

Learning (and Unlearning) the Lessons of Katrina

Sifting Through Myths, Distortions
and Suppressed Truths

by Jed Horne

Most of us who live down here have always known about wind and water and the terrible toll hurricanes can exact in a place like New Orleans. A lesson from Katrina that caught some of us by surprise was this: the flow of information—accurate information, warped and misleading information—can have consequences as critical as the flow of wind and water. It can injure and even kill.

Here's something else we learned. Government efforts to suppress or spin the truth are only one form of censorship that follows a disaster like Katrina. There is self-censorship. And then there are the stereotypes—racial, ethnic, geographic, political—that merge with other impediments to warp clear thinking, at a time when clear thinking is so urgently needed. Stereotypes are a self-derived version of the spin-meistering we have gotten fairly good at spotting among double-talking politicians and government functionaries. Ironically, we seem to have a harder time purging it from our own thinking.

One of the central tasks I took on in writing *Breach of Faith* was to try to set the record straight, to sift truth from fiction and to understand why there was so much of the latter floating around on worldwide media following the storm. Some of it is out there to this day.

I am reminded of that as I visit schools and universities that have begun to embrace *Breach of Faith* as an all-purpose text for studying Katrina. It is a wonderful thing to see that teachers are unwilling to follow the lead of the federal government and pretend that Katrina is old news.

Katrina must not be relegated to what George Orwell, in 1984, called the “memory hole,” the place where we file what we want to forget. The flooding that followed the hurricane is the worst disaster ever to have befallen an American city and New Orleans remains a

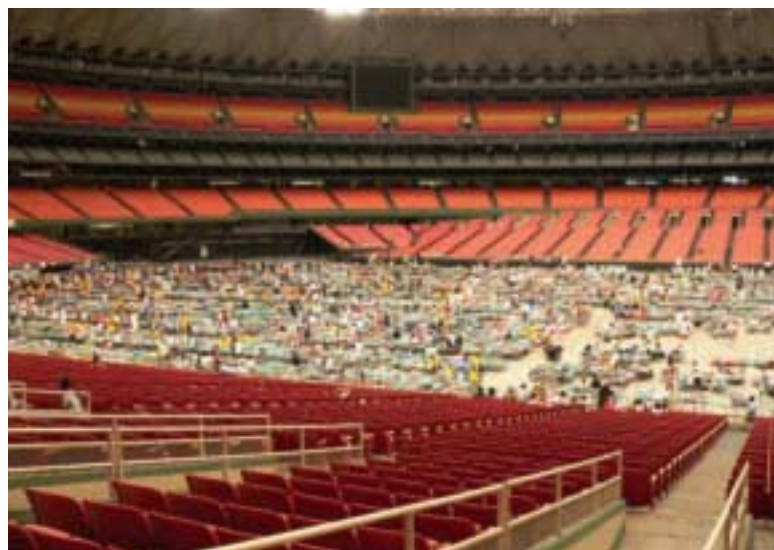
deeply wounded place. Katrina in New Orleans—the Mississippi Coast had a different experience—was not a “natural disaster,” though in the storm’s aftermath the Army Corps badly tried to convince us, and itself, that it was. It was not a question of a hurricane being simply “too big” for the system of levees and other flood defenses that had been built to fight it. In fact, the levees fell apart before the storm had reached full strength and, even at full strength, Katrina was not as strong a storm as the levees were “engineered” to survive.



The catastrophe known as Katrina may have been triggered by a hurricane in a particularly vulnerable part of the country, but one of its central lessons is about the deep challenges we face in maintaining—or failing to maintain—the infrastructure all across America: not just levees, but also bridges, dams, roadways, public water systems—all of it. It can't happen here? We don't get hurricanes? Ask the good people of Minneapolis. They watched friends and neighbors die when a major bridge collapsed. Much more of that lies ahead without major reinvestment in America's public assets.

Deep shame over the failure of the levee system it had designed explains the Army Corps' initial instinct to pretend that the levees had been "overtopped." *Breach of Faith* explores the eventually successful crusade by independent scientists and engineers to prove that the Corps was hiding its failure behind falsehoods. It's a real-world detective story. One of the crusading scientists even went through the flooded areas retrieving stopped clocks so that he could recreate the path of destruction minute by minute, block by block.

