



Straight Talk

By Muriel Sluyter

The Best and Worst of Times in America

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Greetings, Gentle Reader,

Mandatory evacuation orders mean, "Get out now. You may not be able to get out later. There will be no electricity, no water, no food, no useable toilet, and no one to help you."

We've seen those orders both obeyed and ignored. One woman said if she had whiskey and cigarettes she saw no reason to evacuate. She, her whiskey and her cigarettes are probably under several feet of water.

Many criminals, of which New Orleans has an inordinately large number, didn't evacuate because they were poised to steal new cars from dealerships and merchandise from stores, when police left the area, which they did.

The levee system was designed only to withstand category three hurricanes. Both the governor and the mayor knew that, but ante bellum houses that washed away had stood almost unscathed for centuries. Though it should've been strengthened, both local politics and history argued against spending the millions necessary to reinforce the levee. Besides, even the New York Times castigated Bush over his request for money for Mississippi flood control. Of course, that was before Katrina.

We have seen the best of Americans, and we have seen the worst. One teenage boy, who didn't know how to drive a bus, went into a school, found the keys to the buses, matched keys to a bus, took it, and saved the lives of 75 of his fellow Louisianans. He drove them to Texas, buying gas along the way with whatever money his passengers had on them. This is one super kid!

Other buses remained in garages across the city, but adults didn't follow this boy's lead. Many more people could have escaped if they had done so.

Grown men in positions of authority demand that others save them, rather than determining ways to save themselves and others, as this gutsy boy did. That's because Americans like to vote for persuasive politicians, rather than unappealing, hard-nosed managers. Then they

bellyache because all they got was a politician!

When the levee broke and water levels continued to rise rather than fall, rescue efforts began in earnest. By then, rapes and at least one murder had been committed in the convention center, while the Super Dome was becoming a wall-to-wall unflushed toilet.

It gets worse: As helicopter crews struggled to evacuate stranded sufferers, they were fired upon. A convoy sent to evacuate hospitals had to turn back, because they were met by "about 100 armed thugs" ready to attack them. A flotilla of boats, trying to evacuate citizens from rooftops, was fired upon and had to turn back.

Most local politicians blamed the President for not bailing them out of the monstrous mess created by both the hurricane and their inability to deal with it's aftermath (remember, they're politicians, not managers). Bush is not a king. He is not a governor. He is not a mayor. He should have been able to send troops to save lives, rather than battle-hardened warriors to kill lawbreakers and establish order.

The mayor and governor should have dealt with the criminal problem before disaster struck. If Rudy Giuliani could clean that element out of New York City, a tough mayor could have done it in New Orleans, which would have allowed police to concentrate their efforts toward saving citizens. But New Orleans' tolerance for criminality has been part of its "charm" for many years.

Fortunately, America's worst are an infinitesimally small minority. The best are working around the clock to save lives, struggling through toxic water filled with sewage, dead and decaying animals and humans. They're neither watching a clock nor demanding a paycheck. They're putting their heads down and plowing through the horror as true Americans always do. They make up for all the rest.

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