

Lessons from the Great Flood of 1927

Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood and How it Changed America by John M. Barry

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Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi flood and how it changed America, by John M. Barry, Touchstone 1998

It has been five months since Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast on August 29. The devastation left in the storm's wake focused the attention of people the world over on the abysmal social conditions of the region's working and poor population—conditions that existed long before the hurricane struck.

New Orleans, a major US city with deep roots in American history and culture, was virtually destroyed. Hundreds of thousands were turned into refugees by a storm that overwhelmed levees that were known to be inadequate. The appalling negligence and indifference of government authorities at all levels was compounded by their failure to make provisions for the evacuation of tens of thousands of poor, sick and elderly, who were left to their fate.

But the destruction wrought by the storm was both predictable and preventable. Studies by Louisiana State University and the US Army Corps of Engineers confirm that steel reinforcements on failed levees only went half as deep as they were supposed to go. Not only were the levees not built to withstand a category 4 hurricane, despite repeated warnings that such a storm was inevitable, due to shoddy construction they could not withstand a hurricane of lesser force. The construction flaws virtually guaranteed that they would give way in the face of a storm with the power of Katrina—a slow-moving category 3 storm when it hit land.

The responsibility for the breadth of the destruction and suffering caused by Katrina falls squarely in the lap of federal authorities, who oversaw levee design and construction. Moreover, local, state and federal officials—in particular, the Federal Emergency Management Agency—had no viable plan in place for the evacuation of Gulf Coast residents or their shelter after the storm.

However, the Bush White House and Congress have attempted to wash their hands of responsibility for helping those affected return to normal lives, let alone for reconstruction of the devastated areas. The creation of the Gulf Empowerment Zone—and the wonders of the free market and private enterprise—are expected to lead the way to recovery, as the victims of this disaster grapple to cope with its consequences.

Hurricane Katrina has laid bare before the world the rot and deep crisis of the American capitalist profit system. It has demonstrated in stark terms the real implications for society of decades of budget cutting at all levels of government. The starving of funds for infrastructure and the dismantling of state relief agencies was a major factor in the criminally inadequate preparation and response to the hurricane.

One consequence of the debacle has been renewed interest in the book, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood and How it Changed America*, by John M. Barry, who currently teaches at Tulane University in New Orleans. Published in 1997, the work is a narrative of the events surrounding that catastrophic event. Its greatest strength is its

documentation of the social impact of the flood of 1927, which inundated 27,000 square miles along the lower reaches of the Mississippi River populated by more than 900,000 people. It was, until Katrina, the greatest natural disaster in US history.

There are certain parallels between the great flood and Hurricane Katrina. The Mississippi flood of 1927 exposed the class divide in America as well as laid bare grinding class and racial oppression in the South. It also demonstrated the need for the federal government to take charge of managing the Mississippi, which had been previously left to state and local authorities.

The book describes in detail the origins of the ill-conceived “levees only” policy adopted by the US Army Corps of Engineers for controlling the Mississippi. It also examines the career of Senator John Percy of Mississippi, a wealthy plantation owner, whose hometown of Greenville became the focus of an investigation following the flood because of reports of gross mistreatment of black refugees.

Its accounts of the flood itself are compelling. In late August of 1926, massive rains soaked a large portion of the Mississippi watershed, causing widespread flooding. That was, however, only the first of a series of deluges that would eventually push the Mississippi and its tributaries to record flood levels.

For the last three months of 1926, gauge readings on the Mississippi and its two great tributaries, the Ohio and the Missouri rivers, were at the highest levels ever recorded. Barry writes, “The Weather Bureau later stated, ‘There was needed neither a prophetic vision nor a vivid imagination to picture a great flood in the lower Mississippi River the following spring.’

“But that fall no one at the Weather Bureau or the Mississippi River Commission correlated or even compiled this information. The individuals who made the readings simply noted them and forwarded the information to Washington” (p. 175).

Heavy rains continued through the spring of 1927. During that period, there were five huge rainstorms, covering a large section of the Mississippi watershed, that were each larger than any in the past 10 years.

