

Field Notes on “Desert, Storm”

Published in *Slate*, September 7, 2016.

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How this article came about

This story began with my own puzzlement, looking at tragic headlines in the autumn of 2005. Two stories dominated the news coverage: the increasingly controversial war in Iraq, and the disaster following Hurricane Katrina. I’m an historian trained to ask questions about the ways US history is connected to the histories of everywhere else, and what struck me at the time was the gulf between these two Gulfs. One would scarcely have known reading the war side of the front pages that the United States had just experienced the devastation of the Gulf Coast, the failure of New Orleans’ levee system, and the flooding of the city. Similarly, one could mostly read the Katrina coverage and not know that the United States was waging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as part of a much larger and more amorphous war against “terror.”

But a few connections received fleeting mention in the media: harrowing stories about Guard forces from the Gulf Coast watching the catastrophe remotely from

desert bases; about activists raising questions about the toll the wars had taken on American society; about investigators and reporters tracing the roots of FEMA's utter breakdown back to its relocation in the Department of Homeland Security in the aftermath of 9/11.

Looking for a closing lecture for a class I was teaching at the University of Michigan on the United States' role in the world, I assembled these fragments in a preliminary way, and suggested to my students that it was worth asking questions about how events as seemingly distant as the United States' wars in the Middle East and Central Asia might play a role in catastrophes as seemingly local as those that followed Hurricane Katrina. It was late in the semester, and we were all tired, but to my great surprise, the students were visibly energized by the talk. In fact, a couple of them emailed me that afternoon, asking me for a copy of the lecture, even though they knew they weren't going to be quizzed on it. (In my experience up to that time—and since—this never happens.)

In the lead-up to the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, I decided to dig into these questions further. To what extent did it make sense to rewrite the history of Hurricane Katrina—more specifically, the federal government's botched preparation for it and response to it—as an episode in the Bush administration's “war on terror”? Activists at the time had provided one set of on-the-fly answers

to this question: absolutely, the two disasters were causally related to each other, and the callousness and ineptitude that seemed to characterize Bush's approach to the Gulf Coast was also reflected in his foreign policy.

I was persuadable on this front, but I wanted to turn this answer back into a question, and found myself tracking two particular threads: the question of FEMA's transformation after 9/11, and the impact of overseas Guard deployments on post-disaster rescue and relief efforts. And a third thread emerged: the ways the war "came home" where policymakers and troops saw flood victims as adversaries or even "insurgents," and where the policing of New Orleans was seen to require military personnel, institutions and approaches.

With the generous support of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, I set out my research. What I came up with represents a major reframing of what's known about the origin of the federal government's failure in Katrina's wake. Following the lead of path-breaking reporting carried out at the time, I detail the ways that post-9/11 "homeland security" siphoned resources away from natural disaster preparation, as FEMA's response capacities were eroded and redirected towards an exclusive focus on terrorism. I also explore the ways that National Guard personnel and equipment were overstretched by overseas deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, delaying and compromising its response.

At the same time, I demonstrate that rescue and relief energies in the aftermath of the storm and the flood were shaped by a war framework among soldiers, officers, the media and high-level policy-makers: the wars not only drained necessary resources, but also remade rescue efforts in their own image. The provision of aid to New Orleanians sometimes blurred in unsettling ways into a campaign to "take back the city."

Finally, the story is about how Americans talk—and don't talk—about tradeoffs between the United States' global military projection and American society's ability to protect itself from natural hazards. My conclusions on this point take strong issue with official denials at the time—that these two projects remain entirely separable due to abundant resources and organizationally savvy. My research supports, but also complicates, anti-war activists' sense that there are tradeoffs between war and domestic social well-being worth talking about. There are tradeoffs, I conclude, but they're complicated and worth tracing deep into the sources to specify them. When we do, we learn, among other things, that wars remake the societies that wage them—in ways that are desired and ways that are decried, ways that are anticipated and many that aren't—and that some people are made to pay a heavier price for these transformations than others.

## 5 reasons we don't know this story already

Why isn't the impact of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the broader "war on terror," a substantial part of our baseline understanding of the government's failure during and after Hurricane Katrina? Why, in other words, don't we know this story already? In this case, and many others, the question of why we *don't* know something is an intriguing part of the story itself. Why do certain explanations fail to appear, or get buried once they do? How and why do other narratives snap durably into position, then evolve into a smooth, burnished corner of collective memory, whether or not they approximate what happened?

This is not an idle question. How societies decide to remember—and forget—historical events plays a significant, underestimated role in their ongoing debates and decisions. Think about how frequently, and with what distorting effects, politicians, journalists and scholars invoke the "lessons of history," as if the past wasn't subject to interpretation or argument, but was a kind of stern schoolteacher at the blackboard: "Take this down." It's not just, then, as the cliché goes, that history gets written by the victors; the victors (for better and, often, for worse), use history to attain their victory in the first place. All this said, there are lots of forces

that shape the historical narratives that stick and those that don't, which are less subject to conscious manipulation, but which are nonetheless potent in etching certain stories and obscuring others.