Immediately after the hurricane, we were treated to another species of equally unhelpful rumor mongering: the claim—by the mayor and the police chief, no less—



that New Orleans had become a scene of mass rape and murder. Sobbing on Oprah's shoulder before a worldwide audience, the police chief spoke of an epidemic of "babies getting their throats cut." Of course news media picked up on the hyperbole—badly undercutting public support for a city that, more than ever, was dependent on the kindness of strangers, to borrow a phrase from Tennessee Williams' famous play about New Orleans, "A Streetcar Named Desire."

Another piece of propaganda: To this day there are people in New Orleans, including educated people who should know better, convinced that the white elite blew up the levees on purpose to drive out poor blacks.

Drawing heavily on work by colleagues at the newspaper where I worked, *Breach of Faith* chased these rumors to their roots—some as old as the Mississippi River flood of 1927.

I came to think of this stuff—these lies and misinformation—as analogous to the debris—shingles, sign posts, cars and trees—that fly through the air as a hurricane passes by, harmful and gravely compounding the damage from wind and water.

A hurricane, my scientist friends explained to me, is a giant cyclone, a funnel of whirling wind much, much bigger than that other kind of whirling wind, the one we call a tornado. The cyclonic wind creates a vacuum that draws the ocean up into itself in a giant rolling dome. The really horrendous destruction of the type seen in coastal Mississippi happens as that system reaches land and the dome rises high in coastal shoals and then crosses the shoreline, destroying everything in its path: houses, trees, cars, marinas full of boats. The information-age analogue to that vacuum was the one created





by the complete collapse of New Orleans communications infrastructure: phone lines, cell towers, broadcast antennas. If nature abhors a vacuum, so, it seems, does the human mind. The information vacuum drew up into itself not a dome of sea water but the demons and bogeymen that lurk in the depths of our own subconscious.

Reporters who spent the 1990s in workshops sensitizing themselves and their media to racial and gender stereotyping, fell back into old habits with startling ease and portrayed impoverished, majority-black New Orleans as a city of animals. Based on misinformation—that storm victims were firing on emergency helicopters,

for example—FEMA relief workers suspended their rescue work and bus drivers, en route to complete the city's evacuation, held back. Delays of even a few hours assured that the death toll was going to be higher among the frail and the elderly.

The demonizing of Katrina's victims also played into the initial—and continuing—reluctance by Congress and the Bush administration to commit wholeheartedly to the rebuilding of New Orleans. As explained in an epilogue to the paperback version of *Breach of Faith*, three years after Katrina, those attitudes still have a retarding effect on the recovery.

But even without the unstinting government help that was promised and then withheld, local residents and the tens of thousands of volunteers who have swept into the city have turned New Orleans into a laboratory for the reinvention not just of a beautiful old Southern city but of cities everywhere.

The public education system—a disaster long before Katrina—has been completely revamped through a controversial, but so far promising, reliance on charter schools. Political corruption has been attacked; structures of governance overhauled; health care rethought; housing codes revised; housing projects demolished—not without bitter, even momentarily violent, controversy.

The post-Katrina experience repays close study, both of what must be done and of the processes through which a city and a nation have informed themselves of the truth that underlies myths and distortions. As I travel from campus to campus, it is a source of special satisfaction to this school teacher's son to discover that America's educators are taking up that challenge. The challenge is also an opportunity. Katrina is a fascinating story, but the lessons extend far beyond the flood plain. ■

BREACH OF FAITH

Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City
by Jed Horne

Jed Horne's widely hailed book on Hurricane Katrina, *Breach of Faith*, has just been issued in paperback with extensive new material on how the recovery of New Orleans is faring three years later. Declared "the best of the Katrina books" by National Public Radio and other media, "Breach of Faith" was selected by Louisiana State University as required reading for all 5,000 entering freshmen. It was a finalist for the New York Public Library's Helen Bernstein Award, one of six works of book-length non-fiction so honored and the only one of them on the topic of Katrina.

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7650-2, 464 pp., \$16.00



About the Writer

Descendant of a long line of Yankee school teachers, JED HORNE, a Harvard graduate, was city editor of The New Orleans Times-Picayune when Katrina struck. His writing on Katrina was included in submissions for which the paper was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes.