

Rumors, Race and Class Collide

‘Class and race are inextricably bound up in New Orleans, and trying to make sense of it was as hard as trying to get accurate information.’

By Kevin Cullen

After a while, the daily news briefings at the Louisiana State Police complex in Baton Rouge, which served as a command center for relief efforts following Hurricane Katrina, took on a familiar, if increasingly surreal, routine. Governor Kathleen Blanco would talk in a folksy, upbeat way about the unique resilience of Louisianians. Then some big shot from the federal government, Michael Chertoff, the secretary of Homeland Security, or Michael Brown, then known around the White House as “Brownie” and not “the former, disgraced head of FEMA,” would insist that things were well in control when one cursory hip-boot stroll around flooded New Orleans would tell anyone they patently were not.

In the evening, after the governor and Brownie had finished briefing, the Reverend Jesse Jackson would stroll in, usually while print reporters were on deadline and, without a word of introduction, start talking. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, he assured us, was prepared to help if only the neo-cons at the White House would deign to accept aid from this leader whom they have demonized. Just who Jackson was representing, aside from himself, was never quite clear but, after all, he’d managed to get a fleet of buses to the Superdome, which was a lot more than Brownie could say in the days following Katrina. And he’s a preacher, so his words were often more stimulating than a lot of what the officials had to say. With editors howling for copy, his daily sermons managed to be distracting, oddly entertaining, and sometimes illuminating. One evening, Jackson took to the podium to explain that American citizens left homeless by Katrina’s wrath and governmental incompetence are not refugees, they are evacuees.

Jackson also kept telling the press

corps that the feds fumbled the immediate relief effort because most of Katrina’s victims were black and poor. If Jackson’s critics dismiss him as a self-appointed self-promoter, they sometimes fail to give him credit for getting the big picture right. And if his logic is applied to the news coverage, Jackson got that big picture right, too, while huge chunks of the news media got it wrong, as they flooded the airwaves and newspapers with unconfirmed tales of murder, mayhem and anarchy that were exaggerated or just flat out wrong.

So how did we get it so wrong? While many would be loathe to admit it, the idea of poor black folks simultaneously looting Wal-Mart of guns and wide-screen TVs in some apocalyptic “Get whitey!” frenzy seemed perfectly feasible to many reporters and editors, not to mention readers, listeners and viewers. Hundreds of cowardly cops walking off the job so they could join the looters, but not before gunning down innocents on the streets? Hey, if you saw “The Big Easy,” the 1987 movie with Dennis Quaid and Ellen Barkin, you know the New Orleans Police Department is corrupt.

Chasing Rumors

Katrina unveiled the news media’s bias against poor people, especially poor black people. Too many of us trying to report this story were too credulous when it came to passing on information that had very weak sourcing. As the floodwaters receded, something very disturbing was revealed: In a 24-hour news cycle, in the absence of solid information, weak speculation flourishes. With communication difficult, getting accurate information was especially hard, and confirming it was often impossible to do. Because an official didn’t

know about something didn’t mean it didn’t happen. Corroboration became hearing something more than once, but Katrina’s victims repeated what they heard on the street or on radio or TV, producing an echo chamber effect. Add to this the difficult task of judging the credibility of someone who has just lost everything and is suffering an unimaginable trauma.

Reporters had to spend a lot of time chasing down rumors. In part, this was to assuage editors who heard some of the more sensational things back in the newsroom. Something moved on the wires suggesting police had mistakenly gunned down engineers who had gone to fix the levees. Wasn’t true. A local TV reporter told a bunch of us that there were 40 people trapped in an elementary school just south of New Orleans. It wasn’t just a tip, she said, her colleagues were at the scene. I got our national desk at The Boston Globe to send a colleague of mine there. In an intrepid piece of getting around a tightly controlled area, he got there quickly and found the school empty. I rushed to what was supposed to be a hostage situation, with 20 people held at gunpoint in the French Quarter; when police stormed the apartment, they found it empty.

New Orleans’s mayor and police chief, who are black, did little to challenge and quite a bit to enhance the portrait of a city out of control. Mayor C. Ray Nagin, repeatedly asked for an estimated death toll, suggested that as many as 10,000 had perished in the city; the official count is much lower. What he based that estimate on was never quite explained. Police Chief Eddie Compass went on Oprah Winfrey’s TV show to say that babies had been raped in the Superdome. Not to be outdone, Nagin told Oprah that “hundreds of

armed gang members” were, as he put it, “running the show” inside the dome. The idea of a TV show controlled by the richest, most powerful African-American woman in the country perpetuating the stereotype of heavily armed black guys running amok is beyond ironic.

