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# Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina

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It has long been understood by disaster researchers that both the general public and organizational actors tend to believe in various disaster myths. Notions that disasters are accompanied by looting, social disorganization, and deviant behavior are examples of such myths. Research shows that the mass media play a significant role in promulgating erroneous beliefs about disaster behavior. Following Hurricane Katrina, the response of disaster victims was framed by the media in ways that greatly exaggerated the incidence and severity of looting and lawlessness. Media reports initially employed a "civil unrest" frame and later characterized victim behavior as equivalent to urban warfare. The media emphasis on lawlessness and the need for strict social control both reflects and reinforces political discourse calling for a greater role for the military in disaster management. Such policy positions are indicators of the strength of militarism as an ideology in the United States.

*Keywords:* disaster response; disaster management; media reporting on disasters; public response to disasters

Since the inception of the field of social science disaster research in the United States, research has focused on public responses under disaster conditions. Initiated in the late 1940s

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and early 1950s, disaster research in the United States was strongly associated with cold war concerns regarding how the general public might react in the event of a nuclear attack. Federal funding agencies believed that social science research on group behavior following disasters might shed light on such questions as whether people would panic and whether mass demoralization and social breakdown would occur following a nuclear weapons attack (Quarantelli 1987). As studies on public responses in disasters continued, it became increasingly evident to researchers that endangered publics and disaster victims respond and adapt well during and following disasters.

By the 1960s, a body of work had accumulated indicating that panic is not a problem in disasters; that rather than helplessly awaiting outside aid, members of the public behave proactively and prosocially to assist one another; that community residents themselves perform many critical disaster tasks, such as searching for and rescuing victims; and that both social cohesiveness and informal mechanisms of social control increase during disasters, resulting in a lower incidence of deviant behavior than during nondisaster times. Early research on disasters discussed such common patterns as the “expansion of the citizenship role” and “social leveling” to explain public responses to disasters. This literature identified strong situationally induced influences, such as emergent prosocial norms, as factors leading to greater community cohesiveness during disasters. Research indicated that during the emergency period following disasters, earlier community conflicts are suspended as communities unite under conditions of extreme stress. Earlier research also documented the emergence of “therapeutic communities” within disaster-stricken populations, involving victims coming together to provide mutual support to one another (for discussions on these points, see Fritz 1961; Barton 1969; Dynes 1970; Drabek 1986).

Classic research in the disaster field also highlighted contrasts that exist between the realities associated with disaster responses and myths concerning disaster behavior—myths that persist despite empirical evidence to the contrary. The first major article discussing common disaster myths was written by pioneering disaster researchers E. L. Quarantelli and Russell Dynes. That article, titled “When Disaster Strikes (It Isn’t Much Like What You’ve Heard and Read About),” was published in *Psychology Today* in February 1972.

Since the prevalence of disaster myths was first documented, more research has been conducted focusing on such topics as the extent to which the public believes disaster myths (Wenger et al. 1975); the manner in which popular culture—specifically the disaster film genre—both reflects and perpetuates erroneous beliefs about disaster-related behavior (Quarantelli 1985; Mitchell et al. 2000); and the incidence of media accounts featuring disaster myths, relative to other themes (Goltz 1984). Some of this research has focused on how the belief in myths influences individual and organizational decision making in disasters (see Fischer 1998). Other research has pointed to the manner in which media reports can affect public perceptions by amplifying and distorting risk-related information (Kasperson and Kasperson 2005). Outside the field of disaster research, media scholars have also analyzed patterns of reporting in disasters (Smith 1992), as well

as how media accounts help to shape public opinion (Walters, Wilkins, and Walters 1989).

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*[M]essages contained in the mass media and even in official discourse continue to promote ideas that have long been shown to be false in actual empirical research on disasters.*

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More recent analyses document how mythological beliefs have experienced a resurgence in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Tierney 2003). Focusing, for example, on the panic myth, the assumption that the public will panic in the event of another terrorist attack, especially one involving weapons of mass destruction, has been taken for granted in media and public policy discourses and is now even reflected in discussions among public health, homeland security, and emergency management professionals. These discourses often conflate the concept of panic with entirely normal and understandable public responses to risk and uncertainty, such as the upsurge of public information seeking in the 2001 anthrax attack. Intensified information seeking under conditions of threat or actual disaster impact, which can give rise to rumors of all types, has long been recognized as an extension of everyday interpersonal communicative practices and is readily explained by theories of collective behavior (Turner 1994). Although such behavior does create challenges for those who must respond to public inquiries, it does not indicate panic.

Similarly, it is well understood that under impending threats, many people who are not directly at risk will try to move out of harm's way, either because they are risk averse or because they do not fully understand or trust the warning information they have received. This sort of behavior, which researchers term the "evacuation shadow" effect, is quite common in threat situations of all types. First documented following the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island (Ziegler, Brunn, and Johnson 1981; Lindell and Perry 1992), the evacuation shadow phenomenon was seen most recently immediately prior to Hurricane Rita. Despite the fact that they are common, and despite the fact that why they occur is well understood, "inappropriate" efforts to seek safety on the part of people whom authorities do not consider at risk have also been seen as indicative of panic.

The panic myth has been consistently reinforced in various ways in the aftermath of 9/11. For example, the American Red Cross is widely viewed as a trusted source of information on disaster preparedness. Yet in 2005, the Red Cross took

many researchers and disaster management professionals by surprise by launching a print and electronic media campaign whose theme was "I can't stop a [tornado, flood, fire, hurricane, terrorist attack, etc.] but I can stop panic." The campaign, which was intended to promote household preparedness for extreme events, erred in two ways. First, it conveyed the notion that there is nothing people can do to prevent disasters, which is patently false; and second, it sent a message that panic will invariably break out during disasters and other extreme events and that avoiding panic should be a top priority for the public when disasters strike. (For further discussions in inappropriate uses of the panic concept, see Clarke 2002; Tierney 2003, 2004.)

