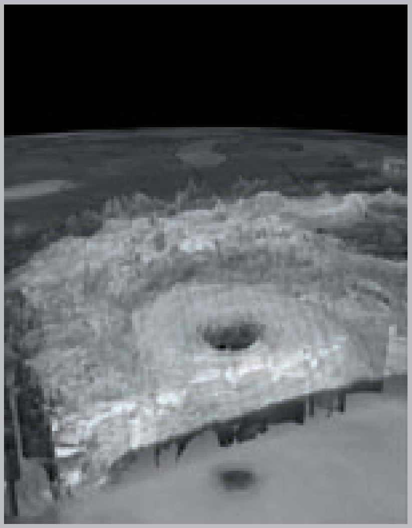
AFTER THE STORM: PATHOLOGIES OF DECISION-MAKING IN NEW ORLEANS

Ray Taras



A Canadian professor of political science at Tulane University in New Orleans, Ray Taras had an opportunity to observe decision-making from within the disaster zone after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Big Easy. His assessment: "Post traumatic stress syndrome suffered by usually competent leaders on the ground, combined with the obliviousness and usual incompetence of Bush administration officials, led to hundreds of needless deaths, tens of thousands of lives changed forever, and billions of dollars of property damage." The re-building of New Orleans is a conversation with strong overtones of the racial inequalities that are always present there, and observable by even the most casual visitor to the city.

Professeur canadien de science politique à l'Université de Tulane, à la Nouvelle-Orléans, Ray Taras a pu observer depuis la zone dévastée par l'ouragan Katrina comment se sont prises les décisions d'urgence : « Le syndrome de stress post-traumatique qui a frappé des leaders généralement compétents, combiné à l'inconscience des représentants généralement incompétents de l'administration Bush, a provoqué des centaines de morts inutiles, des dizaines de milliers de tragédies personnelles et des milliards de dollars en dommages matériels. » Parler de la reconstruction de la Nouvelle-Orléans, conclut l'auteur, c'est chaque fois parler d'inégalités raciales toujours aussi manifestes, même pour le moins attentif des visiteurs.

Do decision-makers act less rationally at a time of crisis than in normal times? Are otherwise experienced policy makers — normally effective at drafting plans for future undertakings — ill-prepared to deal with the stress of taking immediate, ad hoc decisions that will affect the lives of many in unpredictable ways?

These were questions that had particular salience in the cold war era when the spectre of a Dr. Strangelove, turning loose his nuclear arsenal as a release from the psychological stress of a central strategic exchange, haunted policy analysts. But the August 29 landfall of Hurricane Katrina along the Louisiana-Mississippi state line has provided much evidence about the pathologies of crisis decision-making in the face of a predictable natural disaster. No one can blame the absence of an early warning system for the magnitude of the disaster.

Let us recall the behaviour of some of the principal actors in the hours and days after Katrina struck. Just after Katrina made landfall, President Bush broke his holiday on his Texas ranch to travel to Arizona to celebrate Senator John McCain's birthday. But the picture imprinted on the minds of many of the survivors of the hurricane is that of the smiling president strumming a guitar with a country singer in California even as flood waters poured across the hodge-podge system of levees in New Orleans and the first reports of looting were broadcast.

We know that FEMA director Michael Brown was left to communicate with local emergency officials via e-mail (his assistant also used e-mail to set up a dinner reservation for him in Baton Rouge). Safeguarding communications channels had always been central to planning for a nuclear war, but clearly there was no dual use (military-civilian) capability intended. Federal emergency management — even after the 9/11 experience — was not permitted to free-ride on military technology.

If Bush and Brown did not recognize the seriousness of the crisis in the making in New Orleans, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin did. Governor Babineaux appeared traumatized at her first news conference after Katrina struck and her sentences often had to be completed by Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu standing by her side. By contrast, Mayor Nagin, in announcing the breaching of the levees after Katrina had already passed through the city, had a wry smile that said everything: much of the city was now doomed. He methodically listed what emergency supplies his city needed in these dramatic circumstances.

A few days later, however, when virtually no help had arrived and he was asked again by federal officials to specify what emergency help was needed, a very different Nagin launched into an atypical rant against the paralysis of emergency management officials. “Too many chiefs” was his explanation for the inaction but, in retrospect, that did not seem to be the main problem. Post-traumatic-stress syndrome suffered by usually competent political leaders on the ground, combined with the obliviousness and usual incompetence of Bush administration officials, led to hundreds of needless deaths, tens of thousands of lives changed forever, and billions of dollars of property damage.

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Even though it affected hurricane victims in ways that will always remain with them, crisis decision-making now lies in New Orleans’ past (this article does not consider crisis decision-making in neighbouring parishes or on the Mississippi coast). Today policy-makers are grappling with plans for the future. A particularly intriguing question is how a natural disaster offers them opportunities to further long-held objectives. Advocates of educational reform, or a casino economy, or wetlands restoration, or even a more “balanced” racial composition (like a 50-50 black-white mix rather than two-thirds blacks) have become aware how they can use the Katrina disaster to make good their goals.

Race is the most important piece on the New Orleans’ chessboard, and how to resolve the city’s longstanding “two solitudes” is now a highly contested issue.

“Bush don’t like black people,” one rapper snarled shortly after the disaster. Because of delays in getting help to mostly black people desperately trying to stay alive in the flooded Ninth Ward in New Orleans, “we charge America with criminal neglect,” announced Louis Farrakhan at the Millions More March in Washington in October. The lesson that the Muslim-American leader drew from Katrina was that just as a tropical depression is transformed into a category 5 hurricane because the storm becomes progressively better organized, so too do African-Americans need to organize and mobilize in order to become a political force.

Race remains central in American politics. Factoring in the statistical margin-of-error in a recent poll of Bush’s approval rating among black Americans, one analyst suggested it could be minus 5 percent. Race in New Orleans is no less a political signifier, although the cliché that it’s not reducible to a black-and-white issue has ironic resonance here.

The city was always unique in the US for its number of free men of colour before the Civil War. The legacy of the world’s first black republic, declared in Saint-Domingue in 1804 and based on a slave revolt that first broke out in 1791, was transferred to New Orleans when refugees from the brutal insurgency and counterinsurgency settled in the French colony of Louisiane. Intermarriage between French settlers and African slaves created a group known today as creoles of colour — the city’s political and cultural elite. These creoles are distinguished by fairer skin colour, Catholicism and, until recently, French language proficiency. They include some of the legendary families of New Orleans music like the Marsalis and Neville clans. Many baulk at being classified as African-American. The wealthiest of them reside in gated communities among the bayous in New Orleans East, which suffered serious flooding after Katrina.

Those people living in areas affected even worse by the flooding — the lower Ninth Ward — were poor Protestant African-Americans, in many ways the city’s permanent underclass. Suffering from poor housing and education, high unemployment, low wages when they were employed, and black-on-black crime (a controversial subject few politicians — black or white — are willing to discuss), they founded tightly knit communities in the low-lying — and therefore less expensive — areas of the city. The Desire neighbourhood that inspired Tennessee Williams’ fabled play (which has no black characters) lies in the Ninth Ward.

When we recall the images of helicopters rescuing desperate people from rooftops, we are remembering the inhabitants living in New Orleans’ poorer areas. Why had these helpless people living in the most endangered areas of the city not been evacuated before the hurricane struck? Given that this is the United States, where everyone is expected to fend for themselves, the question needs to be reformulated: why had they not evacuated themselves when the first ever mandatory order to do so had been issued by city hall 24 hours before expected landfall?

Poorer, predominantly black citizens were stranded in homes that quickly took on water. Why? Because they did not have the resources to get out. Public transport was unavailable — Amtrak and Greyhound closed their offices at exactly the time they could have been of greatest use. The idea of commandeering school buses to evacuate helpless people seemed to occur to policy makers only after the Superdome (which had been badly vandalized during the Hurricane Ivan scare) and the Convention Center had become untenable as hurricane shelters.

Unfortunately, the colour of one's skin seemed to make a difference to evacuation outcomes outside of the city's impoverished areas. While predominantly white colleges uptown made sure students without resources were transported out of the city, predominantly black Xavier University — an elite Catholic college only a dozen bus stops away — left 400 of its students (mostly creole) to languish on an interstate ramp without food or water for days. Not surprisingly, Xavier, which sends a greater proportion of its graduates to medical school than Harvard, has reported that less than 50 percent of its student body is returning for the spring semester.