So, why didn't we know that the wars and the post-Katrina disaster affected each other? Why hasn't this history been told? Here are five reasons, admittedly speculative, but they may help us get closer to some answers.

1) *We actually did know this, once.* When it came to the FEMA/DHS story, journalist Robert Block was on the case as early as August 2004, when he filed a story for the *Wall Street Journal* that discussed emergency managers' concerns about DHS' neglect of natural disasters and its over-emphasis on terrorism. In the aftermath of the storm and floods, this story featured prominently in newspaper accounts of the crisis' origins. Block and Christopher Cooper's book *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security*, a major source for my piece, came out in May 2007, and detailed many of these linkages. The fact that this early coverage was there makes the relative absence of the story in present-day popular memory all the more striking.

2. *Vociferous, official denials.* One reason why the story may not have taken over the long term was the immediate, forceful response to allegations that the war had

undercut disaster response at home by the Bush administration, DHS and FEMA spokespeople, military officials, and some media figures (check out Christopher Hitchens' swaggering, slaying and fact-fudging *Slate* essay "Iraq and Katrina," subtitled "The War Hasn't Kept Us From Fighting the Flood," for the rhetorical high-point.) The message here was loud and consistent, if not entirely (or even primarily) reality-based: DHS hadn't treated natural disasters like a stepchild; there had been sufficient military personnel and equipment on the ground (almost) as early as it was needed. Subsequent investigations negated these claims, but by that point, apologetic counter-narratives had had a powerful impact on public understanding.

3. *Timing.* As journalists and official investigators probed into the roots of the post-Katrina catastrophe, some of the dynamics I've uncovered here became visible. They turned up, for example, in the myriad Congressional and executive-branch investigations into the government's lapses following Katrina, to which I turned for evidence. But by the time this information had been systematically gathered, the news had mostly moved on; what coverage remained dealt (appropriately) with the struggles of Katrina survivors and questions of urban reconstruction in New Orleans, and causal questions had faded. More recent, discussion of causes has, very importantly, focused on the neglect of the New Orleans levee system by the Army Corps of Engineers.

4. *Anti-war movement emphases.* The people most responsible for first raising the questions this piece has attempted to answer, apart from journalists, are campaigners against the Bush administration's "war on terror." Antiwar activists were among the very first to draw linkages—mostly speculative ones—between the post-Katrina catastrophe and the wars as equivalent or connected "disasters." Tradeoffs between global war and domestic safety were a fixture of activist signboards even as the crisis unfolded. Some nuanced investigations rose from this energy, but for immediate, practical purposes, it was enough to assert these connections rather than to specify them: that the war had disabled the country's security was something that was known without needing to demonstrate it. At the same time, the antiwar movement (appropriately, in my opinion), emphasized the victims of U. S. military projection outside the United States, rather than those suffering within it.

5. *Personalization, parts 1 and 2.* If there is a single, overarching reason why this story still needs telling, it is the highly personalizing ways that blame for the crisis was ultimately distributed. In conventional telling, the debacle falls to two main culprits: George W. Bush and FEMA Director Michael Brown. The quotation that bridges these two—"Brownie, you're doing a heckuva job!"—condenses ineptitude, back-patting cronyism and self-delusion in one breezy Bushism. As I



hope the essay conveys clearly, my own sense is that both men own major portions of responsibility for the particular shape the disaster took (if not exactly in the ways we think.) But personalizing stories are often there to comfort. They are endemic to cultures that like to attribute failure and success to individual action and merit, and struggle to talk about social structures and institutional frameworks. And in general, easy narratives—two stooges at the wheel, in this case—can be pulled around the basic facts without much intellectual work. Most telling are the solutions that such individualizing accounts summon: chase down the villains, purge them, stop thinking about the tragedy.

This, ultimately, may be the main reason this story has proven elusive: it is more difficult and troubling to think about the ways the United States' institutional framework has been forged by seemingly unalterable realities (in this case, the United States' world-wide military presence) than by a few identifiable, replaceable bad apples. Here, as elsewhere, the seemingly critical narratives that a society settles on can ultimately hide more than they reveal, and justify existing arrangements more than they confront and challenge them.

## Process and Thanks

At base, my goal with this work was to take two stories whose connectedness seems unlikely and implausible, and to make the linkages I had uncovered seem obvious and perhaps inevitable. (To this day, when I find myself giving the elevator pitch—“it’s about connections between the ‘war on terror’ and Hurricane Katrina”—I can’t help but feel that I sound like a conspiracy theorist, head swathed in tinfoil; there may be a better synopsis I never managed to figure out, but the reason that this juxtaposition seems so weird is itself worthy of serious scrutiny.) If the essay succeeds, it will also pose larger questions for readers: not only about tradeoffs between war-making and social welfare and protection, but about broader ways that what is often called “domestic” society and the United States’ presence and power in the world can’t easily be separated (or, perhaps, at all), despite the ways that we often experience reality in neatly partitioned, split-hemisphere fashion.

