



# Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security

*Christopher Cooper , Robert Block*

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**Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security** Christopher Cooper , Robert Block  
Based on exclusive interviews, the inside story of how America's emergency response system failed and how it remains dangerously broken

When Hurricane Katrina roared ashore on the morning of August 29, 2005, federal and state officials were not prepared for the devastation it would bring--despite all the drills, exercises, and warnings. In this troubling expose of what went wrong, Christopher Cooper and Robert Block of "The Wall Street Journal" show that the flaws go much deeper than out-of-touch federal bureaucrats or overwhelmed local politicians. Drawing on exclusive interviews with federal, state, and local officials, Cooper and Block take readers inside the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Homeland Security to reveal the inexcusable mismanagement during Hurricane Katrina--the bad decisions that were made, the facts that were ignored, the individuals who saw that the system was broken but were unable to fix it. America's top emergency response officials had long known that a calamitous hurricane was likely to hit New Orleans, but that seems to have had little effect on planning or execution.

"Disaster" demonstrates that the incompetent response to Hurricane Katrina is a wake-up call to all Americans, wherever they live, about how distressingly vulnerable we remain. Washington is ill equipped to handle large-scale emergencies, be they floods or fires, natural events or terrorist attacks, and Cooper and Block make a strong case for overhauling of the nation's emergency response system. This is a book that no American can afford to ignore."

## Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security Details

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**Christopher Cooper , Robert Block**

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## Tom says

A definitive history of Hurricane Katrina remains to be written, but this is the best behind the scenes account of the disaster I've read so far. Jed Horne's *Breach of Faith* and *Voices Rising* by the Katrina Narrative Project focus more closely on the human dimensions of the disaster, but as a blow by blow analysis of myriad governmental failures that allowed the people of the Gulf Coast to suffer without aid for the better part of a week, *Disaster* is an admirable piece of reporting. It's a compelling, infuriating read.

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## Christopher Carbone says

*Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security* is not not a Monday-morning Quarter-back session. It's a deep and insightful look at what went horribly wrong. The story is written about the governmental failures at all three levels- the local, state and especially federal levels. It documents the rise and fall of one of the United States' most confused and misunderstood agencies- the Federal Emergency Management Agency - FEMA, and the men and women who collectively used it and ruined it.

The story begins with "Hurricane Pam" - a gigantic Category 4 Hurricane that ravaged New Orleans in 2004, flood waters drowning the whole city, topping the levees, and stranding hundreds of thousands of people and killing thousands of others. In all, a massive economic, social and human tragedy of unprecedented scale...

... at least on paper. Hurricane Pam was a FEMA-run training exercise, designed to get the state agencies coordinated with FEMA as they tried to prepare for certain disasters. The topping of New Orleans' levees (but not their breach) was a major, ongoing concern with FEMA (and later with Mike Brown), and they wanted state agencies prepared for such a catastrophe. In other words- EVERYONE saw this disaster coming.

Hurricane Pam taught everyone many things, but chief among them was that FEMA could respond to any challenge. All during the exercise, whenever somebody asked a very detailed question- ie: where will we get blankets? Who will take care of busing people out? Where will the generators come from? A FEMA agent would say, (paraphrasing) "FEMA will take care of that; we have those resources." So the state of Louisiana- in just the YEAR BEFORE Katrina - was taught a very valuable lesson: FEMA could handle this. Few doubted them.

The book takes great pains to describe the growth of FEMA since before the Reagan administration and how it was designed, primarily, to handle natural disasters. With Reagan, he shifted the focus to deal more with nuclear disasters and the focus was narrowed too much. That all changed with James Witt, Clinton's man to head FEMA who reorganized the agency to do what came "naturally": deal with natural disasters when the state (or more appropriately, states) could not. Prior to Witt, FEMA was on the federal chopping block.

Then the Mississippi River overflowed in a disaster not seen since the 19th century. FEMA sprung into action with a vengeance, hooking states up to vital supplies and stemming the flow of water where it could; evacuating people out of harm's way when they could not. It was simply a stellar performance by a federal

agency that 1) had a clear mission, 2) the funds to achieve its mission (Clinton had cut the military budget properly to get funds flowing to other agencies), and 3) had a leader that could fulfill that mission. The Mississippi River crisis NEVER was considered a disaster and it slunk away from the public consciousness thanks in no small part to FEMA.

On September 11, 2001, that all changed. FEMA suddenly and dramatically (and without even the smallest hint of direction) was transformed from a natural disaster agency and into an anti-terrorism organ, one that was responsible for dealing with terrorist attacks in a country that was suddenly bat-shit crazy over terrorist attacks. FEMA was immediately consumed by the new cabinet level agency, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). DHS was a massive, lumbering very, very very focused agency all-consumed with overtaking the war on terror in the US. One of its chief missions was to transform US federal agencies into soldiers in the war on terror.