I couldn’t confirm any of the wild stories, but in one story I quoted Compass saying that the city’s SWAT team, headed by Captain Jeff Winn, had run toward muzzle flashes and, holding their fire lest they hit innocent bystanders, tackled and disarmed gunmen no fewer than 30 times. About a week later, I saw Winn and told him what Compass had said. He didn’t deny it, but he gave me a look that left me uneasy in the Big Easy. A few weeks later, the chief’s claim about 30 cases of tackling and disarming gunmen was discounted, along with some other things he’d said, and Compass resigned.

What Nagin and Compass said was on the record, but that didn’t make it accurate. Still, it was hard to probe what they said or challenge them. Nagin did few interviews, and in the crush of reporters surrounding Compass, follow-up questions weren’t possible. Captain Marlon Defillo, the police department’s affable press liaison, looked uncomfortable when asked about some of the chief’s more questionable comments, but he wasn’t about to publicly contradict him, especially since he was having trouble getting accurate, current information himself. On several occasions, Defillo told me to go find the various captains or deputy chiefs in charge of specific areas and tasks. When I found Deputy Chief Lonnie Swain, who was in charge of the Superdome, he was genuinely surprised to hear that various news outlets had reported dozens of deaths and murder and mayhem there. He thought there were, at most, a dozen bodies recovered there, most of them people who were very ill when they arrived at the dome. (The official count, a month later, was six dead, none by violence.) As for babies being raped, Swain said he had heard of just one attempted rape of an adult.

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city, and during that time the image of widespread murder and mayhem was firmly planted in many minds, including reporters’.

Interweaving Race and Class

If it’s too simplistic to chalk up the hysteria to racism, there is no doubt that race played a huge role. Repetitious TV images showed almost exclusively black people caught in the squalor of the flooded city. Those who knew little or nothing about New Orleans could be forgiven for thinking that only black folks were caught in the madness. Those images convinced even some of the locals that the poor had risen up in righteous anger to engage in a class and race war. In his first-person account

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in *The New York Times Magazine* of returning to the city where he grew up, Michael Lewis observed, “If the images were to be reduced to a sentence in the minds of Uptown New Orleans, that sentence would be: Crazy black people with automatic weapons are out hunting white people, and there’s no bag limit!”

It’s just that Lewis was being decorous when he suggested that “black people” would be the chosen description. “Those people” was the most polite term I heard used; other times it was the N word.

On the deserted streets of Uptown, a week after the storm, I found a guy who had been rescued from his mother’s house after spending a week surrounded by the floodwaters. After being rescued, he went to stay at his store, worried about looters. His elderly mother, he told me, had been rescued from the Superdome by Jesse Jackson, who put her on one of his buses. He also spoke approvingly of Nagin and Com-

pass. But, as we talked, he kept using the N word, saying the disaster could turn out to be a blessing in disguise because it had driven out many undesirables. The guy used the N word so many times in the course of our conversation that I felt compelled to ask him to stop. He couldn’t understand why it bothered me so much. And when I asked him why he would use that word so casually, after he had spoken so highly of Jackson, Nagin and Compass, he seemed genuinely surprised. “Oh,” he replied, waving his hand, “they’re not niggers.”

Class and race are inextricably bound up in New Orleans, and trying to make sense of it was as hard as trying to get accurate information. About a week after we had fanned out across southeastern Louisiana, I met up with two Globe colleagues, Tom Farragher and Brian MacQuarrie, for what amounted to a beer and bitch session in Houma, about 60 miles south of New Orleans.

“Have you noticed,” Farragher began, “how many people down here use the N word?”

As well-traveled and experienced as we thought we were, for a trio of white Irish Catholic guys from Boston, the open use of such an offensive, racist word was shocking. We wondered if there was anything that we did or said as reporters that somehow invited other white people to say this to us, as if it was acceptable. The stereotype of bigoted white southerners was as pernicious a stereotype as the one attributed to the black guys with the doo rags at the Superdome, and we told ourselves that there are just as many bigoted people up north, except that they were probably not as brazen as to use that word around reporters with open notebooks. But it left us deeply unsettled and thinking the real story lay somewhere at the confused and confusing intersection of race and class.

“It’s different down here,” Farragher said.

He got that right. ■

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