

Hurricane Katrina's winds uncover social, political and economic failures

"Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job" may well be one of those presidential sound bites that stays around long after people have forgotten the specifics of who "Brownie" (FEMA Director Michael D. Brown) was.



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A few days after making that statement, the president reconsidered his assessment of Brown's oversight of the Hurricane Katrina recovery effort, and Brown was replaced by U.S. Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen for that role.

By now, Brown's meager qualifications for his job are well known, as is the fact that the administration populated the top echelons of FEMA with political appointees lacking qualifications to manage emergencies, which spurred an exodus of experienced disaster experts from the agency.

With Hurricane Ophelia churning off our coastline last week, it was cold comfort to know that Brown had been sent back to Washington to resume his watchful oversight of potential future disasters. His resignation, days later, was no surprise.

Of considerably more comfort, for those of us who experienced Hurricane Hugo in 1989, was the knowledge that our local governments and political leaders performed superbly during Hugo and its aftermath.

In late September, 1989, my wife and I were vacationing in Santa Fe when we flipped on the national news and heard Charleston Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. and County Council Chair Linda Lombard practically yelling at the top of their lungs for everyone to "get out now!"

And while not everyone evacuated, the message was (literally) loud and clear,

and was given early enough to allow people to get to shelters or get out of town. Their efforts and those of countless others in the area's city and county governments undoubtedly saved many lives.

After the storm passed, we flew home via Savannah because Charleston's air terminal was trashed. We drove the last leg in a borrowed car, arriving a couple of days after the storm struck.

And yes, all the familiar phrases applied, "It looked like a war zone!," etc. No power, tap water flowing but possibly not safe to drink and a mess that required 72,000 truckloads of debris to be hauled to nearby landfills.

One thing I do remember is "the spirit of Hugo." In the aftermath of the storm, virtually everyone in the tri-county region who was able-bodied went to work cleaning up the community within hours after the storm hit.

Political squabbling fell by the wayside and people really pulled together to bring the Lowcountry back to life. Help began to pour in from around the country within days. We did ourselves proud.

An unfair comparison

That is not to say it is fair to compare Katrina and Hugo. Fellow "Hugo survivors" I've spoken with agree that as bad as Hugo was, Katrina was far worse in scope and impact, especially when the levees gave way and the city of New Orleans was flooded, as had long been predicted.

Still, it is clear that neither Louisiana's state or local governments were adequately prepared to deal with the threat of a direct hit or near miss of New Orleans by a category 4 storm.

And just as important, the risk of catastrophic flooding from a breach of the city's levees had basically been disregarded for decades at all levels of government. As I heard former Louisiana Sen. John Breaux say on the radio, "Louisiana rolled the dice and lost."

Too many problems

I've been to New Orleans a few times, but that was years ago. I was unaware

until after Katrina hit that the city's economy had been on a downward path for some time, with a declining population and a high percentage of people living at or below the poverty line.

Add to that the unprecedented damage from 80% of the city being underwater for days, and it is clear that New Orleans will be a different place than it has been. How different, and in what ways, are anybody's guess.

The first question is whether it is financially and technically feasible to create the kind of flood control system needed to truly protect the city from another Katrina or worse. If not, it doesn't seem to make economic sense to rebuild much of the city, painful as that will be to New Orleanians.

The second question, far more complex, is whether something better than New Orleans as she was socially and economically before the storm can rise from the ruins of Katrina.

The answer may be in the affirmative, but a successful rebirth of the city will demand leadership and good government in quantities that many say are lacking based on past performance.

The damage to New Orleans is a catastrophe on a scale rarely seen in this country. It is hard to make comparisons with the 9/11 attack on New York City, horrible as that was, because New York's overall infrastructure and population were traumatized but not destroyed or displaced to the same degree as in New Orleans (and let's not forget the rest of the 90-mile stretch of Gulf Coast communities decimated by the storm).

The nation should in no way abandon the victims of Katrina or their communities. This is a test of national will, not just community spirit in areas hit by the storm.

But at the same time, the citizens of the Gulf Coast and the nation, as well as political leadership at all levels, will be challenged to answer some very tough questions about the future of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

Let's hope we are all up to the task. ■