

The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast

Douglas Brinkley

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This is a must-read for ACE members. Not only does it serve as a model for good writing, but it vividly shows the tragic consequences of communication failure. There are lessons to be learned on techniques—such as interviewing, media relations, and videography—as well as on crisis communication.

The author, Douglas Brinkley, a history professor at Tulane University in New Orleans, is just one of many who have jumped into the fray to write about Katrina, the hurricane that, when combined with Hurricane Rita three weeks later, became the worst natural disaster in our nation's history. Today, T-shirts in the French Quarter jokingly sport graphics of two hurricane swirls across the front with the words "Girls Gone Wild—Katrina and Rita."

Brinkley's book is one of two that have received the best reviews so far. The other is *Breach of Faith* by Jed Horne, metro editor with the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.

Brinkley's approach is fascinating and riveting. He decided to focus on one week: Saturday, August 27, through Saturday, September 3. The hurricane hit on Monday, August 29, and the three levees were breached on Tuesday, August 30.

He carefully and thoughtfully takes us through the week, telling the stories of the heroes and villains of the tragedy, which he bases on extensive interviews and research.

He starts out with the story of Laura Maloney, director of the Louisiana Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, who methodically began the evacuation of her animals and 15 employees that Saturday morning. All came through just fine—in sharp contrast to others, such as the residents of St. Rita's Nursing Home. The owners of this facility not only fled, but refused an offer of a bus to evacuate residents. Most of the residents drowned, and the owners have since been indicted on charges of manslaughter.

Brinkley is particularly hard on Mayor Ray Nagin, accusing him of incompetence and even of obstructing help to his city's residents and tourists. Nagin chose to hole up in the Hyatt Regency, refusing to go next

door to the Superdome to offer reassurance to the huddled masses. Brinkley writes, "Nagin was apparently repelled by the idea of speaking at the Superdome, to offer evacuees both information and a morale boost, blaming the city's communication breakdown for his decision" (p. 217).

But Brinkley reserves his sharpest criticism for the Bush administration and its immediate concerns for the political ramifications of a destroyed New Orleans, rather than for the people. "One of the biggest lessons of Katrina was that in times of disaster, bad bureaucracy plus presidential hesitation equals corpses" (p. 411), Brinkley writes.

Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff, for example, attended a meeting about bird flu in Atlanta on Tuesday—the day the levees broke—even though he knew of the breaches. It was not until the next day that he held a press conference and announced the necessary directive to put the wheels of federal help in motion.

Brinkley contrasts President Bush's reaction to that of President Johnson's in 1965 when Hurricane Betsy struck Louisiana. Within hours of Betsy's wallop, Johnson flew immediately into New Orleans. "'With no electricity in the darkness there,' Fineman [Howard Fineman of *Newsweek*] wrote, 'Lyndon Baines Johnson held a flashlight to his face and proclaimed, 'This is the President of the United States and I'm here to help you!'" (p. 340)

Bush, on the other hand, chose to fly over on Wednesday and peer at the destruction through a window while Karl Rove, his adviser, gave photographers and reporters in the back of the plane rare access to the president while on Air Force One.

It was obviously intended as a photo op, a depiction of the President as a compassionate man, connecting to the tragic region. It backfired. No one expected the President to go to New Orleans, pick up a bucket, and start bailing water, but detouring over it in a jet was a meaningless gesture at the other end of the spectrum. (p. 408)

Brinkley explores the relationship of leaders with their communication advisers, including that of Bob Mann, who formerly taught at the LSU School of Communication, with Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco. He was her communication director, a position he has since left.

A decision was made to leave the media to fend for itself. No embedded reporters. No preening for the media. . . .By Wednesday, however, Mann realized that the White House had launched a public relations onslaught against his boss, blaming Blanco for everything. (p. 414)