

# rhizomes 11/12

## fall 2005/spring 2006

### **The Blog Report: Lack of Power in New Orleans** **Craig Saper**

[1] [The Survival of New Orleans](#) blog (aka *Interdictor* before the storm and flood), a [livejournal](#) blog (previously produced by one person for “smack and chat”), chronicled the storm and its aftermath (and included a team of five helping produce the now internationally important blog). The team included owners, employees, and friends associated with an Internet provider. The now famous site chronicles the storm, the chaos, and shameful (lack of) government response to the hurricane and flood in New Orleans. The site, produced from the 10th and 11th floor of a corporate high rise on Poydras Ave., right near St. Charles, began modestly, by the main contributor waiting for Katrina to make landfall, “We have generators and tons of food and water. It is 5 of us total. I am not sure how the internet connection will be affected. I have a camera and my gun.” The site also charts the mainstream media’s coverage. The site includes documentation of the bizarre and willful refusal of the National Guard to allow, for example, a flotilla of 500 or more private boats, with experienced captains, to enter the flooded city to help with the rescue. Many other blogs, including [DailyKos](#), and news outlets, like the UK’s [Mirror News](#), have linked to, and discussed the *Interdictor* site produced from New Orleans.  
<http://mgno.com>

[2] The site includes images of life on the street, timelines, and many pleas for help. Those pleas were still unanswered as of this writing, on September 4, 2005, a day after the National Guard arrived to great media fan-fare and a week late for everyone involved. The site includes a live-feed, an e-mail address for interviews, and even an auction to raise funds, etc.

[3] Some of the reports include unconfirmed rumors.

As for that bridge shooting we've all heard about, this is all I've got. N.O. Deputy Chief Warren Riley: Law enforcement officials shot eight people carrying guns on the Danziger Bridge today - killing five.

I hope these are false rumors, but we're hearing that the people who were shot on the bridge were Army Corps of Engineer. I told you these military wannabes were gonna get someone hurt. Someone needs to reel in these paramilitary types.

The blogosphere buzzes with contact information and specific calls for help like [NOLA.com](#). Descriptions of the shameful response have spread to the mainstream (and even right-wing) media outlets. Even *FoxNews* channel asked where is the government. The fiasco’s victimizing of the vulnerable, overwhelmingly poor, Black, and urban, made the scenes a metaphor for an worsening divide in the U.S. between the very rich and the very poor, the huddled urban masses without cars and the upwardly and outwardly mobile, and Blacks waiting to be bused and those telling us they did not evacuate. The response in less densely populated areas of Mississippi was completely different (and that story less covered). The supplies were immediately available, the police and National Guard protected those in the shelters, and everyone stayed in the shelters.

[4] The situation in New Orleans is more complicated.

From an official source: New Orleans already had a big homeless population. A lot of the already homeless refused to leave without their shopping carts. So they won't go near the evac centers, even though we have heard reports that the helicopters will now allow people to bring their shopping carts with them.

And, to top it all off, as if to confirm my earlier post about government, the State and Federal governments are still at each other's throats. This crisis is going to require some leadership if things are gonna get better.

The government's lack of good intelligence (i.e., they claim not to have known the levees would break or the result of the floods) is nothing new. Recent reports about the government's lack of action during the 1940's, when they had intelligence on the concentration camps, led the report to conclude that the problem was a combination of an inability to appreciate and interpret the information mixed with prejudice (in that case anti-Semitism). The government took no action. One sees the same pattern repeatedly. National governments increasingly blame tragedies on a lack of intelligence or knowledge: the AIDS crisis, 9-11, the lack of WMD, Space shuttle disasters, and more.

[5] How does the *Interdictor* blog understand the lack of power?

And another thing to think about when we start pointing fingers is this. The government is never equipped to handle a crisis like this. There's too much bureaucracy -- initiative-stifling bureaucracy which prevents swift, effective action. I would like to hear from government employees on this. The nature of that bureaucracy is such that you have very specific guidelines to follow for even the most minute tasks. You need approval for just about everything, and the person you need approval from usually needs approval to give you the approval.