Even if, like FEMA, they had ZERO experience doing so.

The result was chaos. Federal agencies were completely baffled as to what their mission was; could not figure out who was in control, were complete animals in protecting turf, and lost pretty much every shred of cooperation between agencies.

This was no clearer than in the ascension of Michael Brown to become head of FEMA

Brown had no experience as a head of a disaster agency of any kind. However, all sources agree that what Brown lacked in experience, he made up for in determination and hard-work. He hit the ground running and became intimately involved in the details of FEMA. And his principal recommendation was that FEMA was not prepared nor good at anti-terrorist involvement, and should get back to its core mission: preparing and responding to natural disasters.

But Michael Chertoff disagreed. Chertoff wanted everything poised at anti-terrorism AND natural disasters. But almost all of Chertoff's visions for natural disasters were based, bizarrely, with how terrorists would exploit natural disasters. The book does an excellent job of describing the Hubris between Brown and Chertoff: Chertoff the former judge and Brown the political animal and agency novice. Brown made few friends in Washington, was eminently dis-likable, was at times too quick to point out how hapless FEMA was becoming, and generally did not have any imagination or vision. All he did, mostly, was go to war with other departments n trying to increase FEMA's power and resources. Chertoff, the book is quick to point out, was mostly directed at cutting out FEMA's powers, most notably, its grant funding power.

Brown resented Chertoff and the two men developed a powerful rift.

But another rift was forming off the coast of Africa.

The book is absolutely clear on dispelling the vast (almost comical) rumors that took hold in the wake of Katrina. But the most amazing is that Katrina- while a powerful and strong storm -was NOT by ANY means a "storm of the century." It started over the dusty plains of Ethiopia and hit Tropical Storm status over the West Coast of Africa. While it DID achieve Category 4 status briefly over the Gulf of Mexico, it hit the LA coast as a pedestrian Cat. 3 storm.

And it also did NOT hit New Orleans head on. The storm grazed the city... and SLAMMED the Mississippi coast like a freight train. However, if the storm was the only thing to go wrong, it, at best, only struck the area hard.

However, the government was busy failing all over the place. The US Army Corps of Engineers had done a terrible job maintaining the levees in New Orleans; the devices that kept the city from being consumed by the largest river in the US and the largest lake in the state. In 2004, in response to the Hurricane Pam exercise, the Engineers stated that the levees were in exemplary condition; absolutely in tact in impervious to natural disasters. This caused the Pam designers to model the storm only TOPPING the levees, not breaching them.

The levees failed on contact with Katrina. The rumor that Chertoff and others CLUNG TO like a flood victim to a raft was that the levees failed after prolonged exposure to such a powerful storm. Wrong again. The levees crumbled immediately, sending water cascading over the National Guard barracks at the edge of the city almost immediately. Chertoff would say for YEARS that there were TWO disasters in NO: the hurricane and the levees. He NEVER connected the two. He has not to this day.

As the storm ravaged the city, one thing became incredibly clear AND WOULD BE MISREPORTED FOR YEARS AFTER: the city was essentially deserted. The book catalogs the rate in which the incredibly inept Ray Nagin and the completely out-of-touch Governor of LA lurched blindly in all this: but that they had, effectively, evacuated the city. Nagin had first ordered a voluntary evac, but then made it mandatory the next day. When the storm hit, only those unable (or exempt from the order: ie: hospitals) to move out were left behind. NO has completed one of the largest evacuations ever. As the book is quick to point out, this explains why "only" appx 1100 people were killed in the storm.

The result was predictable: the states turned to FEMA under the idea that FEMA could handle the problems LA would soon experience: just like had been the case with Pam. FEMA ... blinked.

Mike Brown panicked. He put on a brave face and tried to convince everyone BELOW him that everything was fine; but to Chertoff and others he said that this was going to be a huge problem. He kept flinching at the idea that the levees may be topped, or worse, breached. Nobody paid him any mind. But Brown NEVER impressed upon his superiors how critical the situation was, even trying to cover his own tail by simply saying they were ready for "the Big One."

FEMA was not.

Other myths: few of the people in NO had flood insurance; utterly not true. The city had one of the best records of flood insurance in the country; the city did not order a mandatory evacuation; they absolutely did. Another lie was that LA did not ask for federal disaster relief until weeks after the storm; they asked for it two days BEFORE the storm hit. Other rumors were that the people in the Superdome were committing atrocities and the same was true for the people in the Convention Center (wildly untrue; 6 people died inside the SD, 0 at the Convention center).

