

The Two Americas

by Marjorie Cohn

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Last September, a Category 5 hurricane battered the small island of Cuba with 160-mile-per-hour winds. More than 1.5 million Cubans were evacuated to higher ground ahead of the storm. Although the hurricane destroyed 20,000 houses, no one died.

What is Cuban President Fidel Castro's secret? According to Dr. Nelson Valdes, a sociology professor at the University of New Mexico, and specialist in Latin America, "the whole civil defense is embedded in the community to begin with. People know ahead of time where they are to go."

"Cuba's leaders go on TV and take charge," said Valdes. Contrast this with George W. Bush's reaction to Hurricane Katrina. The day after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, Bush was playing golf. He waited three days to make a TV appearance and five days before visiting the disaster site. In a scathing editorial on Thursday, the New York Times said, "nothing about the president's demeanor yesterday - which seemed casual to the point of carelessness - suggested that he understood the depth of the current crisis."

"Merely sticking people in a stadium is unthinkable" in Cuba, Valdes said. "Shelters all have medical personnel, from the neighborhood. They have family doctors in Cuba, who evacuate together with the neighborhood, and already know, for example, who needs insulin."

They also evacuate animals and veterinarians, TV sets and refrigerators, "so that people aren't reluctant to leave because people might steal their stuff," Valdes observed.

After Hurricane Ivan, the United Nations International Secretariat for Disaster Reduction cited Cuba as a model for hurricane preparation. ISDR director Salvano Briceno said, "The Cuban way could easily be applied to other countries with similar economic conditions and even in countries with greater resources that do not manage to protect their population as well as Cuba does."

Our federal and local governments had more than ample warning that hurricanes, which are growing in intensity thanks to global warming, could destroy New Orleans. Yet, instead of heeding those warnings, Bush set about to prevent states from controlling global warming, weaken FEMA, and cut the Army Corps of Engineers' budget for levee construction in New Orleans by \$71.2 million, a 44 percent reduction.

Bush sent nearly half our National Guard troops and high-water Humvees to fight in an unnecessary war in Iraq. Walter Maestri, emergency management chief for Jefferson Parish in New Orleans, noted a year ago, "It appears that the money has been moved in the president's budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq."

An Editor and Publisher article Wednesday said the Army Corps of Engineers "never tried to hide the fact that the spending pressures of the war in Iraq, as well as homeland security - coming at the same time as federal tax cuts - was the reason for the strain," which caused a slowdown of work on flood control and sinking levees.

"This storm was much greater than protection we were authorized to provide," said Alfred C. Naomi, a senior project manager in the New Orleans district of the corps.

Unlike in Cuba, where homeland security means keeping the country secure from deadly natural disasters as well as foreign invasions, Bush has failed to keep our people safe. "On a fundamental level," Paul Krugman wrote in yesterday's New York Times, "our current leaders just

aren't serious about some of the essential functions of government. They like waging war, but they don't like providing security, rescuing those in need or spending on prevention measures. And they never, ever ask for shared sacrifice."

During the 2004 election campaign, vice presidential candidate John Edwards spoke of "the two Americas." It seems unfathomable how people can shoot at rescue workers. Yet, after the beating of Rodney King aired on televisions across the country, poor, desperate, hungry people in Watts took over their neighborhoods, burning and looting. Their anger, which had seethed below the surface for so long, erupted. That's what's happening now in New Orleans. And we, mostly white, people of privilege, rarely catch a glimpse of this other America.

"I think a lot of it has to do with race and class," said Rev. Calvin O. Butts III, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. "The people affected were largely poor people. Poor, black people."

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin reached a breaking point Thursday night. "You mean to tell me that a place where you probably have thousands of people that have died and thousands more that are dying every day, that we can't figure out a way to authorize the resources we need? Come on, man!"

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff had boasted earlier in the day that FEMA and other federal agencies have done a "magnificent job" under the circumstances.

But, said, Nagin, "They're feeding the people a line of bull, and they are spinning and people are dying. Get off your asses and let's do something!"

When asked about the looting, the mayor said that except for a few "knuckleheads," it is the result of desperate people trying to find food and water to survive.

Nagin blamed the outbreak of violence and crime on drug addicts who have been cut off from their drug supplies, wandering the city, "looking to take the edge off their jones."

When Hurricane Ivan hit Cuba, no curfew was imposed; yet, no looting or violence took place. Everyone was in the same boat.

Fidel Castro, who has compared his government's preparations for Hurricane Ivan to the island's long-standing preparations for an invasion by the United States, said, "We've been preparing for this for 45 years."

On Thursday, Cuba's National Assembly sent a message of solidarity to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. It says the Cuban people have followed closely the news of the hurricane damage in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, and the news has caused pain and sadness. The message notes that the hardest hit are African-Americans, Latino workers, and the poor, who still wait to be rescued and taken to secure places, and who have suffered the most fatalities and homelessness. The message concludes by saying that the entire world must feel this tragedy as its own.