As the panic example shows, messages contained in the mass media and even in official discourse continue to promote ideas that have long been shown to be false in actual empirical research on disasters. Moreover, since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, these types of messages, which continue to be vigorously challenged by experts, now seem to ring true to many audiences, in part because of the unsubstantiated and arguable but still widely accepted assumption that terrorism-related extreme events are qualitatively different from other types of emergencies and, thus, generate qualitatively different sociobehavioral responses.

Researchers have long pointed out that the belief in myths concerning disaster behavior is not problematic merely because such beliefs are untrue. Rather, these erroneous ideas are harmful because of their potential for influencing organizational, governmental, and public responses during disasters. It has been noted, for example, that incorrect assumptions about the potential for looting and social breakdown can lead to misallocations of public safety resources that could be put to better use in providing direct assistance to victims. Concerns with public panic can also lead officials to avoid issuing timely warnings and to keep needed risk-related information from the public (Fischer 1998). Such actions only serve to make matters worse when threats actually materialize.

We turn next to the substance of this article, which concerns the promulgation of disaster myths by the media during and following Hurricane Katrina. Because analyses on data collected in Katrina's aftermath are still ongoing, the article contains only preliminary observations, presented primarily in the form of examples from major press outlets that illustrate key points. We note also that at this time the media, the research community, and the nation as a whole still do not know with any degree of certainty what actually did happen during the hurricane and in the terrible days that followed. However, we emphasize that even though many questions still remain unanswered, and indeed may never be definitively answered, the images conveyed by the media during that turbulent period left indelible impressions on the public and also provided the justification for official actions that were undertaken to manage the disaster. Moreover, the media vigorously promoted those images even though media organizations themselves had little ability to verify what was actually happening in many parts of the impact region. As the sections that follow show, initial media coverage of Katrina's devastating impacts was quickly replaced by reporting that characterized disaster victims as opportunistic looters and violent criminals and that presented individual and group behavior fol-

lowing the Katrina disaster through the lens of civil unrest. Later, narratives shifted again and began to metaphorically represent the disaster-stricken city of New Orleans as a war zone and to draw parallels between the conditions in that city and urban insurgency in Iraq. These media frames helped guide and justify actions undertaken by military and law enforcement entities that were assigned responsibility for the postdisaster emergency response. The overall effect of media coverage was to further bolster arguments that only the military is capable of effective action during disasters.

## What Influences Media Reporting on Disasters?

Discussions on why media portrayals of disasters and their victims so often deviate from what is actually known about behavior during emergencies highlight a number of factors. Some explanations center on reporting conventions that lead media organizations, particularly the electronic media, to focus on dramatic, unusual, and exceptional behavior, which can lead audiences to believe such behavior is common and typical. Other explanations focus on the widespread use of standard frames that strongly shape the content of media messages. Although based on myths about disaster behavior, one such frame, the “looting frame,” appears almost invariably in disaster-related reporting. As Fischer (1998) noted in his book on disaster myths,

Looting is perhaps the most expected behavioral response to disaster. Both print and broadcast media personnel report on the alleged looting incidents, on steps being taken to prevent it, and, alternatively, on how unusual it was for the community in question not to be preyed on by looters. (p. 15)

It is common for both print and electronic media covering disasters to include content indicating that “the National Guard has been brought into (name of community) to prevent looting”—implying that looting would otherwise have been a serious problem without the use of strong external social control. Following circular reasoning, the fact that looting does not occur during a particular disaster event is then attributed to the presence of the National Guard and public safety agencies, even though it is highly likely that looting would never have been a problem in the first place. These types of frames, themes, and content make such a strong impression on audiences in part because they reflect and are consistent with other popular media portrayals of disaster behavior, such as those that appear in disaster films and made-for-TV movies.

In the question-and-answer period following her testimony before the Research Subcommittee of the House Science Committee in November 2005, University of New Orleans sociologist Shirley Laska pointed to another important factor shaping disaster reporting. She noted that while many media outlets often do have science reporters, the media almost universally lack specialists in disaster-

related phenomena, particularly those involving individual, group, and organizational behavior. In her comments, Laska recounted the many hours she spent on the telephone with reporters following Hurricane Katrina—interviews that were particularly lengthy because the vast majority of the reporters with whom she spoke lacked even the most basic understanding of societal response and emergency management issues (U.S. Congress 2005). Perhaps this lack of understanding of the fundamentals of disaster-related behavior is one reason why disaster myths and their associated frames have had such a strong influence on media disaster reporting.

Disaster reporting is also linked to what is judged to be newsworthy about particular events. Decisions about what and how much to cover with respect to specific disaster events are often rooted in judgments about the social value of disaster victims and on conceptions of social distance and difference. Thus, the vast outpouring of generosity following the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of December 2004 was driven both by the catastrophic nature of the disaster and by the fact that so many Western tourists happened to be in the impact region when the disaster struck. There was no comparable compassionate response from the West for the victims of the 2005 Pakistan-Kashmir earthquake, despite the fact that the death toll has now exceeded eighty-six thousand and many more victims are expected to die of starvation or freeze to death when winter grips the impact region. Hurricane Wilma battered Cancun for two days and caused widespread devastation, but most U.S. reporting focused on American tourists who were stranded in the region, rather on the challenges faced by Cancun's residents, and reporting on the tragedy in Cancun and its catastrophic aftermath dropped off within a few days after the event, when the tourists had come home safely.

Since the media have a long record of portraying nonmainstream groups, especially minority group members, in stereotypical ways, it should come as no surprise that these same framing conventions would influence reporting on disaster victims in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Indeed, in Katrina's aftermath, among the most widely circulated media images was a set of photographs in which African Americans were consistently described as "looting" goods, while whites engaging in exactly the same behaviors were labeled as "finding" supplies.

Media practices and judgments regarding newsworthiness, as well as media stereotyping, are undeniably important factors in the production of disaster news. At a more macro level, however, media treatments of disasters both reflect and reinforce broader societal and cultural trends, socially constructed metanarratives, and hegemonic discourse practices that support the status quo and the interests of elites. Thus, myths concerning the panicky public, the dangers presented by looters, and the threat disaster victims pose to the social order serve to justify policy stances adopted by law enforcement entities and other institutions concerned with social control (Tierney 2003).