More than a decade ago, a chapter of my book *Artificial Mythologies* focused on the television coverage of the Gulf War I. It described how the maps used on the ABC news broadcast during the initial bombings by the US were contradictory especially in terms of the location of the position of the US Embassy. Oddly, all of the coverage in the days following that discussed the news coverage failed to notice the mistake; in fact, the reports singled out the maps used by ABC as the most helpful. The coverage of the broadcasts included reports from both progressive newspapers, like the *Village Voice*, and the paper of record, *The New York Times*. With all those careful viewers watching critically, and commenting on the maps, it seemed odd that no one noticed the Embassy jumping back and forth across the Tigris from one map to the other. On a metaphoric level, one might recall that there was a contentious debate about the US position about the planned Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Apparently, the US was equivocal about the Iraqis' plans to invade. Of course, after the invasion the US embassy's position changed.

[6] In describing the collective blind spot, of the literally moving Embassy, and its ironic metaphoric implications, the chapter discussed the mythology, held by both progressive and reactionary forces, that the powers-that-be increasingly controlled media messages and manipulated public opinion. The un-noticed mapping error not only suggested how quickly the Embassy's positions changed, but also demonstrated a general lack of control of media messages at a time when media messages were carefully massaged, spun, and selectively targeted.

[7] My argument, that power exerts its cruelest side in its lack of control and absence of authority, rather than through ideological positioning, has sadly found new demonstrations. A sociopolitical theory that focuses on mistakes, incompetence, and desperation as the locus of power seems to push against a continuous lineage of media studies that seeks to demonstrate how media messages position, manipulate, and delude subjects.

[8] In 2005, the cruel side of incompetent power exerting itself through its (paradoxical) lack of control reared its ugly head again. My work on artificial mythologies does not celebrate this absence as some kind of resistance. With apprehension it seeks alternatives to exposés, demythologies, and revelations—alternatives, not to replace readings that find effaced issues lurking behind simple presentations, but to focus on incompetence masquerading as Power rather than ideological Power masquerading as entertainment, culture, and (news) media.

[9] *The Survival of New Orleans* blog (Friday, September 2nd, 2005):

Then Homeland Sec comes driving by and yells water and hums a 20 ounce at our feet without slowing down. I know I'm not looking too hot right now, but come on. I'm standing out there with my flashlight on in the middle of the road, obviously waiting on a convoy.

Bunch of stressed out, trigger-ready police and military types driving by suspicious as all hell. It's not safe just standing out on the street even if you look like you belong there.

The blogs unwittingly move toward appreciating powerful government's lack of power as a threat, rather than as a revolutionary's ultimate dream-come-true. Lack of power (or power to attack only), rather than the ability to defend, preserve, and protect, may define contemporary culture's greatest threat. If, as the fascists say, the trains always ran on time in Mussolini's Italy, then, one might answer, they ran only for the fascists. In the contemporary version of that tautology, the escape contingencies worked, but only for those that escaped.

[10] *The Survival of New Orleans* blog:

Thursday, September 1st, 2005

10:46 pm

The Real News

The following is the result of an interview I just conducted via cell phone with a New Orleans citizen stranded at the Convention Center. I don't know what you're hearing in the mainstream media or in the press conferences from the city and state officials, but here is the truth:

"Bigfoot" is a bar manager and DJ on Bourbon Street, and is a local personality and icon in the city. He is a lifelong resident of the city, born and raised. He rode out the storm itself in the Iberville Projects because he knew he would be above any flood waters. Here is his story as told to me moments ago. I took notes while he talked and then I asked some questions:

Three days ago, police and national guard troops told citizens to head toward the Crescent City Connection Bridge to await transportation out of the area. The citizens trekked over to the Convention Center and waited for the buses which they were told would take them to Houston or Alabama or somewhere else, out of this area.

