

Lurid reports of rape, murder in Katrina's aftermath exposed as frauds

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A series of articles over the past week have confirmed that the widespread reports of massive looting, murder and violence in hurricane-devastated New Orleans were either concocted out of whole cloth or grossly exaggerated. In the first several days after New Orleans was inundated, these stories were disseminated by government officials at the federal, state and local level, and trumpeted by the media in banner headlines and lurid TV accounts.

Now that officials have been forced to admit that they had little or no evidence of armed thugs roaming the devastated city and mugging, raping and killing tourists and stranded residents, they and their media accomplices are seeking to explain away the disinformation campaign as the inadvertent result of confusion, fear and the breakdown in communications in New Orleans.

In fact, the picture of rampant lawlessness and violence conjured up by the government and the media served definite and entirely reactionary political purposes. President Bush himself picked up the theme of "lawlessness" shortly after he curtailed his Texas vacation—well after the city had been inundated and the dimensions of the human disaster had become clear—and returned to Washington.

In an interview on ABC Television's "Good Morning America" program on September 1, he said, "[T]here ought to be zero tolerance of people breaking the law during an emergency such as this."

In making these comments, Bush was continuing a theme already developed by New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, both Democrats. On August 31, just two days after the hurricane passed over the city, Nagin declared that gangs of looters "are starting to get closer to heavily populated areas—hotels, hospitals, and we're going to stop it right now." He moved to shift virtually the entire police force from search-and-rescue to anti-looting duties.

Governor Blanco announced the same day that "we will restore law and order." She bemoaned the fact that "disasters like this often bring out the worst in people." A day later, she announced that a force of National Guard troops was entering the city: "They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded," she declared. "These troops know how to shoot to kill... and I

expect they will."

Nagin, together with Police Superintendent Edwin Compass III, sounded an even more sensational note the following week. The two appeared on the "Oprah" television show on September 4. Compass declared, "The tourists are walking around there, and as soon as these individuals see them, they're being preyed upon. They are beating, they are raping them on the streets." He repeated accounts of "little babies getting raped" in the Superdome, where thousands of stranded hurricane victims had been left by the authorities to suffer in sweltering heat for days on end without food, water or electricity.

Nagin spoke of an "almost animalistic state" inside the Superdome, where, he claimed, "hooligans" were "killing people, raping people."

There is no evidence that these horrible events took place. According to a September 26 article in the New Orleans newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*, "the vast majority of reported atrocities committed by evacuees have turned out to be false, or at least unsupported by any evidence, according to key military, law enforcement, medical and civilian officials in positions to know."

The *Times-Picayune* noted that during early September, the media in the US and internationally was reporting widespread killings and rapes by gangs in both the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center. However, an investigation by the newspaper found that just 10 bodies were recovered from the two venues. Of the six found in the Superdome, "four died of natural causes, one overdosed and another jumped to his death in an apparent suicide," the newspaper wrote, citing Louisiana National Guard Colonel Thomas Beron.

It is believed that only one of the deaths in the Convention Center may have been a murder. The reports of widespread sexual assaults were likewise unfounded. According to a *New York Times* article of September 29, "During six days when the Superdome was used as a shelter, the head of the New Orleans Police Department's sex crimes unit, Lt. David Benelli, said he and his officers lived inside the dome and ran down every rumor of rape or atrocity. In the end, they made two arrests for attempted sexual assault, and concluded that the other attacks had not happened."

New Orleans District Attorney Eddie Jordan said that in the city as a whole, only four murders had been confirmed during the week after the hurricane hit, which is about average for the city.

These findings expose the utter falsehood of the stories that were floated at the time, particularly by police officials. Compass spoke of residents toting weapons in crowds, shooting at each other and at police.

“People would be shooting at us, and we couldn’t shoot because of the families,” Compass told Chris Elsberry of the *Connecticut Post* as late as September 19. “All we could do is rush toward the flash.”

But Jeff Winn, the leader of the SWAT unit that Compass said had seized 30 weapons in this way, denied that anything of the sort happened. According to the *Times-Picayune*, Winn “said his unit saw muzzle flashes and heard gunshots only one time. Despite aggressively frisking a number of suspects, the team recovered no weapons.”

The numerous reports of people shooting at helicopters that were trying to rescue people have likewise turned out to be untrue. As for the massive looting that was supposed to have occurred, this too was exaggerated. Most of the looting that did occur was directed at gaining access to food and other necessities. In at least one case, in which a Wal-Mart store was looted, the removal of goods was begun by police, under instructions from their commanders to take what they needed.

As always, the US media has played a despicable role. AP reporter Michelle Roberts noted in an article on September 27, “Many news organizations, including the Associated Press, carried the witness accounts and official pronouncements, and in some cases later repeated the claims as fact, without attribution.”

Both right-wing and “liberal” news sources took the rumors and government statements at face value. The *New York Times* recorded in an article on September 19 some of the statements made by television commentators. On September 1, Fox News anchor John Gibson said there were “all kinds of reports of looting, fires and violence. Thugs shooting at rescue crews.” Later that night, MSNBC talking-head Tucker Carlson declared hysterically that “People are being raped. People are being murdered. People are being shot. Police officers are being shot.” These are only a sample of the sort of comments that were ubiquitous at the time.

On September 2, in a banner headline that stretched across the entire front page, the *Washington Post* declared New Orleans to be “A City of Despair and Lawlessness.” The newspaper’s lead editorial of that day bemoaned the fact that “looters and carjackers, some of them armed, have run rampant.”

Given the inhuman and life-threatening conditions in which tens of thousands of New Orleans residents were left, and the incompetence and indifference of the authorities at all levels of government, the wonder is not that looting occurred, along with

some acts of violence, but that they were relatively limited.

What accounts for these extraordinarily exaggerated accounts? They served three interrelated purposes. First, to counter and blunt the enormous outpouring of sympathy for the victims of the hurricane, accompanied by public outrage at the government’s lack of preparations and inept response. This sympathy was felt particularly strongly for the impoverished and largely African American section of the population that was left stranded in the city, either in the squalid conditions of the Superdome and Convention Center, or trapped on rooftops of homes engulfed by the flood.

By criminalizing the population, the government, at a local and national level, sought to draw attention away from its own responsibility. The implication was that the victims themselves were to blame. The idea was promoted that those who remained in the city did so because they had willfully refused to follow evacuation orders, even though it had long been known that tens of thousands would be unable to follow these orders for lack of transportation. This attempt to paint the victims with the brush of criminality had more a hint of racism.

Second, the government and the media attempted, in the first days after the hurricane, to blame hooligan violence for the failure of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other official bodies to mount rescue and relief operations. In particular, the reports of helicopters being shot at as they attempted to bring relief were hyped for this purpose.

The media line in these first critical days was that rescue efforts were rendered impossible by the lawlessness that had seized hold of the stricken city. “Law and order” had to be restored before starving and dying people could be helped.

Finally, the sensational accounts paved the way for the transformation of New Orleans into a militarized city. As has become increasingly clear, the Bush administration is seeking to use the hurricane disaster as a pretext for the elimination of remaining restrictions on military involvement in domestic missions and law enforcement. Plans to increase the power of the military within the US have long been in the works, institutionalized in the Department of Homeland Security and the US Northern Command, but the devastation of New Orleans has provided an excuse for their realization.



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