# British media fears political consequences of Hurricane Katrina

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The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has shocked even the most seasoned of British reporters. The sight of masses left without food, water and adequate shelter, of bloated corpses lying uncollected in the putrid waters, whilst soldiers and police, concerned only with protecting private property, are ordered to shoot to kill anyone deemed to be obstructing their efforts, has met with genuine expressions of outrage, and sometimes of disbelief that this could be happening in the wealthiest country in the world.

But if their disgust at the appalling conditions faced by millions in the US South is tangible, so too are their grave misgivings as to the social and political consequences of the crisis, not only for President George W. Bush but for the entire US ruling elite. A consensus has emerged that New Orleans has laid bare the reality that the American behemoth has feet of clay. For Hurricane Katrina alone could never have caused such an appalling nightmare.

Riven by class and racial inequalities and presided over by a two-party system completely disconnected from the masses, the US superstructure has been so thoroughly corroded from within that it has proven unable to respond to even the most elemental requirements of its citizens. What price now the Statue of Liberty's inscription, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses"?

In its September 4 lead headlined "The week Bush failed America," the *Observer* wrote, "The conclusion that there has been a monumental failure of leadership is unavoidable," so that "the humanitarian disaster of Katrina is also a political crisis for the President."

"There will be far-reaching political and economic consequences from Katrina and from the damage to the oil infrastructure in the Gulf of Mexico, although the scale of these has yet to be calculated. But even America's robust democracy will find it hard to absorb these aftershocks without greater confidence in its leaders. Last week, urban American society revealed its fragility, its vast inequalities, its racial fault lines and its ready propensity to violence. All urgently need the attention of a strong and compassionate White House."

Days later, that compassion had patently failed to materialize. The *Guardian* reported September 6 that a "huge assault ship, the USS Bataan, had been deployed in the Gulf of Mexico when the hurricane struck. Despite the fact it had six operating rooms and 600 hospital beds, and was willing to help, FEMA did not use it all week."

*Guardian* journalist Gary Younge in Baton Rouge described how, instead, rumours of rape and murder in the New Orleans Superdome were being allowed to circulate unchecked. Police had been unable to confirm that any such incidents had taken place, and, "while many claim they happened, no witnesses, survivors or survivors' relatives have come forward."

Media demonizing of the stranded had led to reports in Baton Rouge that evacuees from New Orleans "were carjacking and that guns and knives were being seized in local shelters where riots were erupting."

"The trouble, wrote Howard Witt of the *Chicago Tribune*, is that 'scarcely any of it was true—the police confiscated a single knife from a refugee in one Baton Rouge shelter.... There were no riots in Baton Rouge. There were no armed hordes.' "

In another article, Younge contrasted the response of the US administration to reports of looting in New Orleans to US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's dismissive comment on looting in Baghdad following the US invasion: "Stuff happens."

On this occasion, "[T]he images were not of 'newly liberated Iraqis' making away with precious artefacts, but desperate African-Americans in a devastated urban area, most of whom are making off with nappies, bottled water and food.

"So these are not scenes of freedom at work but anarchy to be suppressed....

"Their plight was not understood as part of a broader, societal crisis but misunderstood as a problem apart from that crisis. Eviscerated from context, they could then be branded as a lawless, amoral and indigent bunch of people who can't get it together because they are in the grip of pathology."

Katrina had "exposed the lie of equal opportunity in the US. A basic understanding of human nature suggests everyone in New Orleans wanted to survive and escape. A basic understanding of American economics and history shows that, despite all the rhetoric, wealth—not hard work or personal sacrifice—is the most decisive factor in who succeeds."

Writing in the *Independent* from New Orleans, Andrew Buncombe reported, "In a makeshift grave on the streets of New Orleans lies the body of Vera Smith. She was an ordinary woman who, like thousands of her neighbours, died because she was poor. Abandoned to her fate as the waters rose around her, Vera's tragedy symbolises the great divide in America today....

"The overwhelming majority of the people who died or suffered in this disaster were, like Vera, the poor—that segment of American society that so often appears to be overlooked or deliberately ignored. These were the people unable to evacuate, who had nowhere else to go or else no means of getting there. These were the people who simply did not have the resources to get a body taken to the morgue."

The *Independent*'s lead article, September 5, stated, "We could be witnessing a significant moment in America. Hurricane Katrina has revealed some uncomfortable truths about the world's richest and most powerful nation. The catastrophe in New Orleans exposed shocking inequalities—both of wealth and race—and also the relative impotence of the federal authorities when faced with a large-scale disaster. Many Americans are beginning to ask just what sort of country they are living in....

"American politics is at a crossroads. Many preconceptions are being battered by natural catastrophes and the consequences of human folly. The question now is whether President Bush is capable of responding to this new mood, or whether he is to be swept away by the floodwaters of ideological intransigence."

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In the *Times* of London, a Murdoch newspaper on the political right, Andrew Sullivan observed, “In the past, American disasters have led to political changes—the Johnstown flood in 1889 and the Galveston hurricane in 1900 led to fury at class privilege and a government that seemed not to care for the poor. The 1927 flood in New Orleans—and the inequalities it exposed—propelled the rise of the populist demagogue Huey Long.

“There seems to me a strong chance that this calamity could be the beginning of something profound in American politics: a sense that government is broken and that someone needs to fix it.