It's been 3 days, and the buses have yet to appear.

Although obviously he has no exact count, he estimates more than 10,000 people are packed into and around and outside the convention center still waiting for the buses. They had no food, no water, and no medicine for the last three days, until today, when the National Guard drove over the bridge above them, and tossed out supplies over the side crashing down to the ground below. Much of the supplies were destroyed from the drop. Many people tried to catch the supplies to protect them before they hit the ground. Some offered to walk all the way around up the bridge and bring the supplies down, but any attempt to approach the police or national guard resulted in weapons being aimed at them.

There are many infants and elderly people among them, as well as many people who were injured jumping out of windows to escape flood water and the like -- all of them in dire straits.

Any attempt to flag down police results in being told to get away at gunpoint. Hour after hour they watch buses pass by filled with people from other areas. Tensions are very high, and there has been at least one murder and several fights. 8 or 9 dead people have been stored in a freezer in the area, and 2 of these dead people are kids.

The people are so desperate that they're doing anything they can think of to impress the authorities enough to bring some buses. These things include standing in single file lines with the elderly in front, women and children next; sweeping up the area and cleaning the windows and anything else that would show the people are not barbarians.

The buses never stop.

Before the supplies were pitched off the bridge today, people had to break into buildings in the area to try to find food and water for their families. There was not enough. This spurred many families to break into cars to try to escape the city. There was no police response to the auto thefts until the mob reached the rich area -- Saulet Condos -- once they tried to get cars from there... well then the whole swat teams began showing up with rifles pointed. Snipers got on the roof and told people to get back.

He reports that the conditions are horrendous. Heat, Mosquitoes, and utter misery. The smell, he says, is "horrific."

He says it's the slowest mandatory evacuation ever, and he wants to know why they were told to go to the Convention Center area in the first place; furthermore, he reports that many of them with cell phones have contacts willing to come rescue them, but people are not being allowed through to pick them up.

There is nothing surprising at this point in the story of the abandonment of New Orleans. Everyone in N.O. experienced (and a world witnessed) the most powerful government's LACK of control and horrific desperation in helping the victims. That is a vision more terrifying than any society of the spectacle seeking subjects to control. Run away and hide from power in desperation. One can seek to ignore spectacle: don't pay attention, mock it, twist it, or détourn the message. The response to power out of control: how to resist that which has no front, no boundaries? How does one protect and conserve life, society, and culture from a rhizomatic force not deeply rooted, spreading this way

and that without centralized control, without goals or horizons? These challenges, only becoming apparent through outrageous tragedies, require a different approach to cultural studies. Cultural studies, mistakenly enamored with demythologies of ideological manipulation manifested in a media-inundated society of the spectacle, needs a new foundation. Not that demythology is not a useful skill, but that the exclusive focus on hidden structures of manipulation ignores the peculiar weapon of desperation and lack of knowledge as a way that power now exerts itself. We need a sociopolitical theory on how power now operates viscosly against its subjects through a desperate lack of control and pleas that "we didn't know." The oft-repeated claim that Bush does not care about poor people, Black people, or anyone who did not vote for him misses the mark; the new face of power, manifested in Bush & Co. for the fleeting moment, is that the machinations of power do not care. Big Brother cared, a war machine does not.

[11] *The Survival of New Orleans* blog (Thursday, September 1st, 2005, 11:50 am):

3. Dead bodies everywhere: convention center, down camp street, all over.

4. National Guard shoving water off the backs of trucks. They're just pushing it off without stopping, people don't even know it's there at first -- they drop it on the side in debris, there's no sign or distribution point -- people are scared to go near it at first, because the drop points are guarded by troops or federal agents with assault rifles who don't let people come near them, which scares people off. It is a mess. When people actually get to the water, they are in such a rush to get it that one family left their small child behind and forget about her until Sig carried him back to the family.

