



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Katrina Exposes Government for What It Is **by Sheldon Richman**

If a private-sector employee performed as badly as the federal, state, and local governments performed before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina, he would be summarily fired. But the governments will claim their budgets were too small and proceed to extract more money from the taxpayers. That's how the political world works. And it's part of the reason that governments perform as miserably as they do.

Hurricane Katrina should finally disabuse people of the idea that government exists to take care of them, especially the most vulnerable. That self-serving promise was never credible. Do we need more evidence that it was a fraud? With guardians like these, who needs enemies?

Government at one level or another dominated every hurricane-related service on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, and in New Orleans. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for decades has managed the levees and other forms of flood protection. Governments continually gave assurances that it had plans to deal with a major storm before and after it made landfall. Doubts were often voiced by the newspapers and weather experts, who warned that the agencies were not prepared, that the levees would not contain the water, and that many casualties would result. But the politicians told the residents otherwise, and the residents believed them, having been taught to trust their "leaders." When the emergency systems failed under the force of Katrina and thousands of people were abandoned, we all got a rude awakening.

This time the self-aggrandizing politicians and bureaucrats must not get away with their lame excuses. They are responsible for many needless deaths and much property destruction. We all should be outraged.

A private company that had built those levees and made those assurances would have hell to pay. It would be facing bankruptcy and its officers lawsuits for gross negligence or even criminal indictments. The prospect of such consequences tends to deter private harmful conduct. But government personnel are effectively immune from such consequences. They don't risk their own capital. Accountability is nonexistent. There are likely to be no dismissals, much less indictments.

The problem is not only the people who run the agencies. It is in the nature of bureaucracy, which gets its money through coercive taxation, does not receive market feedback from consumers and insurance companies, and never faces bankruptcy. Cynics love to denigrate private businesses as putting profits before people, but it was Wal-Mart and Home Depot that were getting the goods to desperate people (when government agents weren't impeding them) while FEMA was still recovering from the shock that the levees failed.

The words "Army Corps" and "boondoggle" have long gone together naturally. The *Washington Post* reported that "over the five years of President Bush's administration, Louisiana has received far more money for Corps civil works projects than any other state, about \$1.9 billion.... But hundreds of millions of dollars have gone to unrelated water projects demanded by the state's congressional delegation and approved by the Corps, often after economic analyses that turned out to be inaccurate." It quoted Pam Dashiell, president of the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association in New Orleans: "Our politicians never cared half as much about protecting us as they cared about pork." As the *Post* emphasized, "In fact, more than any other federal agency, the Corps is controlled by Congress; its \$4.7 billion civil works budget consists almost entirely of 'earmarks' inserted by individual legislators."

But it is not only the Corps that failed. It's FEMA and that monstrosity the Department of Homeland Security. It's President Bush and his outrageous war in Iraq, which has diverted precious resources for a fool's errand. It's also the state and local governments. All can be condemned for the same offense: They took on solemn tasks, made people dependent on them, precluded private alternatives — and then failed miserably. That is government in all its glory.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of The Freeman magazine.*

This article was originally published in September 2005.