How did the city's white minority fare during and after Hurricane Katrina? If many of the poorer parts of New Orleans were inhabited exclusively by African-Americans, the better-off white population has been unable to seal itself off into exclusively white upscale neighbourhoods or gated communities. The funkiest sections of the city — the Faubourg Marigny, Bywater, the lower Garden District, and of course the French Quarter — are mixed. The Garden District proper, with its historic ante-bellum mansions with servant quarters in the rear, is home to old New Orleans families distinguished by their French names; the consul-general of France; and famous novelists, film directors, and NFL quarterbacks. The Garden District may appear exclusively white and upscale, but it seems that never far away from a $1.5 million mansion is a $50,000 blighted shotgun structure serving as a crack house. None of these areas — nor the universities' district uptown — suffered serious flooding.

But there is — or perhaps the proper verb is "was" — a largely white residential area on reclaimed land that lay directly in the path of the waters that burst through the inadequate levees. As the US housing bubble encompassed even the New Orleans market, middle-class whites had found housing options within New Orleans itself, no longer requiring them to flee to the suburbs in neighbouring Jefferson Parish. An area to the south of Lake Pontchartrain around the University of New Orleans — known as Lakeview — expanded rapidly over the past decade. Within the city of New Orleans, this was the middle-class, largely white area most badly damaged by Katrina.

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When discussion turns to rebuilding plans for the city, it is rare that anyone voices the view that Lakeview should be abandoned — even though this recently built-up area has little historical significance and is low-lying and vulnerable to future flooding. By contrast, the lower Ninth Ward is often mentioned as the prime target for triage. No specific rebuilding plans have been finalized, but everyone's expectation — whether they welcome or decry it — is that the city will become smaller, wealthier, and whiter. That means not rebuilding many African-American neighbourhoods.

Black leaders like Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and New Orleans' own former mayor Marc Morial — current head of the Urban League — have made rebuilding the Ninth Ward a test case of whether the plight of poor American blacks is of concern to federal and local authorities. These leaders have highlighted the importance of decoding politicians' speeches in order to grasp their intentions. One example is Governor Blanco's address to a special session of the Louisiana legislature in November. "We cannot simply re-create what those storms destroyed," she stated, referring to Katrina and also Rita, the hurricane that devastated largely white Acadiana, in southwest Louisiana. "We must make the new Louisiana smarter, safer, and stronger."

Racial inequalities are palpable to the most casual visitor to New Orleans. A race-based division of labour is evident in restaurants, contractors' crews, and the city's colleges. Tulane, for example, is sometimes described by critics as a plantation university, with the only blacks to be seen on campus performing maintenance work. That was about to change in 2006, when students from two black colleges whose campuses were destroyed were to begin to take courses at Tulane.

To compensate for blacks being shut out of many middle-class occupations, much public sector employment in the city is unofficially reserved for African-Americans. Recruitment to the police force, for example, is based on a residency requirement: anyone not living in Orleans Parish — which is two-thirds black — is ineligible.

These arrangements are a double-edged sword. Black police officers were caught on film taking items off the shelves of a Walmart store a few days into the Katrina's disaster. But a more notorious incident involving NOPD officers became a signature card for post-Katrina New Orleans. Video showed three white police officers beating up a supposedly drunken 58-year-old black man on Bourbon Street. Their excuse was in part that they had to work during the Katrina crisis and the strain had got to them. But New Orleans residents recalled a more tragic incident on Bourbon Street a year earlier when a visiting black college student suffocated to death after being pinned down by white bouncers outside a club while an NOPD officer stood by.

Few of today's policy-makers openly welcome the social engineering that Katrina inadvertently carried out. This stands in contrast to the reaction of some white residents, who are gleeful that the homicides (the city has periodically had the highest rate in the US), looting, drugs, corruption, ignorance, and inefficiency associated with a black-majority city have been literally washed away.

Whether to restore or to remake the city's traditional demographic makeup has to be the most important question that policy-makers face. It will be a courageous group that insists that New Orleans must safeguard its black heritage at all costs.