5. ... It's hot as hell down there in the sun. Crime is absolutely rampant: rapes, murders, rape-murder combinations. ... In case anyone in national security is reading this, get the word to President Bush that we need the military in here NOW. The Active Duty Armed Forces. Mr. President, we are losing this city. I don't care what you're hearing on the news. The city is being lost. It is the law of the jungle down here. The command and control structure here is barely functioning. I'm not sure it's anyone's fault -- I'm not sure it could be any other way at this point. We need the kind of logistical support and infrastructure only the Active Duty military can provide. The hospitals are in dire straights. The police barely have any capabilities at this point. Please get the military here to maintain order before this city is lost.

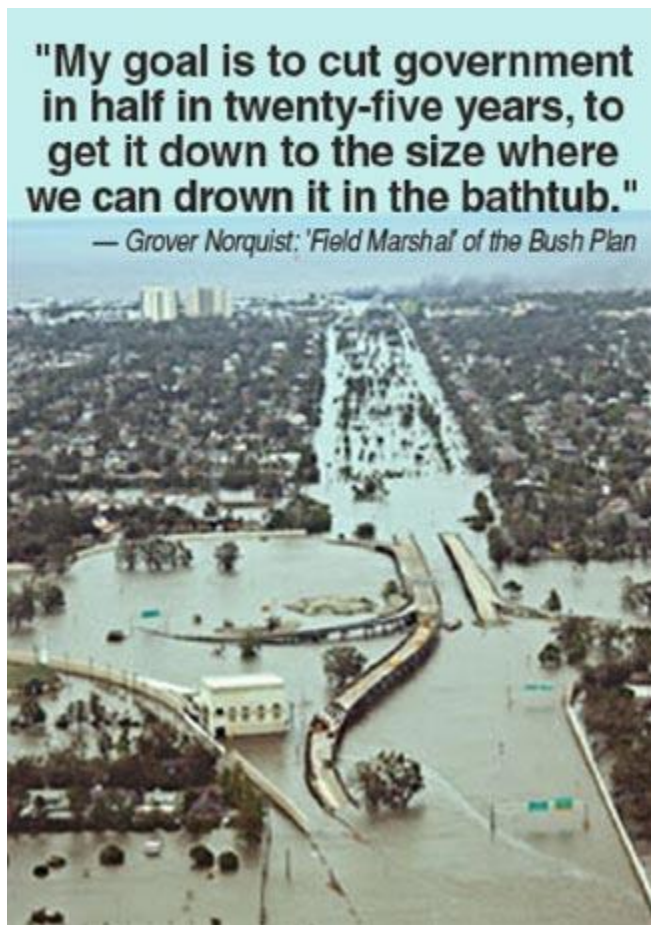
In the livejournal blog, scenes of police protecting worthless, already written-off goods, rather than helping living and still breathing people are shamefully familiar. The police, with shoot-to-kill orders, trying to prevent someone from scavenging after loosing everything, does not represent a system of social control. It is an act of desperation. In fact, the police were looting too!

[12] Wednesday, August 31st, 2005 4:23pm

Looting: The police are looting. This has been confirmed by several independent sources. Some of the looting might be "legitimate" in as much as that word has any meaning in this context. They have broken into ATMs and safes: confirmed. We have eyewitnesses to this. They have taken dozens of SUVs from dealerships ostensibly for official use. They have also looted gun stores and pawn shops for all the small arms, supposedly to prevent "criminals" from doing so. But who knows their true intentions. We have an inside source in the NOPD who says that command and control is in chaos. He reports that command lapses more than 24 hours between check-ins, and that

most of the force are "like deer in the headlights." NOPD already had a reputation for corruption, but I am telling you now that the people we've been talking to say they are not recognizing the NOPD as a legitimate authority anymore, since cops have been seen looting in Walmarts and forcing people out of stores so they could back up SUVs and loot them. Don't shoot the messenger....

In one montaged-image circulating on the Internet, the caption over a bird's eye view of part of flooded New Orleans reads:



They may have succeeded.

-- Craig Saper