We argue here that media reporting surrounding the Katrina disaster can best be understood from this last-mentioned perspective. In addition to reflecting both standard media reporting conventions and long-standing media biases regarding people of color, disaster reporting also serves broader political purposes. In the fol-

lowing sections, we will provide illustrative materials supporting this point. More specifically, we will argue that post-Katrina reporting led directly to the social construction of negative images of residents of the impact area, particularly African American victims and the very poor. Later shown to be inaccurate, slanted by sources that were themselves biased, and based more on rumor than on direct observation, reports constructed disaster victims as lawless, violent, exploitative, and almost less than human in the days following Katrina. Images of lawlessness and civil unrest were later replaced by media discourse characterizing New Orleans as a “war zone” and framing the challenges faced by emergency responders as not unlike those facing troops battling insurgents in Iraq.

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Both reflecting and further embellishing myths concerning behavior during disasters, media stories influenced officials to adopt unproductive and outright harmful response strategies during the emergency. The stories also served to further bolster claims regarding the need for strong command-and-control procedures and for greater involvement on the part of the military in extreme events ranging from homeland security emergencies to disasters of all types. Set in a broader societal context, media depictions of events as they unfolded during the disaster provided strong evidence for arguments that strict social control should be the first priority during disaster events and that the military is the only institution capable of managing disasters.

## Media Reporting and the Social Construction of Looting and Violence in Hurricane Katrina

The preliminary analyses presented here are based on a variety of media sources. News stories focusing specifically on the behavior of victims and the official response to the hurricane were collected from three newspapers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. The



period covered spanned the impact period itself and the two weeks following the disaster, from August 29, 2005, to September 11, 2005. In extracting frames and themes from these reports, we used qualitative analytic techniques, rather than quantitatively oriented analytic approaches (see Altheide 1996). We do not argue that the “civil unrest” and “war zone” frames were the only ones employed by the media. Rather, we argue that these frames and their associated discourses were among the most prominent and that they achieved prominence because they were congruent with post-9/11 official discourses regarding how disasters and other extreme events—including in particular those associated with terrorist attacks—should be managed in the United States.

*Disaster myths and the social construction of disorder in New Orleans*

*Rampant looting.* As noted in the sections above, the notion that U.S. disasters are followed by looting activity has long been contradicted by empirical evidence. Nonetheless, the media continue to assume that looting and lawlessness are significant elements in the public response to disasters. Media coverage of the behaviors of disaster victims following the hurricane mirrored this assumption. Moreover, particularly in the early days after the hurricane, reports referred to disaster looting behavior in ways that would usually be reserved for describing behavior during episodes of civil unrest.

The distinction between disasters and urban unrest is an important one. A substantial social science literature points to the marked distinction that exists between how individuals and groups behave during periods of civil unrest and how they behave following disasters. When civil disorders occur, looting does break out; indeed, the taking of consumer goods and the destruction of property are hallmarks of modern U.S. “commodity riots,” such as the urban riots of the 1960s and the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest. Such looting is typically carried out by groups from within the riot area (including family groups) and in full view of the media, local residents, and even law enforcement agencies. Riot-related looting behavior develops under the influence of emergent norms that not only permit but actually encourage the taking and destruction of property (Dynes and Quarantelli 1968; Quarantelli and Dynes 1970). However, research also indicates that even during riot situations, looting is selective and usually confined to particular types of stores, such as those carrying retail goods, liquor, and groceries (Tierney 1994). Moreover, studies show that individuals who loot and engage in property violence during episodes of civil unrest do so sporadically, mixing their unlawful behavior with other routine social behavior such as gathering with friends and going home for meals. Looters may or may not share common grievances or reasons for looting; some may see looting as an act of protest or retaliation, while others may view unrest as simply an opportunity to obtain goods for free (Feagin and Hahn 1973; McPhail and Wohlstein 1983; McPhail 1991).

In contrast, research has shown repeatedly that looting is highly unusual in U.S. disasters. When it does occur, it tends to be transient, to be carried out in secret, and to involve isolated groups rather than large numbers of people. Unlike looting during civil disorders, actual and potential disaster-related looting behavior is widely condemned by the residents of affected communities. Signs bearing messages such as “you loot, we shoot,” which are often shown in the media following disasters, are not so much indicative of the actual occurrence of looting as they are of strong community norms against looting (Fischer 1998). Community residents also believe looting myths and act accordingly, arming themselves in an effort to prevent looting, even if such behavior has not been reported or verified by official sources. After disasters, individuals returning to their damaged homes and businesses to retrieve items may be mistakenly labeled as looters, as may those who go to others’ homes to check to see whether occupants are safe. Overconcern with the possibility of looting often leads community residents to ignore evacuation warnings and remain in their homes to ward off looters—another example of how the belief in myths may actually increase the risk of death and injury in disasters (Fischer 1998; Tierney, Lindell, and Perry 2001).

This is not to say that there have never been instances of large-scale collective looting in U.S. disasters. While vanishingly rare, such episodes have occurred. Perhaps the most notable recent example is the looting that occurred on the island of St. Croix following Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Hugo was a huge storm that caused serious damage and social disruption in many parts of the Caribbean and the southeast, including parts of Puerto Rico and North and South Carolina. However, looting only emerged on St. Croix, not in other hard-hit areas. Because this was such an unusual case, disaster scholar E. L. Quarantelli spent considerable time investigating why looting was a problem on St. Croix but nowhere else Hugo had affected. Based on his fieldwork and interviews, Quarantelli attributed the looting to several factors. First, the hurricane devastated the island, completely destroying the vast bulk of the built environment. Second, government institutions, including public safety agencies, were rendered almost entirely ineffective by the hurricane’s severity, so the victims essentially had no expectation that their needs would be addressed by those institutions. Third, victims had no information on when they could expect help to arrive. Equally important, according to Quarantelli, was that the lawlessness that followed Hugo was in many ways consistent with the high rates of predisaster crime on the island and also a consequence of preexisting social inequalities and class and racial resentments, which had long been exacerbated by the sharp class distinctions that characterized the tourist economy on St. Croix (see Quarantelli 2006; Rodríguez, Trainor, and Quarantelli 2006 [this volume]).