Fundamentally, the project began when I spotted a few outcroppings of strange ice poking just above the water’s surface—fleeting references to the wars I remembered from the Katrina coverage in late 2005—and a hunch from my training, research and teaching in transnational US history that ungainly, unmapped icebergs often loom beneath. I set out with a hypothesis to test, taking the activists’ answer (that the wars were distracting the US from more pressing, domestic needs), and re-

engineering it into a question that might actually be posed. Perhaps critics were right, perhaps they were wrong or, most plausibly, the question itself would turn and sharpen as I asked it.

Then came a whole lot of work. I interviewed, in person and on the phone, National Guard officers and troops, emergency managers, disaster scholars, ACLU attorneys, city residents, ministers, housing advocates, veterans, antiwar marchers, journalists, and the former Louisiana governor, roughly sixty people all told. I read hundreds of newspaper articles looking for places where Katrina appeared in the war coverage, or the wars showed up in the Katrina coverage. The wars, the storm, and the post-storm catastrophe were constantly in each other's business: in quips by soldiers patrolling New Orleans, on protest banners, in journalists' pointed questions to defensive politicians. The references required painstaking gathering, organizing and interpretation, and didn't point me in any one direction.

As I proceeded, I discovered that the wars were both context and tool: a reality that shaped events and peoples' experiences of those events, and a resource which different groups harnessed for diverging purposes. The Bush administration drew one set of equivalences, for example, arguing that the US could and would protect Americans from both terrorists and storms. Opponents used the post-Katrina Gulf Coast to recast Iraq as Bush's other "disaster." It was essential to me to approach

these competing claims as salvos launched against opponents a decade ago, mostly devoid of supporting evidence: interesting as such, but in no way the answer to the questions I was asking.

What struck me as I moved forward, however, was how consistently observers at the time had drawn connections. Emergency managers had raised alerts about the undercutting of disaster response capacities within a year of DHS's inauguration. National Guard leaders were warning of thinned-out ranks and equipment and the implications for natural disasters soon after the start of the Iraq War. In other words, I was rediscovering a set of complicated tradeoffs that had been anticipated, experienced, and then—somehow—been almost completely forgotten.

It was important to me that the story ultimately not funnel down to a narrowly technocratic, managerial lesson: that wars and storms were simple equivalents, and that the problem had been that military materiel or personnel that could have been “here” was “there.” It takes nothing away from the dedication of the thousands of troops who provided relief to those in harm's way to say that the militarization of disaster response itself raises troubling questions, not simply about response capacity in wartime, but about soldiers' relationships to those escaping danger, and the supremacy of civilian institutions essential to any democracy. At a moment like this one, when the US military commands more prestige and respect than most

civilian, democratic institutions; when troops are charged with disaster response; and when disasters, especially those flowing from global warming, are becoming more frequent and intense, the levees between militarized and democratic politics (such as they are) may be subjected to pressures they cannot withstand.

There's no way that this essay could exist without the work, creativity, and generosity of journalists who came before me and inspired me, and from whose work I drew. Here I'm especially indebted to Mark Schleifstein, Robert Block and Christopher Cooper, both for their trenchant reporting and their willingness to speak with me and share their contacts and insights. I relied heavily on the reportage by the *Times-Picayune*, a periodical to which my home institution unfortunately didn't subscribe; many thanks to Eladio Bobadilla at Duke University for all his work running searches through this indispensable source.

I'd like to thank the more than sixty people I interviewed for this story, who gave of their time and shared their personal and professional experiences with me on a topic that for many remains painful and difficult to talk about. I'm also grateful to the Louisiana National Guard's Public Affairs Office, for putting me in touch with the many Guards I was able to speak to

Many thanks to the staff of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, especially Tom Hundley, Katherine Doyle, Steve Sapienza, and Jordan Roth for all their support; to John Swansburg and Carla Blumenkranz for their editorial guidance; to Michael Thompson, Dan Usner, Jim Mokhiber and Dirk Bönker for their insightful reads; to Linda Shopes, for her elegant pruning (as long as the piece is, there was more); to Sean Lavery and David Canfield, for their patient, energetic fact-checking, and to Megan Wiegman for her meticulous copy-editing.

I am grateful for the love, support and encouragement of Melinda Turner and Ava Kramer, my home in sun and storm.

Finally, my thanks to Mark Kramer: teacher, guide, rebel, crafter of convivial sentences, in-gatherer of scribblers, deep mensch. I first pitched this project to his fabled kitchen workshop in Newton, Massachusetts in the spring of 2010 and from that point to this one, he's egged me on, marked up countless drafts, and made wise sense of the twisty path I found myself on. This piece is dedicated to him.