“That disaster exposed something else that few want to discuss: race and class. New Orleans is a city that has barely ever functioned effectively, and that was part of its charm. But it was also a city in which the enormous gulf between rich and poor was wider than elsewhere. When you look at the images of those stranded and left behind, they are overwhelmingly poor and black.”

Writing in the same newspaper, Martin Samuel warned, “So the breakdown of society in New Orleans was a one-off? Think again: it could happen in many US cities....

“The city has extreme problems of violence and deprivation, but the economic apartheid inflicted on America is a wrong turn away in most cities. Go west of Constitution between central Washington and the RFK Stadium, walk the length of Broadway, get lost in Detroit.”

An equally right-wing publication, the *Daily Mail*, in its lead September 3, warned, **“**The awesome natural force of Hurricane Katrina laid New Orleans low. The horrors that followed are largely man-made....

“From the world’s only superpower that can send shuttles into space and militarily pulverise nations within days, we are witnessing the impotence of a Third World country to a catastrophe on its doorstep.

“The first duty of any government is to protect its citizens. The Administration has failed in that task.

“There has been no shortage of warnings. Four years ago, before 9/11, the President was told that the three biggest potential disasters facing the US were a terrorist attack on New York, a major earthquake in San Francisco—and a hurricane hitting New Orleans.

“What has Washington done? Why, cut spending on flood defences and diverted the resources to the war in Iraq, of course.”

The British media’s indictment of US failings is disingenuous given that it has acted as the cheerleaders for the same policies of enriching the few at the expense of the majority carried out by successive governments in the UK. However, editors and well-paid media pundits are well aware that social and political opposition to the neoconservative order in the US poses a direct threat to their own privileged existence in Britain.

Hence, amidst the voices of sympathy and concern there are those who have come forward to viciously attack the poor of New Orleans. Such, inevitably, has been the response of Murdoch’s populist rag, the *Sun.* Under the headline “flood of evil” it opined, “Catastrophes on the scale of the New Orleans hurricane bring out the extremes of human behaviour.”

This was not a reference to the callous indifference of the Bush administration in the face of untold human suffering. Piling rumour upon rumour, the *Sun* launched a diatribe against those left stranded in the wake of Katrina for their “bestial atrocities.”

“A child rapist murdering a little girl in a public toilet. Crack addicts randomly raping, murdering and looting. And, almost more incredibly, a gang of snipers trying to shoot dead rescue workers.

“It is horrifying that so many conscienceless psychopaths seized their moment to behave like animals once the rules of modern civilisation broke down.”

Its conclusion was that law and order must prevail. What the *Sun* found “harrowing” was that “these same savages were free and undetected—walking the streets alongside decent Americans and British tourists—hours before Katrina struck.”

Bruce Anderson, whose reactionary diatribes are regularly published by the nominally liberal *Independent* in the name of “stimulating debate,” was more explicit. Under the headline “New Orleans was responsible for its own fate,” Anderson spewed forth his racial and class prejudices.

“America is founded on work, responsibility and law. There is no more important item in the Bill of Rights than the unwritten one: that each and every American has the right to work his butt off. That is the basis of another right: this year shall be better than last year and next year will be better than this year. Not in New Orleans: that city is founded on laziness, irresponsibility and lawlessness,” he wrote.

The American ethos only works for “the voluntary immigrants,” he continued. In contrast, “large numbers of the descendants of the involuntary immigrants [a cynical reference to African Americans] have spurned every opportunity to invest in the American dream. It is as if they regard the work ethic as tainted, because it was imposed on their forebears by slavery.”

“Much of the black community in New Orleans was in the grip of self-pity,” he went on, many of whom “chose” not to prosper.

“I suspect that at least 90 percent of the looters were from one-parent families,” he continued.

“Over the next few months, America will agonise over New Orleans. It ought to keep one point in mind. None of the looters was a neoconservative.”

The *Independent,* as with other liberal journals such as the *Guardian*, has sought to console itself and its readers with the possibility that, whilst the catastrophe in New Orleans could claim Bush’s presidency, a “new political settlement” may arise, led by the Democrats, to rescue the myth of the American dream and with it US capitalism itself.

Johann Hari, in the *Independent,* pondered, “Could a new American liberalism rise from the fetid waters of New Orleans once again?”

The dilemma for Jonathan Freedland in the *Guardian* was that “time is fast running out” for such a possibility.

The problem for “progressives,” he wrote, was an impediment “that has dogged its opposition to the Iraq war: a lack of leadership. There are few Democrats bold enough to step forward and make the post-Katrina case for an active, caring government....

“Hurricanes toss everything into the air; how things settle afterwards is up to the people on the ground. A new political settlement will not come about by a simple act of nature—it has to be fought for and won.”

But just who would fight for it? Commenting on BBC News, veteran Washington correspondent Charles Wheeler agreed that US history had shown natural disasters were inevitably followed by social upheavals.

However, those political organizations and individuals who had come forward to lead the fight for social change in previous eras were missing today. Jesse Jackson, for example, was a “busted flush,” just part of the “black establishment,” Wheeler commented.

Stephen King, managing director of economics at HSBC bank, made clear just what outcome he most feared and opposed. Writing in the *Independent*, he agreed that New Orleans had raised the “issue of market failure.”

“The suffering we’re now seeing in the Deep South evokes John Kenneth Galbraith’s famous reference to ‘private affluence, public squalor.’ If a nation becomes too reliant on the market, and market failures are therefore ignored, the nation’s longer-term economic health is potentially compromised.”

But, he insisted, “This is not to say that we should be heading towards some sort of socialist utopia.”

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