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When the Levees Broke

Hurricane Katrina is one of the worst environmental disasters in the history of The United States. Over \$81 billion was lost to damages, over 800 thousand people lost their homes, and almost two thousand lost their lives. To make the situation worse, the handling of the events leading up to and after the hurricane remains extremely controversial. Varying social, political and economic issues were the catalysts which unlocked the true destructive power of Hurricane Katrina.

An abundance of social and cultural issues made the fallout from Katrina exponentially worse. The social climate of New Orleans is unlike any other city in the U.S. Most of the families residing in New Orleans have lived there for generations, and many have never traveled outside the city. This fostered a relationship between the residents and the city itself, that is, many were not willing to evacuate the only place they have ever lived. The residents also had a false sense of security. In 1965, New Orleans was struck by Hurricane Betsy. Although this hurricane caused massive damages, the city was able to rebuild and overcome it. This created a secure mentality for residents; if they were able to survive Betsy, then surely, they could survive Katrina. These two factors stopped residents from evacuating their homes, adding to more lost lives. Not every resident decided to wait out the storm, but some did try to evacuate. Some of these residents tried to evacuate by crossing the Mississippi Bridge into Jefferson County. To

their surprise, they were stopped by police and told they couldn't cross. It is theorized that the more affluent and primarily Caucasian residents of Jefferson County didn't want the poor African American residents of New Orleans to "invade" their neighborhood.

A hostile political climate also aided the destructive power of Katrina. The levee system in place in Katrina was subpar, to say the least. The levees were built by the Corps of Engineers, and they assured the public that their levees would be able to withstand a category three hurricane. Despite this, the levees were not built correctly. The levees were not dug deep enough into the ground, therefore water was able to seep below the levees and push them apart. They fell over like dominoes shortly after the storm hit. In addition to the poorly constructed levee system, F.E.M.A. (Federal Emergency Management Agency) was not working as intended. After the disaster struck, F.E.M.A. declared that they would allocate part of their budget to pay for housing to those who lost their homes. This primarily included paying for hotel rooms. At the end of November, just two months after the storm hit, F.E.M.A. stopped paying for these hotel rooms. To handle the mass amounts of people who would no longer have a home, F.E.M.A. was supposed to provide over 40 thousand trailers to those in need. The wait time to receive these trailers was severely backed up. It took some people months to receive theirs, leaving them effectively homeless for the time being. Once again, to handle these homeless people, F.E.M.A. shipped them to various housing locations across the country. This created mass hysteria since many of these residents have never left their home city. This exodus caused a lack of communication between household members; some even went months without being able to contact their family members.

Finally, a range of economic issues plagued those who were affected by Hurricane Katrina. Louisiana is an oil-rich state and the federal government took most of their profits.

Many local government officials urged the federal government to use some of the profits to rebuild the state's wetlands, which were destroyed from the extraction of oil. Wetlands are a crucial defense mechanism for coastal states. These wetlands act as a sponge which "soak up" water in the chance of a flood. Without these wetlands, Louisiana is at a major risk for flood damage. Despite these warnings, the federal government did nothing to rebuild the wetlands, adding to the damage caused by Katrina. After Katrina hit, a countrywide debate began between insurance companies and the residents of New Orleans. Since New Orleans is a coastal city, many of the residents have flood insurance. Those that had flood insurance filed a case with their insurance company. However, these insurance companies were reluctant to pay out. They argued that the water damage was caused by the hurricane directly, and not flooding caused by the hurricane. Thus, flood insurance would not cover the damages. Land developers also contributed to the disastrous fallout of Katrina. Over 800 thousand people lost their homes, creating an abundance of open land for developers to potentially seize. Developers descended on New Orleans and offered to buy out the barren land, which once contained the homes of residents. Since these residents had barely anything left, they felt forced to sell their land to developers who were offering them next to nothing. Land developers thus exploited the victims of Katrina solely to buy cheap property.

Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst hurricanes experienced by the United States, both in terms of its destructive power and how cleanup was handled. Today, the city of New Orleans is still recovering and rebuilding. Families are forever torn apart, and lives are ruined. The combination of social, political, and economic issues prolonged a natural disaster which will forever reside in United States infamy.