It can be argued that the post-Katrina conditions in New Orleans in many ways paralleled the situation on St. Croix following Hugo. Those who were unable to escape the city or find refuge after Katrina struck may well have reached the same conclusions as those who were trapped on St. Croix after Hugo. With homes, property, and livelihoods gone, with no evidence of a functioning governmental system, facing severe danger and hardship, and without having any idea of when help

would arrive, many residents might have understandably concluded that they were on their own and that they had best fend for themselves.

Given the utterly miserable conditions the hurricane produced, looting might well have been collectively defined as justifiable by some of those who were forced to remain and await help in New Orleans. Many news reports featured images of desperate residents fanning out through neighborhoods in search of basic necessities such as food, water, diapers, and clothing (Barringer and Longman 2005; Coates and Eggen 2005a). However, as of this writing, no solid empirical data exist regarding how widespread (or rare) looting actually was, who took part in the episodes of looting that did occur, why they were motivated to take part, whether the goods people took could have been salvaged, or how much damage and loss looting actually caused, relative to other losses the hurricane produced. Equally important, whatever lawless behavior may have occurred has not yet been systematically analyzed in the context of “normal” rates of lawbreaking in New Orleans. What do exist are volumes of information on what the media and public officials *believed and communicated* about looting in New Orleans. As discussed below, these reports characterized post-Katrina looting as very widespread, wanton, irrational, and accompanied by violence—in short, as resembling media characterizations of riot behavior. Moreover, the media confined their reporting to the putative lawless behavior of certain categories and types of people—specifically young black males—to the exclusion of other behaviors in which these disaster victims may have engaged during the disaster, producing a profile of looters and looting groups that overlooked whatever prosocial, altruistic behaviors such groups may have undertaken.

More systematic analyses of media looting reports will come later. In this article, we offer a series of representative reports that appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* as well as from the Department of Defense’s American Forces Information Service. We stress that these are typical comments that were made in these media outlets, not unusual ones. The material presented below focuses mainly on the first few days after the hurricane.

From *The New York Times*:

August 31: “These are not individuals looting. These are large groups of armed individuals.” . . . “Looting broke out as opportunistic thieves cleaned out abandoned stores for a second night. In one incident, officials said a police officer was shot and critically wounded.” (Treaster and Kleinfeld 2005)

September 1: “Chaos gripped New Orleans on Wednesday as looters ran wild . . . looters brazenly ripped open gates and ransacked stores for food, clothing, television sets, computers, jewelry, and guns.” (McFadden and Blumenthal 2005)

From *The Washington Post*:

August 31: “Even as the floodwaters rose, looters roamed the city, sacking department stores and grocery stores and floating their spoils away in plastic garbage cans. . . . Looting began on Canal Street, in the morning, as people carrying plastic garbage pails waded

through waist-deep water to break into department stores. In drier areas, looters raced into smashed stores and pharmacies and by nightfall the pillage was widespread.” (Gugliotta and Whoriskey 2005)

September 2: “What could be going through the minds of people who survive an almost biblical tragedy, find themselves in a hellscape of the dead and the dispossessed, and promptly decide to go looting? Obviously not much: Stealing a rack of fancy clothes when there’s no place to wear them or a television when there’s no electricity does not suggest a lot of deep thought.” (Robinson 2005)

#### From the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*:

August 30: In the midst of the rising water, two men “were planning to head out to the levee to retrieve a stash of beer, champagne, and hard liquor they found washed onto the levee.” (MacCash and O’Byrne 2005)

August 30: “Midafternoon Monday, a parade of looters streamed from Coleman’s retail store. . . . The looters, men and women who appeared to be in their early teens to mid-40s, braved a steady rain . . . to take away boxes of clothing and shoes from the store.” (Philbin 2005)

August 31: “Officials watched helplessly as looters around the city ransacked stores for food, clothing, appliances, and guns.” “ ‘The looting is out of control. The French Quarter has been attacked,’ Councilwoman Jackie Clarkson said.” (McGill 2005)

*Beyond property crime.* Not only were the crowds engaging in the collective theft of all types of goods, but their behavior was also violent and even deadly. Media accounts made it seem as if all of New Orleans was caught up in a turmoil of lawlessness.

#### From *The New York Times*:

September 2: “Chaos and gunfire hampered efforts to evacuate the Superdome, and, the New Orleans police superintendent said, armed thugs have taken control of the secondary makeshift shelter in the convention center. The thugs repelled eight squads of eleven officers each he sent to secure the place . . . rapes and assaults were occurring unimpeded in the neighborhood streets. . . . Looters set ablaze a shopping center and firefighters, facing guns, abandoned their efforts to extinguish the fires, local radio said.” (Treaster and Sontag 2005)

September 3: “America is once more plunged into a snake pit of anarchy, death, looting, raping, marauding thugs, suffering infrastructure, a gutted police force, insufficient troop levels and criminally negligent government planning.” (Dowd 2005)

#### From *The Washington Post*:

September 1: “Things have spiraled so out of control [in New Orleans] that the city’s mayor ordered police officers to focus on looters and give up the search and rescue efforts.” (Coates and Eggen 2005b)

September 3: A firefighter from Long Beach is quoted as saying, “People are taking clothing, liquor, things that aren’t life-surviving, material items. I don’t have a problem if someone is trying to get food and water, but beyond that, we’re bustn’ em. . . . What we’re get-

ting worried about is people are starting to shoot at us now. . . . That's the lowest form of human being haunting the earth." (Vedantam and Klein 2005)

From the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*:

August 31: According to the New Orleans homeland security chief, "There are gangs of armed men in the city, moving around the city." (*Times-Picayune* 2005a)