Public policy after Katrina has an extraordinarily ambitious agenda. Everything from transforming race relations, to eradicating poverty, to turning the central business district into a Monte Carlo, and to beginning work on a mega-project to fortify the levee system is on it. Business leaders, who are mostly white, have the greatest leverage in the city's present economic crisis, but efforts have been made to level the playing field.

When Mayor Nagin formed his Bring New Orleans Back Commission to develop a master plan for the city, he made sure that it had as many black as white members. That was not a mirror image of the city's population, however, and within a month there were accusations that an "A" team of insiders was holding luncheon meet-

The Super Dome was seriously damaged by Katrina, and thousands who had taken shelter there were left in squalid conditions for days before finally being evacuated. Most of the dislocated people were black Americans. "Racial inequalities," writes Ray Taras of Tulane University, "are palpable to the most casual visitor to New Orleans."

ings that excluded a "B" team made up of mostly black members. Governor Blanco set up her own "Louisiana Recovery Authority" under the chairmanship of the president of Xavier University. In November it sponsored a conference attended by hundreds of civic and business leaders, elected officials, and planning experts. Eighty percent of participants were white.

Formulating a master plan for rebuilding the city is hamstrung not just by the unrepresentative character of these planning committees but also by their unwieldy, fragmented, and opaque nature. Senator Hillary Clinton, who strongly backs rebuilding New Orleans, admitted that she was confused about the policy-making process. "Someone has to be in charge, and I don't know who that is."

Nagin's "too many chiefs" remark during the Katrina crisis seems more relevant, then, to today's master planning process. There is a lack of unity of purpose and vision. Policy-makers share a built-in skepticism, which comes with the times, about public sector initiatives. They are resigned to having market forces make all the key decisions. Most importantly, they cannot count on sufficient funding to carry out the projects they do support.

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Nowhere are these problems clearer than in remaking the levee system that is New Orleans' first line of defence against hurricane disasters. The 200-mile system surrounding metropolitan New Orleans built by the Army Corps of Engineers was designed to withstand a direct hit from a category 3 hurricane packing 130 mph winds and a 12-foot storm surge. Construction flaws in the system — some experts call Katrina an engineering, not a natural, disaster — triggered the flooding.

Before there can be levee improvements, however, there must be levee board reorganization. Governor Blanco has proposed the consolidation of levee boards, possibly establishing one regional board for all of flood-prone southeast Louisiana in place of the many individual authorities that exist now. She also wants to give the state the right to develop comprehensive coastal preservation and restoration and hurricane protection plans — a commonsense proposal that will nevertheless irk conservative anti-government groups.

Organizational choices pale in importance compared to financial constraints. In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Congress appropriated $62 billion for relief and recovery for the Gulf Coast. President Bush promised to rebuild New Orleans "higher and better." In this climate Louisiana's political leaders were convinced that they could ask for the moon and get it. Louisiana Senators Mary Landrieu, a Democrat, and David Vitter, a Republican, asked Congress for an additional $190 billion for post-Katrina rebuilding.

This appeared to be a financially unrealistic request. It was based in part on another improbable recommendation supported by virtually all of Louisiana's political leaders — that the rebuilt New Orleans be protected from category 5 hurricanes, where winds exceed 155 mph and create an 18-foot storm surge. Protection from the strongest hurricanes, it is argued, is a *sine qua non* for long-term business confidence in the city. But the price tag for reinforcing levees to withstand a cat-5 hurricane is approximately $3.5 billion, and extending that protection 72 miles south of New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico would make the bill closer to $18 billion.

Many in Congress question whether cat. 5 protection is essential to redevelopment. Why not cat. 3 protection, they ask — after all, at landfall Katrina's strength was closer to a 3 than a 5. The Bush administration has joined the skeptics, even though that flies in the face of the president's promise in Jackson Square in October to do everything he could to get New Orleans back to normal. Because of its philosophical implications about what obligations a rich country has to its poor, how New Orleans should be rebuilt may become a campaign issue in the 2006 congressional elections.

