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# Forecasting Mass Destruction, from Gulf to Gulf

by Sheila Carapico | published September 29, 2005

While internally displaced Americans were piled into an unequipped New Orleans sports stadium, the question on everyone's lips was: where were the Louisiana National Guard and its high-water trucks when Hurricane Katrina struck? One answer, obviously, was that at least a third of the Guard's human and mechanical resources were deployed to Iraq. Anti-war protesters demonstrating in Washington on September 24, 2005 as a new storm battered the Gulf coast turned the question into a new slogan: "Make Levees, Not War."

Pundits and protesters shared a gloomy sense of connection between the seemingly unrelated storylines of catastrophe along the Gulf of Mexico and the no less catastrophic US military intervention in the Persian Gulf. Linked to the Iraq war by repugnant pictures and abject forecasting malfunctions, and converging with the war's impact on the American pocketbook via soaring government expenses and gas prices, the weather-wrought calamity simultaneously revealed and concealed US mishaps in the Middle East.

## Cinema Verité

First, there was the sheer, horrifying spectacle of it. The scale and duration of destruction and death and the feelings of vulnerability and sadness associated with the hurricane recalled the attacks of September 11, 2001. But the video itself was more extensive and less telegenic. Katrina unleashed a torrent of unsightly visual images Americans hardly ever see on television, so many close-ups of the feeble and the dispossessed, the angry and the unkempt, people who live in slums, trailers and nursing homes. The gritty *cinéma vérité* on the 24-hour news channels was vaguely evocative of the vile photos from inside Abu Ghraib prison, in that case snapshots of a ghostly, humiliating reality captured on handheld phones and delivered uncensored and disembedded from the dominant narrative. Now the normally invisible American poor—so invisible that evacuation plans overlooked them—literally stretched out their hands to the cameras.

On the scene days before the federal government's relief convoys, camera crews offered relief neither to their hapless subjects nor to the sickened audience. The running commentary offered no soothing undertone of triumph over adversity, no climax wherein heroes race to the rescue. Katrina was not the Asian tsunami of 2004, with self-congratulatory coverage of care packages air-dropped efficiently and effectively by the US Air Force to those left alive, but endless footage of those left to die. People who stuck it out or swam their families to safety were presented not as plucky survivors but as pathetic refugees or rowdy rabble. The New Orleans story conjured the discomfort of the Abu Ghraib photos because the pictures themselves were ugly, raw and unedited, and because, unlike on September 11 when New York firemen charged into the towering inferno, there were really no good guys in sight, not even a poster child. Jean Baudrillard, the intellectual inspiration for the films in *The Matrix* series, might call it "hyper-real." What was captured on camera failed to simulate the simulation.

## Unpredictability

The New Orleans deluge washed up epistemological questions about how we know what we know, what events or circumstances can be foreseen, and the differences among possibilities, probabilities, predictions and scenarios. How did this happen after four years of talking about "preparedness" for melodramatic emergencies centered on terrorist sabotage

of vital infrastructure? How could the vast new Department of Homeland Security have failed to absorb the engineering reports, meteorological studies and flood simulations that were both ample and amply available, and failed to make adequate preparations for a storm predicted for days whose effects had been foretold for decades?

The dissonance between assurances of preparedness and the discombobulated response to Katrina was deeply disconcerting to the US national psyche. Again government failed to anticipate and respond to danger, whether from terrorists, rogue nations or the weather. Al-Qaeda was already on the radar screen of intelligence analysts and specialized academics in 2001, and evidence that the organization was actively planning a major attack on the United States was arguably overlooked. But the stunning hijackings and crash landings of September 11 had certainly not been mapped onto a trajectory with the accuracy found in the Army Corps of Engineers' projections of the impact of a Category 5 storm surge upon the Crescent City's soup bowl. In this sense, the collapse of the World Trade Center towers was a complete surprise. Katrina felt "as big as 9/11" to many Americans, except that this time the national protectors had no excuse for being caught off guard. The president's self-exculpating bleat notwithstanding, plenty of experts had "anticipated the breach of the levees."