Mississippi levees were not designed to withstand such a volume of water. Compounding the difficulty was the mistaken official policy, imposed by the US Army Corps of Engineers, that opposed the building of spillways and floodways in order to maximize the flow of water in the river. This was based on the mistaken assumption that an increased flow would deepen the Mississippi channel enough to relieve pressure on the levees.

Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, engineers assured the public that the works would hold, even as the river continued to rise.

Levees began breaking along the course of the Mississippi and its tributaries, spreading water over thousands of square miles of land. The largest breach, or crevasse, occurred at Mounds Landing in the northwest

part of the state of Mississippi, sending a torrent crashing into the surrounding region. Barry writes, "Quickly the crevasse widened, until a wall of water three-quarters of a mile across and more than 100 feet high—later its depth was estimated at as much as 150 feet—raged into the Delta.... The water's force gouged out a 100-foot deep channel half a mile wide for a mile inland."

It was a volume of water "more than double a flooding Niagara Falls, more than the entire upper Mississippi ever carried...." (pp. 202-03).

The floodwaters eventually covered nearly 1 million acres and created hundreds of thousands of refugees. According to official records, 500 people died, though the actual toll was undoubtedly much higher. At its widest point north of Vicksburg, Mississippi, the flooded area was nearly 100 miles wide.

The most interesting portions of the book deal with the social context of the flood. Barry focuses a good deal of attention on the flood's impact in the Mississippi Delta region, the alluvial plain in the northwest portion of the state of Mississippi that was the scene of some of the worst devastation.

Despite containing some of the richest agricultural land in the world, the Delta remains to this day one of the poorest areas in the United States. In 1927, the combination of stark class divisions and natural forces combined to produce an appalling catastrophe for its inhabitants.

The book's description of conditions of life in the Deep South for African Americans recalls the century-long role of the Democratic Party as the champion of White Supremacy. Barry recalls Mississippi Governor and Senator James Vardaman, a racist and supporter of lynch law, who claimed that the education of blacks was a waste of money.

Vardaman and fellow Democratic governors across the South were determined to wipe out whatever gains were made by African Americans under post-Civil War Reconstruction.

The author cites a 1912 *New York Times* article that illustrates the serf-like conditions faced by blacks in Mississippi. The *Times* reported that an engineer overseeing work on a levee threatened by high water ran out of sandbags and "ordered...several hundred negroes...to lie down on top of the levee and as close together as possible. The black men obeyed, and although spray frequently dashed over them, they prevented the overflow that might have developed into an ugly crevasse. For an hour and a half this lasted, until the additional sandbags arrived" (p. 131).

Conditions for the poor—white and black—were abysmal in 1920s Mississippi. A planter listed what he considered the typical items that would have to be replaced for a sharecropper family that had lost everything in the flood: "1 dipper, 1 baking pan, 4 forks, 4 spoons, 1 large spoon...4 joints of stove pipe, 1 elbow for stove pipe, 1 cooking stove...1 suit overalls, 4 pair shoes...two beds and springs." The cost of these items totaled \$77.42. Most flood victims did not even receive that much (p. 371).

So oppressive were conditions in the Delta that in 1907, following an investigation, the Italian government had posted a warning to its citizens not to emigrate to the region, where planters were attempting to recruit Italian workers as a supplemental source of cheap labor.

The maintenance of the black population in conditions of semi-feudal servitude was the cornerstone of the system of class oppression in the South. The constant stoking of racial prejudice among poor whites was needed to divert the anger of small farmers and wage workers away from the repressive social structure. To this end, Senator Vardaman would occasionally shake his fist at the planter aristocracy while promoting crude and vicious racist sentiment.

Barry recounts that when the break on the levee at Mounds Landing first appeared, the National Guard commander in charge forced black levee workers to continue filling sandbags at gunpoint. According to some reports, as many as 200 of these workers drowned when the levee finally gave way.

In Greenville, Mississippi, in the heart of the Delta, more than 10,000 people took refuge on the levee protecting the town, one of the few areas of dry ground. Their condition grew desperate.