September 2: "Governor Kathleen Blanco called the looters 'hoodlums' and issued a warning to lawbreakers: Hundreds of National Guard hardened on the battlefield in Iraq have landed in New Orleans. 'They have M-16s, and they're locked and loaded,' she said." (Breed 2005)

Another graphic *Times-Picayune* story, published on September 1, spoke of gangs looting houses and businesses, robbing people in the street, looting gun stores, stealing guns from Wal-Mart, and assaulting disaster victims (Anderson, Perlstein, and Scott 2005). These media stories, along with stories passed through rumor networks, clearly influenced disaster management decision making. Immediately following the New Orleans levee breach, for example, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco emphasized that search and rescue should take priority over all other emergency activities. However, as the September 1 story above in *The Washington Post* indicates, within three days of the hurricane's impact, she and the mayor of New Orleans ordered public safety officers to pursue lawbreakers, rather than concentrating on lifesaving activities (Coates and Eggen 2005b). This decision directly influenced the survival chances of stranded and dying disaster victims.

The material presented above comes from print media. While we have not attempted to undertake the Herculean task of analyzing electronic media, the Internet, or postings that appeared in the blogosphere, anyone who watched or read these media in the aftermath of Katrina can only conclude that the images of looting and looters these media conveyed were even more extreme. While television news did report extensively on the suffering of Katrina's victims, the inter-governmental disaster response debacle, and other topics, it also featured numerous stories of looting, rape, and lawlessness, continuously "looping" video of the activities of groups that had already become "armed, marauding thugs" in the minds of viewers. Video images also conveyed more powerfully than print media could that the "thugs" who had taken over New Orleans were young black men.

As the emergency continued, all manner of rumors were reported by the media as truth. Readers and viewers were told, for example, of multiple murders, child rape, and people dying of gunshot wounds in the Superdome. These reports were later found to be groundless, but they were accepted as accurate by both media organizations and consumers of news because they were consistent with the emerging media frame that characterized New Orleans as a "snakepit of anarchy," a violent place where armed gangs of black men took advantage of the disaster not only to loot but also to commit capital crimes.

More thoughtful analyses of looting and other forms of disaster-related collective behavior would later emerge in the media (see, for example, an article titled

"Up for Grabs; Sociologists Question How Much Looting and Mayhem Really Took Place in New Orleans," which ran in the *Boston Globe* on September 11, 2005; see Shea 2005). But before these kinds of balanced reports appeared, the "armed thug" frame was already well established. Reports seemed to clearly show that the activities of armed thugs, "the lowest form of human being haunting the earth," had gone well beyond looting for necessities and had spilled over into murder, rape, and acts of random violence (Vedantam and Klein 2005). This frame provided part of the justification for the subsequent governmental response to the Katrina disaster.

## Metaphors Matter: From Civil Unrest to Urban Warfare

The inability of federal, state, and local authorities to respond rapidly and effectively to Hurricane Katrina quickly became a major scandal both in the United States and around the world. In the days immediately following the disaster, the press, the U.S. populace, and Washington officialdom all sought to understand what had gone so terribly wrong with the intergovernmental response to Hurricane Katrina. Within a few days, a broad consensus developed that Michael Brown, the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), was the individual most responsible for the Katrina debacle. Brown resigned under heavy criticism on September 12, 2005. In the weeks and months following Katrina, the media have continued to report both on Brown's lack of qualifications for his position and on his lack of basic situation awareness during the Katrina disaster. Most recently, stories have focused on e-mails that Brown exchanged with colleagues at the height of the crisis, purportedly showing that he was drastically out of touch with what was actually happening in New Orleans and other areas affected by the hurricane. In the meantime, broader management system failures during Hurricane Katrina became the subject of a congressional investigation.

Even before Brown's resignation, administration officials had likely already concluded that civil authorities were incapable of responding to Katrina and that the military would have to play a significantly larger role than it has traditionally played in U.S. disasters. The president attempted to federalize and militarize the response immediately after the hurricane, but he was rebuffed by Governor Blanco (Roig-Franzia and Hsu 2005). Although the initial federal response to Katrina had been shockingly incompetent, the federal government ultimately did mobilize, and a large component of that mobilization involved military and security resources. Just two days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana and ten days before Brown's resignation, the president had already ordered General Russell Honore, as commander of Joint Task Force Katrina, to coordinate the military's role in rescue and relief activities throughout the Gulf Coast. Within a week (and in some cases, within days), along with first responders from around the United States, military, law enforcement, and private security companies began to converge on the

region to provide all forms of assistance and to reinforce overwhelmed state and local public safety forces. They would help restore public order, joining what Governor Blanco had earlier referred to as battle-seasoned Louisiana National Guard forces, “locked and loaded,” to put down looting and violence (Breed 2005). When beleaguered FEMA chief Michael Brown was finally recalled to Washington, he was replaced as chief coordinating official in the disaster region not by another civilian official but by Admiral Thad Allen.

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*[W]hatever lawless behavior may have  
occurred [in Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath]  
has not yet been systematically analyzed in  
the context of “normal” rates of  
lawbreaking in New Orleans.*

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By the fifth day after the hurricane’s landfall in the Gulf region, the number of National Guard and active military deployed in Hurricane Katrina had tripled the number deployed within that same time period following Hurricane Andrew in 1992 (American Forces Information Service 2005a). With the arrival of so many command-and-control-oriented entities into the impact region, the response to Hurricane Katrina, particularly in New Orleans, began to take on a tone not seen in other U.S. disasters. Badges, uniforms, and arms—including assault weapons—were seen on the streets in large numbers. Search and rescue missions in the flooded neighborhoods of New Orleans began to resemble military search and destroy missions, as armed soldiers broke down doors and entered homes in search of stranded victims. In a city already under a strict dawn-to-dusk curfew, the movements of New Orleans residents—described as “holdouts” for their refusal to follow orders to leave their own homes and evacuate the city—were further curtailed, as sheriff’s deputies were ordered to “handcuff and ‘forcefully remove’ holdouts” (Nolan 2005). The militarization of the response now affected even media reporters, as response personnel attempted to limit their access to sites within the city.

