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The Big Ball of Blame

BY [DONELSON RFORSYTH](#)

In 2005 a Saffir–Simpson Category 5 hurricane, Katrina, passed over Florida, strengthened in the Gulf of Mexico, and then set its sights on New Orleans. The hurricane caused destruction and death, for many residents were unable to evacuate to safety. Then this natural disaster escalated into a man-made catastrophe, as days passed and local, state and federal officials moved at a glacial pace to help. Some called it bureaucracy and poor planning. Others used stronger words: incompetence, injustice, racism and business as usual in an elitist America that takes better care of the wealthy than its poor. But whatever word you like to use, it was wrong: People suffered and died because no one helped.

Who could watch the news reports of Katrina without asking who is to blame? New Orleans was protected by a levee too weak to withstand a Category 5 hurricane? Officials opened the city's Superdome as an emergency shelter and then failed to provide it with basic survival supplies? In the days after the storm some survivors attacked rescuers? Who is blame?

We often blame the victims themselves. The media and Web sites have smacked of this kind of victim-blaming. Orleaners lived in a city built in a swamp separated from a lake by a flimsy dike. They could have evacuated to safety, but they stayed behind. New Orleans, nicknamed the Big Easy, is a lazy, decadent, Southern city where easygoing lifestyles interfered with the work needed to prepare for the flood. New Orleans is the Sodom and Gomorrah of the Mississippi, a city with more bars than churches. New Orleans brought its destruction down on itself.

But then there are the facts; facts that, unfortunately, contradict the "they had it coming" mentality. Many victims were long-term residents whose roots to New Orleans ran so deep that they felt at home there and nowhere else on earth. Many had no means to escape from Katrina — they did not own cars, and the public transportation system broke down. New Orleans, despite its fame for revelry, is also a deeply religious and spiritual community. Many of the storm victims were children, who cannot be held accountable for the choices of their parents.

So the search for blame must push on and upward, as we shift our sights to leaders: Ray Nagin, the mayor of the city of New Orleans; Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco; Michael Brown, who oversees the part of the federal government that is supposed to analyze and manage such crises (FEMA, or the Federal Emergency Management Agency); and the president himself, George W. Bush. But no one likes to take the blame, and even people whose job it is to take the blame shirk that duty, preferring to pass the big ball of blame on to someone else. I called for aid immediately, says Mayor Nagin. I instituted a state of emergency as soon as I could, says Gov. Blanco. How could we expect that the hurricane would inflict such massive damage, says Michael Brown. We must investigate this failure, says President Bush.

Experts will again call this "diffusion of responsibility," as the leaders busily disburse blame across all the involved parties, until it settles onto no one individual's shoulders. It's the system, politics,

the blame game, just what leaders do. But it isn't what good leaders do. It was President Truman who kept a sign on his desk that read "The buck stops here" to remind himself to never dodge the responsibility that came with his job as president: to never "pass the buck." The sign, now in the Truman Presidential Museum and Library in Independence, Miss., needs to return to the Oval Office.

But perhaps we are all to blame, if only indirectly. Just as we take pride in the accomplishments of our nation and its citizens, so we must also take the blame for our country's mistakes. It was our nation, America, that could not manage to save its people from Hurricane Katrina. We must resist blaming Hurricane Katrina's victims. We must stop living in a dream world where leaders actually take responsibility for harm they do. Each one of us must, instead, take seriously our social contract and its requirements that we care for others in our community. We cannot lie awake in our beds at night, like the bystanders who listened to Kitty Genovese's screams, and think, "It is not my job to help."

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