It is bad enough that the nation's soothsayers failed to foresee the two episodes of actual mass death and destruction in US cities. Now juxtapose those blind spots with the Bush administration's pseudo-scientific evidence of illicit weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the fatal consequences thereof.

The story of the wild WMD chase went beyond faulty interpretation of aerial photography. It involved the systematic discrediting of the professional arms inspectors who had halted the Iraqi nuclear program and then spent a decade destroying what remained of Saddam Hussein's chemical arsenal and biological weapons research. It required the methodical sidelining of dissenting expert opinion on the uses of aluminum tubes. Rather than champion the findings of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, former Secretary of State Colin Powell showed the world satellite photos and diagrams as he wove a phantasmagoric narrative about substances hypothetically manufactured in laboratories or Saddam's basement and then passed off to terrorists and smuggled into the US in suitcases. It involved transforming the notion of "mass" from a quantitative measure of scale to a quality that inheres in a substance even in miniscule amounts, as if a sarin gas attack in Tokyo were the equivalent of an atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Along with the most serious news outlets like the *New York Times* and the *PBS NewsHour*, a majority of Congressional representatives took this narrative at face value, and a defeated, disarmed and dilapidated dictatorship was magnified into a genuine threat to US national security. The delusions of a handful of Iraqi exiles who expected to be showered with roses during their triumphant homecoming atop US tanks were preferred over the sober assessments from inside the Pentagon. The perpetually surprised Bush administration embodies Americans' missing danger monitor, but the failure was epistemic. There is now a great, gaping credibility gap.

## **Mounting Costs**

If these mismatches between "preparedness" and preparation have induced national trauma, the anxiety is heightened by the double whammy of disaster-area reconstruction costs and spiraling gas prices.

Just how will the United States pay for rebuilding along Gulf coast beaches and shoring up the Persian Gulf beachhead simultaneously? With bills from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita still being totted up, Bush has already quietly taken his top domestic priorities—making his tax cuts permanent and privatizing Social Security—off the table. The 2001 and 2003 tax cuts translated into \$225 billion in lost revenue. According to a tally released on August 31 by the Institute for Policy Studies, the Iraq war has cost US taxpayers \$204.4 billion and counting. That is well over \$400 billion worth of red ink to drench the federal budget. Reconstruction in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas could rival those expenditures.

And where, exactly, will those billions go? So far two Iraq war profiteers, the Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg, Brown and Root and Bechtel, are among the 22 companies the Corps of Engineers awarded no-bid "indefinite delivery-indefinite quantity" contracts to rebuild the region devastated by Katrina. These contracts have drawn critical attention from the Government Accountability Office and Congress because they are open-ended and insufficiently specific about the work to be performed. (In Iraq, for instance, an indefinite delivery-indefinite quality contract for "information technology" was used to hire the Virginia-based company called CACI to supply interrogators for Abu Ghraib.) KBR, which had to repay the government millions overcharged in Iraq, was allocated \$16 million to repair the New Orleans levees before Rita damaged them further.

Not only the national pocketbook, but also the household checkbook, will take a hit. The twin typhoons' damage to rigs, refineries and shipping in the Gulf of Mexico drove gasoline and heating oil costs to new highs. This gives us good reason to reconsider the fuel-profligate policies of the past 15 years of economic growth in the United States. That growth has been led by domestic consumption, especially mall-and-McMansion "development" in exurbs accessible only by automobile and the related markets in housing-lending and gas-guzzling vehicles. Ironically, today's SUVs are the descendants of the high-end, heavy-duty, off-road, four-wheel drive luxury jeeps, such as the Toyota Landcruiser and the Chevy Suburban, that were developed in the 1970s, at the peak of the oil boom, for the Saudi Arabian market. The suburban cowboys who are the Republican base will feel higher gas prices more than cuts in either taxes or social services. Along with other middle Americans, they may begin to wonder whether US Persian Gulf policy, which in the subliminal popular imagination is connected to the American "way of life" via the gas pump, is working. In short, the American way of life is getting a great deal more expensive as the costs of the war mount and the \$50 tank of gas threatens to become not only the norm, but a fond memory. Evacuations in advance of Rita that wasted all the gasoline in Texas were but another shocking symptom of hydrocarbon addiction.