Plans were made to evacuate all of Greenville's residents. However, local landowners protested, complaining that sending away all the area's blacks would deprive them of their primary source of cheap labor. At the last minute, plans to evacuate African Americans via steamers were cancelled. All the blacks in the area were forced to the levee, one of the few areas above water, where they were made to load and unload supplies without pay. Those who refused to work were cut off Red Cross relief rations.

They were held as virtual prisoners. The National Guard beat and brutalized African Americans with impunity. A pass was required to enter or leave. While the conditions in Greenville were the harshest, similar conditions prevailed in all of the "concentration camps" (future US President Herbert Hoover, then in charge of flood relief, is credited with coining the term) set up by the Red Cross in the state of Mississippi for flood refugees.

As reports surfaced of the abuse of blacks by local authorities in the Delta region, Hoover appointed a commission of handpicked middle class blacks, headed by Robert Moton of the Tuskegee Institute, to investigate. It issued a sanitized report, giving a prettified view of the relief work that sloughed over the horrific abuses suffered by African Americans.

Further down the river, in New Orleans, the city's political and business leaders sought to assure citizens that all was well, even as residents watched the river rise to perilous heights. To avoid a flight from the city and protect commercial interests, all news of the approaching danger was censored by the New Orleans papers.

Meanwhile, the city's elite made plans to defend their property by sacrificing the residents of poorer outlying regions. New Orleans bankers met in secret to discuss a proposal to relieve pressure on New Orleans's threatened levees by dynamiting the levee protecting St. Bernard Parish, on the other side of the river.

The same area was the scene of enormous devastation in 2005 when levees failed in the face of Hurricane Katrina. The entire parish, home to some 67,000 people, was inundated when tides overwhelmed its inadequate levees.

In 1927, some 10,000 people lived in St. Bernard Parish, and the proposed destruction of the levee would turn them all into refugees. However, this was of little concern to the New Orleans businessmen. Determined to maintain the confidence of investors, they ignored advice, correct as it turned out, that levee breaks up-river would dissipate the flood crest long before it reached the city.

After securing the approval of the administration of Republican President Calvin Coolidge, they set about their plans. The only condition laid upon New Orleans's elite was that residents of the parish be compensated for property losses. However, the Reparations Commission set up to administer claims was a tool of New Orleans bankers and businessmen. It made sure residents in most cases ultimately received only pennies on the dollar, if anything, for their losses.

The National Guard carried out the forced evacuation of the parish. Those residents who had nowhere else to go were housed in a large warehouse in downtown New Orleans, whites on the fifth floor and blacks on the sixth floor.

Barry writes, "New Orleans meanwhile was enjoying itself. The fine families, as if on a picnic, traveled down to see the great explosion that would send dirt hundreds of feet high and create a sudden Niagara Falls" (p. 256).

However, it took 10 days and 39 tons of dynamite to finally breach the levees. "The crowds went away disappointed."

Later, the dynamiting of the levees would be denounced as unnecessary by the national press. Indeed, just a few months later, the same wealthy

businessmen who planned the dynamiting would launch a public relations campaign aimed at coaxing back investors and convention goers, claiming the city had never been in any danger at all.

Meanwhile, city leaders turned against the refugees in their midst. Businessmen complained about the cost of maintaining them. The Reparations Commission voted “to deduct from personal damage claims the amounts extended by way of relief for parties claiming damages” (p. 348).

To put additional pressure on claimants, the board refused to make partial payments until the full extent of damages was settled. By the following winter, many families were in desperate straits.

Barry notes that the arrogance and hostility of the New Orleans elite and the entire official establishment toward the working class and poor helped bolster the fortunes of Huey Long, the populist who shortly afterwards became Louisiana governor and later a US senator.

The flood had many consequences. Barry writes, The flood “shifted perceptions of the role and responsibility of the federal government—calling for a great expansion—and shattered the myth of a quasi-feudal bond between Delta blacks and the southern aristocracy...it accelerated the great migration of blacks north. And it altered both southern and national politics....” (p. 422).

