Urban Politics in the United States

**The Impact and Aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy**

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1. Mayor Ray Nagin’s responses to the Katrina Hurricane disaster in New Orleans have been widely questioned and criticized by many. Yet reading some excerpts from his book, he seems to be very upset by how things were handled. In an interview, he read some of these excerpts, detailing how President Bush decided to give a speech in a completely unlit and section of town, the French Quarter.3 This section was completely off the grid. With the President’s speech to be at 9pm, “The feds” came in the “fancy, expensive equipment as if they were lighting up New York’s Times Square”.3Then, almost immediately, post-speech, all equipment was removed. Nothing was left, not as a gift to aid recovery services in a completely power-less part of the city. Then, he goes on about how Jefferson Parish secretly pumped floodwaters into a breached levee multiple times, about how Gretna officials stopped people in the Convention Center marching on a federal interstate, about how St. Bernard officials blocked a critical escape road just before Katrina hit which stopped people from escaping, and halted floodwater drainage. This entire excerpt shows a more human side of Mayor Nagin. A man who has failed because of others. It also shows that he does not want to be solely responsible. That said, he did respond to the threat at the time. Over the weekend before the storm hit, some parishes had been ordered to evacuate. Roads were opened to contraflow in an attempt to minimize congestion, which failed. On Sunday, a mandatory evacuation for New Orleans had been signed after working through the night. Granted, this was after final confirmation of Katrina’s course, and working through the night for the evacuation order.4 Also, after he had made several public statements telling people to evacuate, but to those who wouldn’t, he said “We will take care of you”.2 Mayor Nagin seems to not have responded adequately and not early enough.

Then, there’s the corruption and indictments currently going on. Ray Nagin has been indicted on multiple counts of fraud, corruption, and bribery.5 These charges state that he used his office for personal gain, accepting bribes in the form of money, gifts, and free trips.1 The charges state he accepted more than $160,000 in bribes, and free granite for his family’s business. These were exchanged for business interests in the Katrina recovery. Businessmen gave him and others bribes for multi-million dollar contracts for architectural, engineering, and management services.1

After having read through some of these articles and excerpts, I can only conclude that Ray Nagin was a man capable of weighing legal aspects with financial aspects. He did not do enough to limit damage to New Orleans and the New Orleans people, and then accepted bribes in the wake of Katrina. It might have been possible that, had he not accepted the bribes, the city would have recovered quicker, but this cannot be proven. All that is known, is he violated Louisiana Ethics Law.1 At this point, to make up for some of the errors throughout the Katrina incident, a new levee and drainage system has been finished, with massive amounts of support by Nagin.6

1. In contrast to Mayor Ray Nagin’s approach to Hurricane Katrina, Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s approach was more severe. Having seen Katrina’s effects, Bloomberg was more prepared. The people were given a two day advanced mandatory evacuation, not one.7 The city was more prepared. In the aftermath, Bloomberg has fought hard for funds to rebuild quickly. He even fought to keep the New York City Marathon going, but because the damage was severe, the sponsors dropped the marathon.10 Since then, he has pushed PlanNYC to continue development on climate change plans.9 He has also proposed a $20 billion system of flood barriers designed to protect low areas from storms.8 He has worked extremely hard to aid people in need. He has accomplished so much that experts in leadership and disaster response have given him very high marks for his performance in response to Sandy.11 All in all, New York City’s pre-emptive attempts at damage limitation proved effective. In New York City, only about 100 people died, versus 2,000 in Katrina.11 Those numbers are so vastly different because of the pre-emptive efforts at damage limitation, where most died in the storm, rather than after it like in Katrina.

Yet as a man, Bloomberg is questionable. He is cold, he does not inspire. Yet as a CEO, a manager of things, he is an expert.11 He managed Sandy very well, having a cool head, and some luck with many worst-case scenarios not manifesting. He did visit some disaster-ridden areas, and was confronted by people multiple times. Yet, he still kept his cool. Many felt this as abandonment, but the amount of logistical problems Bloomberg dealt with were staggering.10

All in all, Bloomberg did a very good job of managing the situation. While Chris Christie was heavily involved as well, it was Bloomberg’s efforts for funding and recovery that has helped NYC recover so quickly.

1. FEMA’s response to Katrina was vastly different than to Sandy. With Katrina, FEMA was not able to respond until after the incident. Post-Katrina, the Post-Katrina Reform Act was created, which now allows FEMA to declare an emergency before it happens, rather than after it.12 This allowed FEMA to pre-emotively prepare for Sandy, rather than just react to her. For Sandy, food, water, and equipment was prepared in New Jersey to be ready once the storm had passed. FEMA worked alongside their local counterparts to prepare as much as possible. FEMA was ready. This was crucial to Sandy relief and recovery.12 In contrast, with Katrina, FEMA couldn’t act until after. This resulted in widespread criticism of the government, and FEMA.13 Because response was so unprepared and minimal, there was massive public hate for FEMA.13 Since Katrina, though, FEMA has worked hard to be ready for almost anything. In one notable case, Bill Carwile, FEMA’s response operations head, was enraged when told about a man who’d asked “Where the hell’s FEMA at?”. He had spent his time since Katrina preparing for something like Sandy, and FEMA had succeeded.14
2. I have a few recommendations. Of these, I know some are pretty much financially unfeasible. I would recommend centralized disaster gathering areas along the coast of the gulf, and the eastern seaboard. People attempting to escape should have a place to go to. This would, however, be difficult to implement as it would cost a huge amount of resources. Next, I would recommend quicker response, and an earlier pre-emptive approach. This problem was almost completely fixed by FEMA during Hurricane Sandy. Next, construction should be beefed up. Flimsy housing resulted in extraneous damage. Yes, this would be incredibly costly, but it would not only solve flood and wind issues, but help with keeping cool air inside in the summer. Also, the building will last for millennia. Lastly, I would suggest residents take escaping into their own hands, and leave much earlier. Extremely low thresholds for emergency declaration should be present. As a bonus, my last recommendation is completely unfeasible, but would solve the issue of another Katrina: don’t put a city there.
3. My recommendations to Sandy are far less extreme than they are to Katrina. First of all, FEMA was prepared this time. But, you can never be prepared enough, so I would suggest putting more funds aside in preparation for another incident, mobilizing even sooner, and with many more resources. As with Katrina, I would suggest massive construction upgrades. In general, I feel American construction of homes is vastly lower quality than European buildings, and suffer for it. Thirdly, the electrical and communications infrastructure of New York City took a few weeks to recover. Currently, many companies are upgrading their communications fiber optics and data lines to survive water damage. This should have been done the first time these things were built. Skipping things like this does cut costs, but will come back to harm you, and it did. Lastly, New York City’s infrastructure system should have been built to handle flooding. The tunnels and sewage systems were flooded for a long time. If these systems had been built to handle flooding of any sort, this would have been war less damaging. In fact, I recommend every city near bodies of water have some sort of system for handling flooding, even if it is minor. Any measures that can limit damage should be taken.

Sources

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