



Katrina Writ Large

by Ravi Logan

For many years it had been known that a Category 5 hurricane passing over New Orleans would bring failure of the city's protective levee system and wreak massive destruction. (Prior to 9/11, FEMA identified a hurricane hitting New Orleans as among the three most catastrophic disasters likely to occur in America.) Destruction was certain; it was only a matter of time. The warnings were ignored.

For several years it's been known that oil production would peak while demand grows, resulting in soaring gas prices (among other effects) and widespread economic hardship. The warnings were ignored.

Funds were requested by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for needed maintenance work on the New Orleans' levees. But because of massive federal tax cuts by the Bush Administration, and because of the cost of Homeland Security and the Iraq War, these funding requests were consistently slashed from the Corps' budget. Spending choices were made that resulted in much human suffering.

In many local communities, massive tax breaks are given to large corporations that have no loyalty to those communities and that return little for the subsidies they receive. Along with this, tax revenues are allocated for huge infrastructure projects that benefit sprawling development soon to be made obsolete by peak oil. To finance these corporate subsidies, tax revenue must be taken from public expenditures for social development. Spending choices are being made that, once again, ignore human needs.

Hurricane Katrina was only the immediate cause for the suffering that followed in its wake. Other factors amplified the weather calamity into a massive, multifaceted catastrophe.

- There was local and federal administrative incompetence and uncaring.
- Poverty in New Orleans left many people without the resources to evacuate and also contributed to the looting of stores.
- Much of the Mississippi National Guard was stationed in Iraq, and was not available to help with disaster relief.
- Sprawling development on the Mississippi coast (mostly gambling resorts) put more people in harm's way.

- Development in the lower Mississippi Delta diminished the capacity of the natural ecosystem to buffer the storm surge, which contributed to the flooding and destruction.
- An American energy policy based on cheap oil, and not regional self-sufficiency in renewable energy, made it inevitable that fuel prices would sky-rocket after hurricane damage to the Gulf oil production infrastructure.
- Agricultural development that promotes grain production for export (through southern Louisiana ports), instead of diversified production for regional markets, created the shipping problems experienced by Midwest farmers.
- There was inadequate regulation of the toxic materials that became a witches brew of poisons in flooded New Orleans.
- Corrupt lifestyles diminished the vitality people needed to survive well under stress. And so forth.

Katrina was the proximate cause of a catastrophe. It is inevitable that other proximate causes like Katrina will trigger other "perfect storm" catastrophes. We live in a society lacking in sustainability, resiliency, social vitality, and leadership. We live in a world out of balance that is rampaging toward collapse.

Just in the past few years, many civil liberties have been lost, massive election fraud has occurred, the Iraq War has intensified, enmity toward America has increased in the Islamic world, the effects of climate change have deepened, the speculative housing bubble has burst, precarious mountains of debt mounted are now collapsing, environmental degradation is occurring at an alarming pace, oil prices have soared, disinformation and control of information have reached new extremes, retirement funds have been gutted, ever more people are without medical insurance, recession is setting in, greed-driven corporate agendas continue to drive federal policy, and so forth.

More and more strands in the socioeconomic fabric and of the environmental web of life are unwinding. The stage is being set for even more devastating catastrophes.

Protection from pending catastrophes lies in making fundamental shifts in the way we function as a society. The PROUT paradigm of development provides a hopeful vision for bringing society back into balance. But collective shifts require more than a new social vision. They require shifts in individual consciousness and behavior.

At present, our addiction to an unsustainable material lifestyle still runs deep. But the costs of materialism — and its subsidiary manifestations of economic globalism, corporate corruption of democracy, environmental destruction, resource control driven wars, community devitalization, economic instability, spiritual impoverishment, etc. — are becoming too burdensome for many to bear.

Hurricanes and disasters can do much damage. But they are also times when consciousness can shift, when new possibilities can arise.