A favourite cause of environmentalists, the restoration of coastal wetlands, which also offer hurricane protection, is even less likely to receive significant funding. According to the US Geological Survey, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed 100 square miles of marshes in Louisiana, including about 60 square miles that were submerged around New Orleans. Since the 1930s, the survey noted, Louisiana had already lost nearly 2,000 square miles of coastal wetlands due to oil and gas drilling, natural erosion, and levees and dams built along the Mississippi that deprived the river delta of land-forming sediment. Policy-makers have not made any decisions as to which areas in coastal Louisiana could be restored by allowing the sediment-rich Mississippi to flow into them. Asking for a blank check from

Congress for wetlands restoration is not the way to address this issue; a plan needs to be formulated.

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For some time residents of New Orleans with school-age children have been riveted by the spectacle of New Orleans School Board meetings. Rarely in the past few years has a meeting taken place without a charge of racism or reverse racism being levelled. White participants who choose to speak have been invariably heckled and intimidated by a colourful, large black woman who enjoys the pun made on her last name, Eighteen Wheeler. Usually made up of five black and two white members, the school board may be the single most embarrassing — if entertaining — feature of public life in New Orleans, and there are many. Policies adopted by even reform-minded members have often been petty, mean, self-serving and counterproductive. Perhaps the most infamous scam associated with the board was a “dead souls” roster that paid salaries to fictional school employees.

In a demagogic moment in early 2005 — he is much more comfortable in boardrooms with white corporate leaders — Mayor Nagin accused the city's white population of abandoning public schools. Apart from a few isolated magnet schools — including one that has a French Ministry of Education curriculum — white parents tend to choose parochial (Catholic) rather than public schools, where the tipping effect has produced many all-black student bodies. Creole kids also prefer private schools, such as Xavier Prep. Anyone who has the resources — not just whites — abandons the public school system, leaving disadvantaged African-Americans to receive a sub-standard education. Governor Blanco lamented that “Even before the storm, New Orleans schools were not educating our children as they so deserve.”

The hurricane disaster has made a complete overhaul of the school system possible. “I'm determined to seize this opportunity to start anew,” the governor announced as she asked the Louisiana legislature to mandate the state takeover of Orleans Parish's poorly performing schools — those with a performance score below the state average. That would include 90 of the system's 127 schools!

It is remarkable how suddenly sweeping educational reform has become possible. Only a short while ago, a plan to offer taxpayer-financed vouchers for New Orleans students to attend private school was defeated in the Legislature. It took a hurricane disaster to topple a reviled school board and open up an opportunity structure for change.

Before Hurricane Katrina the economy of New Orleans had a more than passing resemblance to the other *cabildo* cities located in the circum-Caribbean that existed during the Spanish Regency period. The city had limited industry. There was no Fortune 500 company in town. The city's largest employer was a university — not unusual for a town the size of Ann Arbor or Rimouski, but remarkable for a city whose metropolitan population approaches that of Calgary. With Tulane's medical centre devastated by flooding and dramatically downsized for the foreseeable future, it is uncertain which employer will — by a process of elimination — emerge as the city's largest. The bustling port, which always specialized in low-value goods, has had its work force slashed. Indeed, it is estimated that only 18 percent of inhabitants of Katrina-impacted areas hold the jobs they had before August 29.

The tourism and convention business remains, of course. The allure of Bourbon Street is for the ages, even though it may become only a simulacrum of the real city. There is Mardi Gras, too: the city council is heatedly debating whether, in the wake of Katrina, it should be limited to just six days. Carnival krewes who traditionally parade during the first week are up in arms.

Even as New Orleans puts on a happy face — an exercise it excels in — the city is hurting. Policy-makers can only make policies that have financial backing, but today these are few and far between. Compassion fatigue has set in, and New Orleans is the victim. Some groups — in a number of cases with noble intentions, in others with nefarious ones — see opportunities in the process of remaking the city. A pluralism of possibilities and approaches does not guarantee an optimal final outcome. “Anything is possible” should worry the rebuilders of New Orleans.

A native of Montreal and graduate of Concordia University (Loyola), Ray Taras is a professor of political science at Tuilane University in New Orleans. He is currently living in a university-provided trailer park in New Orleans.
taras@tulane.edu