Perhaps, along the lines of the New Deal or the Marshall Plan, massive government deficit funding and tax incentives for shoreline, rural and urban redevelopment will lead to a new era of prosperity in one of the poorest regions in North America. It is possible that the Ninth Ward, totally swamped twice in one month, will rise again as McOrleans, with a reproduction French Quarter mall surrounded by houses with porches like Sen. Trent Lott's, and that the Mississippi delta of the future will look more like South Florida, and that Houston will build new roads to alleviate traffic jams in future evacuations. For that matter, Galveston could imitate Dubai, crafting islands in the shape of world maps and palm trees in the Gulf. Or a more environmentally sound coastal policy could be pursued. But none of this can be done with Monopoly money; the government must tax more, borrow more or slash spending drastically in other areas. Moreover, whether the policies of burning off fossil fuels with little thought to conservation, ignoring global warming pessimists' dire prophecies of low-land inundation and waving off the Kyoto protocols are contributing to the frequency and

intensity of biblical floods or not, the era of “development” and “security” both pinned to the premise of endless supplies of plentiful cheap petroleum is probably behind us.

## **Seeing the Unseen**

Storm stories pushed Iraq news off US front pages even as the mayhem there took an even more ominous turn, with record deaths a month before the yea-or-nay vote slated for October 15 on the deeply flawed draft constitution. Homeland destruction became the proxy for what Americans don't see in Iraq coverage. Both stories lack a heartwarming metanarrative. Abu Ghraib notwithstanding, heavy censorship has so far kept the public from viewing much of the human and material wreckage wrought upon Iraq in the last two and a half years. In ten days, there were more portraits of corpses in New Orleans, abandoned in wheelchairs or floating in muck, than 30 months of Iraq war coverage has yielded. Americans saw no pictures of the internally displaced of Falluja in November 2004, nor of the people forcibly evacuated from Tall Afar during the week of the New Orleans emergency. Many Americans readily buy the official myth that people in Iraq are better off despite displacement and shaky access to electricity and running water, but when former First Lady Barbara Bush tried that cynical line on Katrina evacuees in a Texas shelter, she prompted sneers of derision.

The tide of US public opinion has turned: a majority of Americans now think homeland security begins at home. The story about democratizing Iraq, including the current chapter on constitutional-referendum-as-panacea, increasingly reads like a fairy tale.

Abroad, in the Arab and international media, the waters crested over the dam and have sought a new level. US imperialism is projected via a reputation for omniscience and omnipotence, intelligence and power of epic proportions, great wealth and ultimate invincibility. The teleological conspiracy theories so rampant in the Arab world linking the September 11 attacks to the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, fed by the outright lies about WMDs—the US must have known, even planned, how things would turn out—are built on this parable of indestructibility and foolproof information. Now it turns out that it is not only Asian nations that lack early warning systems to sound the alarm before disaster strikes; it is not only Asians who have to smell the stench of death in the streets for weeks or have to beg for basic necessities. On al-Jazeera, the coverage has been respectful and sympathetic, but not without a few tastes of irony, both whimsical and bitter. The pan-Arab satellite channel reported Fidel Castro's offer of a Cuban relief package as if it might be accepted. It also broadcast pictures of uniformed and armed Americans bypassing corpses that would be familiar to regular viewers of its photojournalism from Iraq. The bankruptcy of US promises of “security” in both Gulfs lies devastatingly exposed.

The Bush administration chose this moment to send its new Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, the inveterate spinstress Karen Hughes, on a “listening tour” of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. As she deflected pointed questions with platitudes and promises, her audiences responded with growing incredulity. The credibility gap is felt there, too.