Once the looting and civil unrest were perceived to have exceeded the capabilities of local law enforcement, the National Guard were described as having been brought into disaster-stricken areas to help “restore and maintain law and order” to affected areas (Haskell 2005). As more military and law enforcement personnel streamed into Louisiana, and as media reporting continued to emphasize civil disorder and lawlessness, a new “war zone” metaphor began to emerge. First employed

by the media, the “war zone” metaphor was quickly reflected in the discourse of both public officials and military personnel who were deployed in the impact region. With so many military and other security personnel on the ground, comparisons to wartime experiences became increasingly common. “I’d thought we’d just entered a war zone” and “the region looks like a war zone” became familiar statements (Alvarez 2005a, 2005b). In interviews, National Guard personnel likened the destruction in the Gulf region to their experiences in the Gulf War. Referring to the extensive building damage, one Guardsman noted that “some of the things you see out here you see in Iraq” (Alvarez 2005a). The extent of the devastation was characterized as shocking even to the “most seasoned veterans of past wars” (American Forces Information Service 2005c).

Within a few days after the hurricane, President Bush and other government officials described themselves as determined to regain control and protect the people from the criminal element through the presence of military forces. For example, on September 3, a *Times-Picayune* story emphasized Mr. Bush’s strong law and order stance:

“What is not working right, we’re going to make it right.” Referring to rampant looting and crime in New Orleans, Bush said, “We are going to restore order in the city of New Orleans. The people of this country expect there to be law and order, and we’re going to work hard to get it. In order to make sure there’s less violence, we’ve got to get food to people. We’ll get on top of this situation, and we’re going to help the people that need help.” (*Times-Picayune* 2005b)

A few days later, the *New York Times* described the warlike conditions in New Orleans in this manner:

September 11: “Partly because of the shortage of troops, violence raged inside the New Orleans convention center, which interviews show was even worse than previously described. Police SWAT team members found themselves plunging into the darkness, guided by the muzzle flashes of thugs’ handguns.” (Lipton et al. 2005)

Media also reported that in response to civil unrest at the convention center, one thousand National Guard military police “stormed” the convention center “to thwart a looming potentially dangerous situation” (R. Williams 2005). A National Guard officer explained that “had the Guardsmen gone in with less force, they may have been challenged and innocent people may have been caught in a fight between the Guard military police and those who didn’t want to be processed or apprehended” (R. Williams 2005). After military police regained “control” of the convention center, hundreds of disaster evacuees were searched like criminal suspects for guns, illicit drugs, alcohol, contraband, and other items that had been designated as “undesirable” and then sent back into the center to await buses that would take them out of the city (R. Williams 2005).

The increasing threat and the use of military force were presented as key factors in restoring order throughout the Gulf Coast region. On September 3, for example, a news report quoted an Army major general as stating that “once you put soldiers



on the streets with M-16s, things tend to settle down” (Alvarez 2005a). On September 4, the *New York Times* reported that “the mere sight of troops in camouflage battle gear and with assault rifles gave a sense of relief to many of the thousands of stranded survivors who had endured days of appalling terror and suffering.” In the same article, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco was quoted as stating that

they [the military] brought a sense of order and peace, and it was a beautiful sight to see that we’re ramping up. We are seeing a show of force. It’s putting confidence back in our hearts and in the minds of our people. We’re going to make it through. (McFadden 2005)

By September 13, the deployment of military personnel in response to Hurricane Katrina, totaling more than seventy-two thousand troops, was the largest for any natural disaster in U.S. history (American Forces Information Service 2005b). According to the media and the military press, military missions included deploying guards at street intersections (Hynes 2005), searching damaged buildings, and reinforcing social control through the use of “security” and “safety” measures.

To media, governmental, and military sources, operations in Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and the rest of the impact region had come to resemble a second Iraq War. Indeed, one military official, presumably equating the disaster impact region with Iraq, was quoted as saying that “we are now fighting on two fronts” (*Times-Picayune* 2005c). A Loudon County, Virginia, sheriff mused upon sending county officers to Jefferson parish near New Orleans, stating, “I almost feel like a father sending his kids off to war or something. Things are becoming more and more violent as people become more desperate” (Laris 2005).

The media emphasized the “war zone” metaphor in multiple articles discussing the response of the people of New Orleans. For example, the *New York Times* described the thoughts of a man who had volunteered his fishing boat to rescue New Orleans residents:

A shotgun rested in the boat next to Mr. Lovett, who said shots had been fired near him on occasion during the past week. “I don’t feel like I’m in the U.S. I feel like I’m in a war. All the guns, the chaos.” (Longman 2005)

New Orleans Police Superintendent Eddie Compass spoke with the *Times-Picayune* about the New Orleans Police Department’s successful attempts to operate under wartime conditions:

“In the annals of history, no police department in the history of the world was asked to do what we were asked,” Compass said Monday, at the Emergency Operations Center in Baton Rouge. “We won. We did not lose one officer in battle.” (Filosa 2005)

Ironically, with the increased presence of the military, the media itself began facing restrictions and threats over its coverage of the hurricane response. The National Guard and law enforcement agencies initiated various strategies to limit journalists’ access to places where disaster operations were being carried out. One strategy centered on controlling the movement of journalists within the city of New

Orleans (B. Williams 2005). Response agencies also began refusing media access to the Convention Center and Superdome (B. Williams 2005). When reporters protested, they were faced down by military personnel carrying loaded weapons (B. Williams 2005). As the recovery of bodies began, reporters were told, “No photos. No stories.” In an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a soldier was quoted as telling reporters that “the Army had a policy that requires media to be 300 meters—more than three football fields in length—away from the scene of body recoveries” (Vega 2005).

