at all levels from the individual citizen on up but get on with it, stop carping, clean it up, and straighten out the disaster waiting to happen so it doesn't happen in the same way again. The United States doesn't need defenders so much as workers who pitch in and Americans fortunately have that trait in abundance no matter where they come from. Pitch in or move on.

What Incompetence?

Does anyone know how to run a better law enforcement agency or disaster recovery agency than the ones that exist? If so, why don't they? Show me the cases of people being stopped.

OK I know if you want to form a private police force the laws will get in your way, and this does restrict the growth of certain knowledge. But there are two points to keep in mind: A) That knowledge you want, in fact, does not presently exist B) No other country is more competent

Further, no one has suggested simple, reasonable, *attainable* improvements on our current government *and* persuaded a significant amount of people they aren't terrible ideas. Why is that, if our government is so incompetent?

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/

Competence

Elliot, you make a blanket statement that no other country is more competent. What makes you so sure of that? That certainly is a claim that should not be accepted without good reasons.

-- Mikko Särelä

other countries

Well, all I really need is this weaker statement: I haven't seen someone even *claim* another government is more competent, let alone make a serious argument that one is. It just seems to be: big disaster implies big failure. That doesn't follow.

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/

USA

Besides, if someone said "Look here, if only the US was more like France, then it would have responded to the disaster far better. the French have an age-old tradition of charity and rescue. however, the arrogant Americans rejected it because they prefer dead civilians to adopting anything more from the French than French Fries" I would be right to laugh without bothering to look anything up.

I can imagine a few countries where I wouldn't outright *laugh*. But c'mon, the burden of *a little evidence* is on the people criticising the most successful country ever.

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/

Re: Problems

Perhaps it is true that few Americans believe such theories while many feel it necessary to claim to believe them in order to signal membership of their groups. If so, it implies that many groups require lip service to be paid to such theories, which is surely worrying in itself.

Be that as it may, **Condoleezza Rice** has found it necessary to publicly deny one of those theories:

> "I don't believe for a minute anybody allowed people to suffer because they are African-Americans. I just don't
>
> believe it for a minute"

Competence

Elliot, the people in charge of the rescue operations were hired to do that job. I can point out as a customer that a certain corporation has failed in delivering something it's customers needed/wanted even if I don't know how to make the better thing. In the market, you can often tell that they failed by them taking a fall.

With government thing, you don't have that creative destruction showing that the organization failed.

I, nor anyone else, do not have to be an expert, or have practical experience in the subject to be able to critisize what was done. Nor is the question of the government rescue being competent/incompetent a question of whether there's anybody out there who would have done a better job - but a question of whether objectively with the resources they have been given, could they reasonably have done a better job.

To start with some criticism: Why did they not evacuate hospitals before the storm hit? The likelihood of a disaster was high enough to have warranted such actions. Nor did they evacuate prisons, or probably many other places where people could not have moved out on their own. (Sorry for not providing links, I've mostly read Finnish newspapers and don't have time to dig English references - believe me if you like, or don't, or dig up the references, your choice).

Another thing: Why did they not know that the land had went down at some points in the city at least a meter, in some places more (this affected the flood walls' capability to operate)? Such a thing just would not happen in Finland and it isn't that costly to do.

How come there were no police within the congress center keeping peace? Nobody was there to prevent violent gangs from taking over - a simple thing that could have changed many peoples lives.

Now, if your criticism is directed toward those who just want to bash America, I have no problem. But to claim that the crisis operation went well that it did not fail or that incompetence was no part of it failing, you are reaching too far. You are making claims far bigger than your shoes.

The problem the rescue organization were trying to solve was huge, of catastrophic magnitude. In order to learn, one must look at what was done see the successes where they were and the failures where they were. The purpose of this is not bashing people, but learning. As the likelihood of another great storm appearing in the same area within a month was 42% last I checked - the people doing these things really need to learn to do better. A lot better.