The book goes into detail at how completely clueless the organization was and how absolutely abysmal the DHS handled the whole situation; pulling resources around, moving Brown from one bad assignment to another, finally sequestering him in Baton Rouge where he effectively was useless. Bush and Cheney were so hapless during the problems that they often wanted to send in Army troops and Federalize the National Guards (both Governors of LA and MI refused all such "assistance"). When Bush visited NO (after comically exhibiting his cluelessness by flying over NO in Air Force One trying to "visualize" the carnage), he seemed more like a lost tourist than a President.

And the complete and total lack of coordination in getting supplies ANYWHERE- nobody got anything from the Fed for days; people roasted in their homes, died to exposure, drowning, thirst, etc. Brown at one point

promised buses to get the people out of town; the buses NEVER showed (the state had to use their own which were not nearly as large or as rugged as the FEMA ones- but at least they were there). Bodies rotted in the street as FEMA mortuary teams never were put into place; even the act of packing for animals was short-circuited as FEMA vacillated as to get cages for animals or not (pets were not allowed in the Superdome).

When Bush finally hit the ground he displayed three things: he did not know the scope of the problem, he seemed callously indifferent to those affected by the problem (bizarrely talking about only ONE victim while he was on the ground: Mississippi Senator Trent Lott and the loss of Lott's vacation home), and seemed utterly incapable of solving the problem. He then turned to Mike Brown and uttered the now famous "Kiss of Death" : "And Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job." When the dust settled, Bush was politically crippled (note how support for the Iraq War began to disintegrate right around Katrina; Nobody could pretend Bush of his team knew, cared or could solve any legitimate problems). Bush was regulated to a lame duck within hours of Katrina. In 2008, at the RNC, Bush gave a speech... via satellite, many miles from convention cite, with every Republican desperate to stay as far away from their President as possible. Mike Brown was forced to resign. He states to this day that the problems of Katrina were almost entirely those of the bloated, incompetent, and chaotic DHS.

But Brown failed in two vital areas: he never could engender support from his superiors or from those in other agencies he had to coordinate with AND he failed to display any vision or imagination in his post. However, DHS crippled FEMA long before Katrina crippled New Orleans.

The city was hampered by Ray Nagen and his own "dear-in-headlights" leadership style, and a LA governor who was too removed and was swayed too easily. Neither had good plans going into the disaster; neither could do much of anything while they were in the disaster. But they were told- for YEARS -that FEMA had the ball, long after FEMA clearly did not.

In the aftermath, the book details how everything went back to where it all started. Brown started doing independent consulting work, even for a NO parish (county). When word got out that Brown was involved with disaster protection, residence almost revolted. Brown refused to be paid in order to keep the peace. To this day, people stop Brown in the streets to say that they are sorry that they ever blamed him for what was obviously DHS's massive screw-up and that he was, most likely, a scapegoat. But to be fair, he is also a proper scape goat.

In 2005, Michael Chertoff gave a speech wherein he told an audience that in a disaster, people should plan to have supplies on hand for 72 hours. In other words, people are on their own.

Gee... thanks...

The book is amazing at describing the intricacies of a failure, describing EXACTLY what went wrong and why it went wrong. The book does not lay blame, but leaves it to the reader (the book is almost deferential to Bush). The book is also excellent at describing how the state and local governments screwed up as well, and does a good job explaining where what they did worked.

The book does have some failures; it spends a whole chapter describing post-Katrina issues that fall flat. The book also teds over certain facts that I wish were explored more. Finally, the book only describes the personal horrors of the storm after-the-fact, and I did not think this was particularly effective.

But overall the book describes a failure: not of levies or of storm command, but of leadership, vision, and determination. And above all, it shows that FEMA was also lost on 9/11- it was changed from a natural

disaster responder and into an anti-terrorst machine.

And that in the end, it can do neither.

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## **M says**

If you want to know why the Federal response to Katrina was such a complete failure, this is the book to read. Not only is it clear and informative, it's also a quick and enjoyable read, despite the subject matter.

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## **Rhonda says**

Disaster is a thorough inside take on the failures of the local, state and federal responses to Hurricane Katrina. I recommend this book to anyone living in the coastal Gulf states. The budget cuts, mismanagement, miscommunication and ineffective leadership will astound you. I kept up with the Katrina story as it happened because I live in South Louisiana, but Disaster gives a detailed, enlightened view of the story behind the story. Put it on your reading list--you won't be disappointed.

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## **Shelly says**

This was a very informative (albeit it little slanted) narrative and investigation into the sad events of Hurricane Katrina.

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## **Christopher says**

I started this book with a serious amount of trepidation thinking that it would be just another cheap bashing of Michael Brown, FEMA Director at the time of Katrina. This is because I have a bachelor's degree in emergency management, I'm FEMA Advanced Professional certified, voluntary on an animal disaster rescue team and my day job is in the first responder field in Florida. I was here for the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons. I also run a blog on personal preparedness.

