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Op-ed
State of Emergency

Two months have passed since Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans, and still accusations of insufficient government response abound. Americans demand to know, “Where were our federal leaders?” But the more pressing question is, why did no leaders arise from the emergency? The disquieting answer is that the most publicized victims of Katrina, poor inner-city residents, have been conditioned all their lives not to think, but to depend.

Several days before Katrina’s arrival, New Orleans residents were advised to evacuate. Many did not, citing failure to plan for transportation as their excuse.

When floodwaters engulfed the city, remaining residents trudged to the Superdome without considering such basic necessities as medicine and toiletries.

Once secure in the Superdome, evacuees needed to band together to survive the crisis. Instead, reports surfaced of animalistic stabbings, shootings, and rapes.

People wondered, aghast, how this could happen in America.

Indeed, the third-world images were difficult to reconcile with the perception of America as a prosperous country of productive citizens. Katrina unmasked a depraved subculture that has festered in American cities like New Orleans for years.

International news reports jeered, “America can’t take care of its own.” But the opposite is true: New Orleaners had been taken care of too much, for too long, in the form of the welfare state.

The welfare state is a system based on the belief that one’s neediness obligates others to fulfill those needs. This creates a cycle of growing dependency, whereby those who place themselves in greater need are rewarded with greater public aid.

A frequent scenario begins when individuals possessing minimal education and job skills give birth to more children than for whom they can adequately provide. Encouraging this irresponsibility is the welfare system, which awards more assistance to larger families. As the state provides for these children’s physical needs with monthly checks and “free” school meals, so too does it aim to provide for their mental needs: parents need not teach their children the alphabet or their address, as this responsibility is thrust to the public schools. Endorsing the welfare state’s tenet that failure is to be rewarded, teachers promote students irrespective of achievement. The resulting generation consists of under-motivated, unemployable drudges who are not only unwilling to care for

themselves, but are cripplingly unable to comprehend the principles of responsibility, independence, and self-sufficiency.

The climax of this welfare state-created dependency is seen in Katrina's aftermath. The hurricane destroyed the aid distribution infrastructure, disrupting the steady flow of public assistance many New Orleaners had come to take for granted.

The citizens cracked. News reports showed a young single mother with five bedraggled children, overwhelmed with what she described as "burdens." The welfare system previously supported the children financially and mentally, and she failed to develop sufficient budgeting and parenting skills. A child who couldn't spell her name wailed incoherently as she could not locate her family. The welfare state trained her to rely on others to make decisions. An older man complained of hunger as he drank a bottle of alcohol. The welfare state always provided for his sustenance through food stamps, and he gave no thought to acquiring food.

In these instances, the real emergency was not the hurricane's destruction, but the panic of realizing that, never having to be self-sufficient, they did not know how to think rationally. Yet critical thinking was now essential to survival. When one is incompetent to survive a crisis, two behavior patterns emerge.

The first is complete chaos. This was witnessed as a group of evacuees resorted to violence and criminality, angrily demanding aid.

The second response is internal withdrawal from life. Indeed, thousands of evacuees sat and did nothing. Not a single resident in the Superdome took a leadership role. No-one set up a designated refuse area, organized a watch group to quell violence, or transported dead bodies outside. They waited for someone, somehow, to rescue them.

People often rise to the situation in emergencies, showing untapped courage and resourcefulness. That none of the Superdome evacuees could cope with an emergency is a greater crisis than Katrina herself. Yet this apathy and reckless indifference is the necessary final culmination of the welfare state. Public aid becomes a life-long mode of survival—an ironic crutch which never restores health as promised, but instead destroys the very legs it purports to heal. Humans, who possess the power to engineer skyscrapers and rocket ships, are reduced to impoverished bodies unable to recover from the murky waters of dependency.