As the quote above indicates, the military’s response and reaction to coverage of the deaths from Hurricane Katrina came to eerily resemble the administration’s policy in Iraq, which prohibits the media from showing images of dead American soldiers. Reporters were told they would “face consequences” if they took pictures (Vega 2005). In an effort to further contain media coverage, on September 10, 2005, General Honore and Colonel Terry Ebbert announced that the media would have “zero access” to the recovery operations (CNN.com 2005b). The media were granted access to gather information and report on body recovery only after a temporary restraining order was issued at the request of CNN (CNN.com 2005a).

## Conclusions and Implications

*Myths and their consequences.* As the foregoing discussion shows, both media reporting and official discourse following Hurricane Katrina upheld the mythical notion that disasters result in lawlessness and social breakdown. This is not to say that media coverage following Katrina provided nothing helpful or useful to victims, the American public, and audiences around the world. That was certainly not the case. The media devoted enormous resources to covering Katrina and also to performing such services as helping to locate and reunite disaster-stricken households. Reporters worked tirelessly to provide up-to-date information on all aspects of the hurricane.

However, even while engaging extensively in both reporting and public service, the media also presented highly oversimplified and distorted characterizations of the human response to the Katrina catastrophe. Ignoring the diversity and complexity of human responses to disastrous events, media accounts constructed only two images of those trapped in the disaster impact area: victims were seen either as “marauding thugs” out to attack both fellow victims and emergency responders or as helpless refugees from the storm, unable to cope and deserving of charity. These contrasting constructions are reflected in a story that appeared in the *Times-Picayune* on August 30, which discussed Louisiana Governor Blanco’s reflection on displaced New Orleans disaster victims:

Part of the population in the Dome are people “who do not have any regard for others.” But many “good people” are also living in the Dome, she said, including mothers with babies. (Scott 2005)

Even as media and official discourses acknowledged that “good people”—mainly women and children—were among those victimized by Katrina, the terms used to describe the behavior of disaster victims in New Orleans, the majority of whom were people of color, were identical to those used to describe individuals and groups that engage in rioting in the context of episodes of civil unrest. Those trapped in New Orleans were characterized as irrational (because they engaged in “senseless” theft, rather than stealing for survival) and as gangs of out-of-control young males who presented a lethal threat to fellow victims and emergency responders. Officials increasingly responded to the debacle in New Orleans—a debacle that was in large measure of their own making—as if the United States were facing an armed urban insurgency rather than a catastrophic disaster. As the situation in New Orleans was increasingly equated with conditions of a “war zone,” strict military and law enforcement controls, including controls on media access to response activities such as body recovery, were seen as necessary to replace social breakdown with the rule of law and order.

Once the initial media frenzy finally died down, journalists themselves were among the harshest critics of Katrina reporting. For example, in a September 29 segment that aired on the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, media analysts, a journalist who had covered the Katrina disaster, and a military official were unanimous in their condemnation of how the media promoted myths of looting and violence in stories that were based almost entirely on rumor and hearsay. Noting that media reporters had by and large never actually witnessed lawlessness and violence in New Orleans, *NewsHour* guests gave numerous examples of the ways in which the media fell short of its duty to report facts, as opposed to rumors. One commentator noted that

The central part of this story, what went wrong at the convention center and the Superdome, was wrong. American media threw everything they had at this story . . . and yet they could not get inside the convention center, they could not get inside the Superdome to dispel the lurid, the hysterical, the salaciousness of the reporting. . . . I have in mind especially the throat-slashed seven-year-old girl who had been gang-raped at the convention center—didn't happen. In fact there were no rapes at the convention center or the Superdome that have yet been corroborated in any way. . . . There weren't stacks of bodies in the freezer. But America was riveted by this reporting, wholesale collapse of the media's own levees as they let in all the rumors, and all the innuendo, all the first-person story, because they were caught up in their own emotionalism . . . [this was] one of the worst weeks of reporting in the history of the American media. (Online *NewsHour* 2005, 5)

Ways of telling are also ways of not telling, and this same commentator went on to say,

I think that some of the journalists involved, especially the anchors, became so caught up in their own persona and their own celebrity that they missed important and obvious stories. They failed to report on the basic issues surrounding who deploys the National Guard; they failed to report on why the Salvation Army and the Red Cross were forbidden by state officials to deliver supplies to the Superdome and the convention center. They failed to report what happened to the buses [that were supposed to be used to evacuate residents of New Orleans] . . . they reported panic-inducing, fear-inducing, hysteria-

inducing events: looting, pillaging, murder sprees, sort of the most squalid journalism you could imagine. (Online NewsHour 2005, 7)

*Outcomes and consequences of media myths.* Despite these and other efforts to criticize the media's performance following Katrina, initial evidence suggests that the media's relentless adherence to disaster myths and to frames emphasizing civil unrest and urban insurgency, along with the strategic response measures these reports justified, had a number of immediate negative consequences. For example, by calling for curfews and viewing all victim movements around the city as suspect, authorities likely interfered with ability of neighborhood residents and family groups to assist one another. Because they focused on combating what the media had constructed as out-of-control looting and widespread violence, officials may have failed to take full advantage of the goodwill and altruistic spirit of community residents and community resources, such as churches and community-based organizations. By reassigning emergency responders from lifesaving activities to law enforcement functions, those in charge of the response placed law and order above the lives of hurricane survivors. By treating disaster victims as thugs engaging in capital crimes at worst and as troublesome "holdouts" at best, responding agencies created conflicts between themselves and disaster victims that might not have developed otherwise and that likely destroyed the potential for the kinds of collaborative partnership activities that major disasters require. Anecdotal reports, not yet verified, also suggest that images of looting and lawlessness may have caused individuals and organizations from outside the affected region to hesitate before mobilizing to disaster sites in the immediate aftermath of Katrina (Laris 2005).