After Katrina there was a flood of books that in order to get them out quickly took the easy route which was to blame everything on Brown even though it did not take much research to show otherwise, not so with this book. Disaster is actually a very well research and laid out book. Even for all the stuff that I already knew there was considerable amount of new information in here. The book centers its argument on the behind the scenes action that were going on or not going on as the case maybe at the Department of Homeland Security. Here the book lays most of the blame where it belongs on Chertoff and more importantly the bureaucracy of Homeland Security. While Brown made is share of mistakes he was far from the sole source of the train wreck that became the Federal Government's response to Katrina. There are even examples of things that Brown warned about in the 2003 reorganization that came true in 2005.

In the bid for sensationalistic news Brown became an easy whipping boy for the media in 2005 and Chertoff

was more than happy to let it happen because it kept media from looking too closely at his role. To prove and validate this point the authors looked at FEMA and Homeland Security's actions for Rita and Wilma. Not only did Homeland Security not learn anything they doubled down on the mistakes made in Katrina.

While understanding that the emphasis of the book was an examination of the Federal response there are some instances where Louisiana (Gov Kathleen Blanco) and New Orleans (Mayor Ray Nagin) were given too much of a pass.

I highly recommend this book for anyone who thinks that government is always the answer and that the higher you go the better.

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### **Jennifer says**

Pretty good book with a "top down" view of what went wrong with Hurricane Katrina. It's not so much the gory details about what happened in New Orleans, but rather how this one whole incident represents a failure of Homeland Security; in fact, the author claims, this was a natural consequence of the federal government's response to 9/11 and the war on terror. Beware - this will make you mad!

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### **Tom says**

The best journalistic account of Hurricane Katrina that I have read. Far better research and written than Brinkley's book.

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### **Roger says**

The book highlighted how inept FEMA and Homeland Security were with Katrina. The final sentence of the book says it all - "When disaster strikes, we are all on our own"

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### **Shannon says**

This book provided a thorough account of the leadership and governance failures in the response to Hurricane Katrina. It served as an interesting read and an opportunity to evaluate federal, state, and local issues. Only complaint: the authors had a tendency of repeating pieces of information throughout the book for no specific reason, lest they forgot that they had already covered that tidbit.

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### **John Morris says**

Great account and insight into this terrible, terrible disaster.



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## **Ron says**

Excellent text in the form of a long, enjoyable Wall Street Journal treatise of the event

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## **Melissa Hicks says**

Being a native of Louisiana, this book really hit home. The insights on the failure of FEMA when it came to relief efforts were to me, somewhat not well thought out as I feel more people could have been saved. The actual cause of the flooding of New Orleans wasn't because of the storm, but because of the weak levees that broke. The mental perception the writer, Christopher Cooper gives, is chilling and heart breaking. The mismanagement of funds, the miscommunication and the lack of leadership will remind you of the last year's disaster in Puerto Rico. Just like the documentary, When the Levees Broke, written by Spike Lee, the book takes you to a place that will weaken your heart and make you question the humanity of the government. I remember living in Shreveport, Louisiana which is northwest of the state, and the aftermath was horrible. The high winds and heavy rain knocked out power for miles throughout the city. It only took a couple of days for restoration of electricity. After words, the news both told and showed the horrific scene of the flooding in New Orleans. Ray Nagin, who was Mayor at the time of the storm, pleaded for government officials to help with disaster relief and rescue. The news showed families on roof tops waiting for rescue and some were in town looting the stores for clothing and food. When civilian officials couldn't get a grip on Hurricane Katrina's devastation, it was Lt. Gen. Russel Honore who took charge, leading federal troops to help rescue thousands still stranded in New Orleans days after the storm. The levee and flood wall failures caused flooding in 80% of New Orleans and all of St. Bernard Parish. Tens of billions of gallons of water spilled into vast areas of New Orleans, flooding over 100,000 homes and businesses. Responsibility for the design and construction of the levee system belongs to the United States Army Corps of Engineers; the responsibility of maintenance belongs to the local levee boards. The Corps hands components of the system over to the local levee boards upon completion. When Katrina struck in 2005, the project was between 60–90% complete. Four major investigations were conducted by civil engineers and other experts in an attempt to identify the underlying reasons for the failure of the federal flood protection system. All concur that the primary cause of the flooding was inadequate design and construction by the Corps of Engineers. The disbursement of the survivors and their story will break your heart. This book is defiantly a must read.

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## **Julie says**

Good, comprehensive compilation of events. No sugar-coating here. Everyone gets their fair share of criticism.

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## **Piedmont\_Michael says**

The title pretty much covers it. There was failure on multiple levels: federal, state, and local authorities. A little slow reading at times, you get bogged down ... I think it will be many more years before all the lessons of Katrina are learned.