I did not provide references to my claims of incidents happened, because I've mostly read them from Finnish newspapers myself and can't be bothered to search for similar stories in English. I have

better things to do, such as doing research on crisis management and communication systems for medical emergency recovery. Doing that, as it will be part of my Ph.D. and hopefully something I will be working on in San Diego next year, is a little bit more important to me at the moment than looking for the references in this case.

I would like to finish this by saying that the task of managing such a widespread disaster and emergency is hard. It is a lot harder than most people estimate - most people have no idea how many things we take for granted that really are not there when you get into a disaster zone. Or for that matter how hard it is to coordinate groups of people from different organizations with different equipment and communications devices. And to do all this in an extremely hostile environment.

Re: Competence

Mikko,

You want to ask questions like, *Why did they not evacuate hospitals before the storm hit?*

That line of argument does not work. You could use the same style of argument about any subject where the government *did not* fail. People use it about Iraq all the time: Why was the old Iraqi army disbanded not used for security? Why not more troops? Can't any idiot see we needed more troops, and if only we brought them the war would be more successful?

We could question WWII submarine countermeasures policy similarly, regardless of what it actually was. We lost boats, didn't we?

I don't know why they didn't evacuate the hospitals. But neither do you. The correct line of argument would be an explanation of what the government did and why it functioned that way, coupled with implementable ways it could have done better. Tell me the *reason* they *intentionally chose* not to evacuate the hospitals.

You act like what to do was obvious and any reasonable person would have done better, but you have yet to explain what force prevented anyone reasonable from getting the job.

You say the organisations in the area need to get better. I say: They will get better at dealing with this. That's what they do. All by themselves.

Now, if your criticism is directed toward those who just want to bash America, I have no problem. But to claim that the crisis operation went well that it did not fail or that incompetence was no part of it failing, you are reaching too far.

I didn't say it went well, but I have no policy changes I'm suggesting, and my attitude towards the government is mildly

friendly. I am annoyed with government haters of all varieties, and

also anyone complaining without a clear purpose. (People who live in the area are excused and may complain. As can their friends who live elsewhere.) It takes knowledge to do things well. Either put up or shut up. (Create the knowledge in usable form yourself, or pay for it to be created.)

And even if you do create knowledge now, you didn't create it in usable form prior to the disaster. There's no getting around that.

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/

Competence

I could continue my line by saying that it is my understanding that in e.g. Finland evacuation of hospitals, etc. _are_ part of evacuation procedures already in place and that they have been for a long time. It is a well known fact in the disaster recovery profession that you need to make yourself a process and a plan for evacuating those people who cannot do it themselves.

It seems that such plans for New Orleans did not exist. Or that they were not used. Which ever the case, this is something that a) several organizations working around the globe know, b) was not used in this case, and c) goes directly against what you said before: namely that nobody else could have done a better job.

And no, I did not create the knowledge in a form that was usable within New Orleans area, nor did many other people. Me, I was not interested in creating it in such form, because to any sensible person it is clear that you need a plan for evacuating those who cannot do it. It never dawned to me that this might be a thing that people expressedly paid for doing emergency management _never_ contemplated (or if they did, they nevertheless did not act on).

We only have 24 hours a day to do things and that ultimately means that one needs to choose priorities in what to pursue and what not to. That is why people hire other people to do things for them. They can dedicate themselves to doing the job and let you dedicate yourself to doing something else; something that your time is better spent in.

Now for the reasons why any capable person wouldn't have gotten the job? Are you asking about why not get the job from current organizations, or why not be capable of putting up their own?

For the first, the answer is not so simple, but public choice theory might give you a few hints to why. For the second, I wonder why the insurance companies have not started this by themselves - they would certainly have the economic incentives to do such things. Why it hasn't, is indeed an interesting question.

ps. your example of Iraq army actually punctuates my point, if I have understood the situation correctly. I've read that the armed forces had actually planned to use the Iraq army for stabilizing the

area, but that the government appointed representative for Iraq disbanded the Iraq army without consulting the armed forces.

Priorities

Frank J **agrees with me.**

-- Elliot Temple
http://www.curi.us/