None of the things Barry cites were entirely the result of the flood. However, it is true that the flood accentuated and brought to the fore tendencies that had been largely hidden from the popular view. The year 1927 was a time of wide and growing class divisions, divisions that had been largely suppressed and pushed into the background. In only a few years time, with the advent of the Depression, these tensions would assume open and explosive forms.

While the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina and the 1927 flood were similar in many respects—lack of preparation, official negligence, indifference and incompetence, the exposure of naked class and racial oppression—the immediate consequences were somewhat different.

After the catastrophic impact of the flood became too obvious for politicians in Washington to ignore any longer, President Coolidge appointed a commission to oversee flood relief headed by Herbert Hoover, then secretary of commerce. The work of the commission received front-page treatment in major papers across the United States.

Hoover was an astute enough politician to understand that a demonstrative display of sympathy for flood victims was necessary to divert popular outrage over the lack of preparedness and inadequate response at all levels of authority.

Hoover, who had undoubted abilities as an organizer, assumed authority over all state and local flood rescue and relief efforts and helped coordinate their activities. He proclaimed that his mission wasn’t merely disaster relief, but the rebuilding of the region. Barry notes that the Hoover even used his authority to extract corporate assistance for stranded flood victims: “next, with a few phone calls, Hoover convinced railroads—the Illinois Central, the Missouri Pacific, the Texas Pacific, the Southern, the Frisco—to provide free transportation for refugees and cut rates on freight during the emergency....” (p. 275).

Aided by a friendly and largely uninquisitive press, this high-profile intervention helped provide a placebo for public opinion and boosted the image of the federal government and Hoover in particular. Indeed, Hoover used his flood relief work as a catapult for his successful run for the White House in 1928.

The glaring weakness of the relief effort was its sole reliance on private charities, in particular the Red Cross. Even as public demands grew for federal funds to be used for flood relief—there was a large budget surplus—Hoover and Coolidge resisted. The reliance on private financing to secure funds for rebuilding proved a fiasco. Lack of income and collateral prevented most businesses and individuals from obtaining access to what little loan money became available. As a consequence, a

great many of those displaced by the flood, particularly African Americans, migrated elsewhere.

However, the great flood did spark a significant piece of legislative action. In the immediate wake of the catastrophe, Congress passed the Flood Control Act, the single largest public expenditure in history to that time outside of World War I. The bill moved through Congress at a remarkable speed and was signed by Coolidge in May 1928. While the bill did nothing to recompense victims of the 1927 flood, it launched a massive program under federal sponsorship to strengthen flood control up and down the Mississippi, including the redesign and upgrading of levees.

In an article published after Hurricane Katrina, John Barry expressed hope that, as in the wake of the great flood, popular pressure would force the Bush administration and Congress to reassess their priorities.

The response to the hurricane disaster, however, shows precisely the opposite. There will not be a return to policies of social reformism by the US ruling elite. The sharp class divisions exposed by Katrina are the product of a long historical development, or rather degeneration, of US capitalism.

The United States in 1927 was still a rising economic power that had vast resources at its command. Nearly 80 years later, an entirely different situation exists. The United States is the world’s greatest debtor nation, faces enormous trade deficits and has an eroded industrial base.

The reaction of the ruling elite to the decline in the world position of US capitalism has been to systematically drive down living standards and dismantle the social programs established in the wake of the Great Depression and to slash taxes for the wealthy. At the same time, it is pursuing ever more reckless military adventures overseas.

The consequence has been a dramatic erosion of democratic rights and the polarization of society between a fabulously rich ruling elite and the mass of the working population.

Continuing on this trajectory, Congress has responded to Hurricane Katrina, not with a mass program of public works to improve the levee system and rebuild destroyed homes and businesses, but with further cuts in social programs, more tax cuts and the further strengthening of the repressive apparatuses of the state.

The inability of the United States to seriously address the crisis created by Katrina exposes the utter irrationality of an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and the subordination of social needs to the drive for profit.

The coming period will not witness a revival of social reformism, but ever more bitter class conflict. These convulsions promise to undermine and break up the rotting US political superstructure just as Katrina broke through the levees of New Orleans.



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