

## The Tail of Two Cities

The images and reports from what is left of New Orleans have been profoundly shocking. If this wasn't tragedy enough, the events of hurricane Katrina have only displaced from our bulletins the story of similarly horrific events in Baghdad, where nearly a thousand Shia pilgrims were killed in a stampede.

While apparently entirely separate, these two events raise difficult questions. If so much US manpower and equipment had not been tied up in Iraq, would the relief effort in New Orleans have got off to a quicker start? And if the troops had not been in Iraq, would a culture of fear and panic been so rife in Baghdad?

If nothing else, such questions around these catastrophes highlight that we live in an interconnected world. While the fallout from both continues, I believe that the peoples of these two countries could discover mutual compassion in their grief, and thus move a step further to peace.

George Bernard Shaw once wrote that "newspapers are unable, seemingly, to discriminate between a bicycle accident and the collapse of civilization", and one wonders what possible means of communicating the horrific scale of both of these events are left to editors who sanction the boldest headlines for every piece of frivolous celebrity tittle-tattle. Perhaps Shaw would now add that in an 'info-tainment' driven media it boils down to the quality of footage available. Few were there recording at the time in Baghdad; it's not a story that's going to run for long. But pictures of Victoria Beckham's new look are easy to come by, and while food, supplies and transport seem impossibly difficult to get to New Orleans, video-tape, outside broadcasting equipment and 24-hour reporting facilities seem easy enough to shift in quantity.

This is perhaps uncomfortably symbolic of the political situation in the US. While media crews are highly organised, extremely adaptable and seem always ready to turn up interviews with experts who had been predicting this for a long time, the government agencies appear poorly organised, poorly informed and unable to muster the correct equipment. Nowhere was this more clearly evident than in ABC News' interview with Michael Brown, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). On air Brown admitted that he had "no idea that there was anyone – let alone 20000 desperate people" waiting to be rescued in the New Orleans convention centre. Ted Koppel, the ABC anchor asked in shock, "Don't you guys watch television? Don't you guys listen to the radio? Our reporters have been reporting it for more than a day."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, it takes an more time and logistical expertise to plan and roll out a major relief operation than it does a television report. Yet given this obvious truth, Brown had ended up as head of FEMA with almost no experience. Having overseen emergency services in a single town in the seventies, he had worked for the International Arabian Horse Association, but had been sacked due to his inability to organise events properly. It appears he only landed the job at FEMA because his room-mate at college had run Bush's 2001 election campaign.

Brown will probably end up as the scapegoat, yet while he and FEMA might be blamed for failing to respond once the disaster had occurred, it cannot necessarily be held responsible for the extraordinary way that the situation evolved.

Bush's economic policy is perhaps more to blame for that. By cutting taxes on the rich, he purports to encourage them to create new jobs for the poor.<sup>ii</sup> The problem? Lower tax receipts mean less money to undertake the essential engineering work to protect New Orleans. Not only that, but the wealthiest did not use their extra cash to help create jobs for the poorest. It is these poor people, mostly black, one third of whom were living below the official poverty line, who were left literally drowning, with no transport to escape the floodwaters. And, as Michael Moore has controversially reported in his film *Fahrenheit 911*, it is these same blacks who sign up to fight in Iraq – the military being the only place where work is on offer.

Yet in Iraq too, it seems that it is the poorest - the tail-ends of our cities - who are left most vulnerable. While the 'forces of nature' have been blamed for the disaster in New Orleans, it is perhaps the more dangerous forces of human nature that resulted in the Baghdad stampede.

Shias, for many years the poorly-represented majority in an Iraq ruled by a Sunni minority, were observing a festival at the Kadhimiya mosque - the burial place of a venerated leader. The wealthier men were allowed to stay at the mosque overnight, so it was the poorer men, and all the women and children, who were marching over the Tigris bridge to restart the celebrations the next morning. Initially fired on by Sunnis opposed to a constitution that will see their power reduced, the crowds were then gripped by rumours that suicide bombers were in their midst. As they jumped in their hundreds

into the river below people were crushed and drowned. And symbolically, as in New Orleans, the technology that promised protection cracked and buckled: bridge railings sending hundreds down to watery deaths, just as levees had collapsing to send water rising up.

Sunnis blamed for igniting wild-fire rumours. Rich republican whites blamed for not doing enough to help poor blacks... It seems that the racism that has afflicted both of these countries for so long is still rife. An article in the *Melbourne Age* reported how it had received two virtually identical photos from news-wire services. One showed a black man, described as a 'looter', the second, two whites who had been 'finding bread and drink in shops'.

The accusations of racism are likely to continue, yet the more uncomfortable truth behind both images from New Orleans is that as the luxuries dissolve, the SUVs float away, the access to clean water and convenience food disappears in the mud, our fragile societies - the very democracies that marched out to bring an end to terror - find out that when a family is thirsty and the shop keepers are absent then windows are going to get broken and essentials are going to go. What is more alarming is that many have categorized weapons as essential alongside bread and water.

Disasters such as these have a nasty habit of exposing the underbellies of our supposed 'civilizations'. There needs to be an honest admission in the US that something is desperately wrong with the whole fabric of a society that degenerates so quickly into violence and lawlessness when the normal authorities are removed. As one Sri Lankan observed, "I am absolutely disgusted. After the tsunami, our people, even the ones who lost everything, wanted to help the others who were suffering. Not a single tourist caught in the tsunami was mugged. Now with all this happening in the US, we can easily see where the civilized part of the world's population is."<sup>iii</sup>

Violence breaks out where channels of generosity break down; when others generously come running to help, the rising tide of anger is suppressed. One of the key problems appears to be that this generous spirit has not been evident enough yet. Indeed, it has been noted absent from the American psyche before: "Each person", wrote de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* in 1845, "behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of all the others."<sup>iv</sup>

It is precisely this strangeness, this separation from 'the other', that we pray will be lessened by these dual tragedies. As two cities grieve, and desperately try to work out how they might be rebuilt and healed, we need remember that it was deliberately to the city that Christ came to be wounded and killed. It had to be in the city as the city was, and still is, the place where people who are 'other' should live in close proximity - not separated in gated communities. The city is therefore the place where wounds are carried, where pain cannot be hidden from the media, where people have to face their prejudices, their hatreds, their fears, and therefore the place where the body of Christ must still turn its face.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in *The Observer*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2005

<sup>ii</sup> From an analysis by Will Samson, *Katrina and the role of Government*, <http://willzhead.typepad.com/>

<sup>iii</sup> *The Observer*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2005

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in *Flesh and Stone*, Richard Sennett, New York, 1994