The treatment of disaster victims in New Orleans and other areas affected by Katrina has also reinforced the nation's racial divide. Public opinion polls conducted in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina reveal stark differences between white and African American perceptions of the governmental response to the disaster. A survey conducted by the Pew Center for the People and the Press in early September found that a majority of those polled disapproved of the government's handling of the Katrina disaster. However, comparisons of black and white responses to the poll revealed very significant opinion differences. For example, 71 percent of blacks thought that the disaster showed that racial inequality is still a major problem in the United States, but 56 percent of white respondents said that was not the case. Two-thirds of black respondents believed that the governmental response would have been swifter had the disaster victims been white, while only 17 percent of whites thought the race of the victims made a difference. The opinions of blacks and whites differed dramatically along other dimensions as well: blacks were much more likely to report feeling angry and depressed after the hurricane; to feel sympathy for those who had been unable to evacuate; and to believe that those who may have looted did so because they needed to survive, not because they were criminals seeking to take advantage of the disaster (although 37 percent of whites expressed the latter view) (Pew Center 2005).

These disparate reactions to the government's handling of Hurricane Katrina have broader implications for other extreme events. If people of color now have

such low regard for national leaders and crisis response agencies, and if their faith in mainstream institutions has been so badly shaken by the Katrina disaster, what will be their likely response in future national emergencies, such as an avian flu epidemic? If government leaders, the media, and members of the white majority see African Americans and other people of color as lawless elements who are ready to take advantage of disaster- or terrorism-related social disruption, what extreme measures are they likely to advocate to ensure the maintenance of public security during future emergencies?

*Militarism and disasters.* Hurricane Katrina showed once again that the potential for catastrophe is present wherever extreme events—natural, technological, or willful—intersect with vulnerable built environments and vulnerable populations. Those left behind in the hurricane's wake were the most vulnerable groups in the impact region—individuals and households that lacked the resources to evacuate or that stayed behind for a variety of other reasons. It was widely understood well before Katrina that New Orleans could not be successfully evacuated in the face of a major hurricane, but few concrete actions had been taken to address the needs of these most vulnerable residents.

Reflecting on the fate of these stranded victims, it is important to note that many of the nation's large urban agglomerations, and their populations, are at risk from future extreme events. These large urban centers include New York City, Los Angeles, the Bay Area of Northern California, and Miami. Highly vulnerable urban places are also home to highly diverse populations, including many who are forced to live in poverty. Will other low-income inner-city communities be seen as potential hotbeds of urban unrest and potential "war zones" in future disasters? Will the same images of violence and criminality that emerged following Katrina be applied, perhaps preemptively, to other large cities affected by extreme events?

Predictably, the failed governmental response to Hurricane Katrina has led to new calls for stronger military involvement in disaster response activities. In Katrina's wake, disasters are now being characterized as best managed not by civil authorities but by entities capable of using force—deadly force, if necessary—to put down civil unrest and restore order in the aftermath of disasters. Military institutions are widely viewed as possessing the resources, logistics capability, and strategic insights required to "get things done" when disasters strike. This militaristic approach stands in sharp contrast with foundational assumptions concerning how disasters should be managed, which emphasize the need for strengthening community resilience, building public-private partnerships, reaching out to marginalized community residents and their trusted institutions, and developing consensus-based coordinating mechanisms at the interorganizational, community, and intergovernmental levels (see Waugh 2000; Haddow and Bullock 2003).

Calls for military control following disasters are not new. Many of the same arguments for greater military involvement were made following Hurricane Andrew, which struck in 1992, and which was followed by failures on the part of the intergovernmental emergency response system that resembled those following Katrina, but on a smaller scale. However, a study later conducted to analyze the re-

sponse to Andrew and recommend improvements saw no justification for giving broader authority to the military during disasters (National Academy of Public Administration 1993). Even after Katrina, opposition to greater military involvement is widespread. For example, a *USA Today* poll of thirty-eight governors found

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that only two governors supported the president's proposal that the military take a greater role in responding to disasters (Disaster preparedness 2005). In an Associated Press report on November 4, 2005, Montana governor Brian Schweitzer was quoted as saying that at the upcoming meeting of the Western Governors Association,

I'm going to stand up among a bunch of elected governors and say, "Are we going to allow the military without a shot being fired to effectively do an end-run coup on civilian government? Are we going to allow that?" We're going to have a little civics lesson for some leaders who are apparently out of touch in the military.

Despite such protests, the concept of military control during disasters continues to gain traction in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Distorted images disseminated by the media and public officials served to justify calls for greater military involvement in disasters. At a broader level, images of disaster victims as criminals and insurgents and of military personnel as the saviors of New Orleans are consistent with the growing prominence of militarism as a national ideology. We do not speak here of the military as an institution or of its role in national defense. Instead, following Chalmers Johnson (2004), we distinguish between the military and *militarism*—the latter referring to an ideology that places ultimate faith in the ability of the military and armed force to solve problems in both the international and domestic spheres. Johnson noted that "one sign of the advent of militarism is the assumption by the nation's armed forces of numerous tasks that should be reserved for civilians" (p. 24) and also that "certainly one of the clearest signs of militarism in

America, is the willingness of some senior officers and civilian militarists to meddle in domestic policing" (p. 119). This is exactly what occurred during Hurricane Katrina—and what may become standard procedure in future extreme events.

It is now common knowledge that in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration and some military officials began a reassessment of the *Posse Comitatus* act, which forbids the military to perform policing functions within the United States. This reassessment accompanied the creation in 2002 of the U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM), a military force whose purpose is to engage in "homeland defense." A number of analysts, including writers representing conservative think tanks like the Cato Institute, have called attention to the continual expansion of the role of the military in domestic emergency and security operations (Healey 2003). One of the most profound domestic impacts of the so-called war on terrorism is a growing acceptance of the military's involvement in a wide variety of domestic missions, including providing security at the Salt Lake City Olympics, searching for the Washington-area sniper, and now the policing and management of disaster victims.

Disasters can become "focusing events" that bring about changes in laws, policies, and institutional arrangements (Birkland 1997; Rubin and Renda-Tenali 2000). Hurricane Katrina may well prove to be the focusing event that moves the nation to place more faith in military solutions for a wider range of social problems than ever before. If this does turn out to be the case, the media will have helped that process along through its promulgation of myths of lawlessness, disorder, and urban insurgency.

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