



ARTIFACTS

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Critics of Americas Engineers Form Bashing Squad Following Katrina

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It doesn't take much to blame a disaster like Hurricane Katrina on an act of God or on uncontrollable circumstances. Be reminded that nature, in all its beauty, has the power to destroy anything humans build. When the hurricane hit the Gulf coast on August 25, 2005, the levees separating Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans collapsed. With many homes and businesses submerged in the torrent of water, the people within the city fought to survive. Even before the water level returned to normal, people reacted with frustrations toward the government, relief organizations, and engineers. People wanted to know what went wrong and who they should blame.

Suspicious arose when no one stepped forward in front of the firing squad [1]. People started to wonder if a cover up was underway by the Army Corps of Engineers, the group who constructed the levee system. Justice seemed to be missing from the events aftermath, and critics arose to help direct the flow at people they deemed worthy of damnation. They accused engineers of not only trying to ignore their mistakes, but also of neglecting to update building standards and hiding behind investigations which promised to uncover the truth [2]. Critics were steamed at the fact that the investigations were lead by technical experts, that in their eyes had a conflict of interest, and that the investigations were publicly funded. Investigation reports usually involved technical data that would be more relevant to engineers than civilians. The public saw no real return from the reports. They believed that they were paying the engineers hundreds of thousands of dollars to engineers so they could understand how they themselves messed up.

Critics and victims of Hurricane Katrina have every right to be angry, but not at the Army Corps of Engineers. The levees were constructed by the Corps with care and deliberation. Upgrades could have been made and technology could have been implemented to reinforce the levee, but it comes down to facts. The Corps is one of the only groups qualified to do the job, they did the job with a limited amount of money, and they did it to prepare for a category three hurricane [3]. In this circumstance, the people in the area took a risk that a category three hurricane barricade could withstand a category five storm. It makes obvious sense that the levees would fail [3]. The people jeopardized themselves by living in the area and more so by staying in the city while the storm was coming. The Army Corps should not be penalized just because some individuals lost their bet.

Investigation

To form an initial opinion on whether the Army Corps is to blame, many people look to news programs or newspapers for an overview. While these forms of mass media are important and valid, topics can be spun by the information chosen to be released at that time. A much clearer vision of the situation could be formed by investigating a more variety of sources on Katrina. Nonetheless, the newspaper article, Engineers accused of cover-ups, did provide keys ideas and names to jumpstart a more in-depth search on the cover up dilemma.

A major step in discovering the whole truth would be to pick apart the News article and try to discover any biased undertone that may be present. Newspapers, as of March 2008, have reported that several attacks have been made toward the Army Corps of Engineers [2]. The Corps has been accused of three things: covering up mistakes that its engineers had made in the past, not renewing building codes, and hiding behind investigations to avoid lawsuits [2]. The News reports seemed to favor the critical side of the issue and left out that many people doubt this claim that the Corps are hiding from responsibility or creating a cover up. For one thing, the levees had been protecting the city many years before the storm and the Army Corps is a respected organization known for its reliability [4]. Another point the reports ignored was that the underlying goal of critics is to point fingers or to eventually file lawsuits against the government to collect easy money. News articles can, however, be a stepping stone to the underlying facts.

Going a step further, the arguments of the case can be revealed by investigating the prominent people involved. Several top professionals in the engineering field have been called to testify for both groups. One such expert, Raymond Seed, a levee specialist from University of California, Berkeley, was a major critic of the crew in charge of the investigation. He claims that the Army Corps and the investigation society are working in cahoots to erase the mistakes made in the past [5]. Upon further research on Dr. Seed, his statements used in the newspaper seem out of context [4]. He makes a valid point that humans can learn a great deal from their mistakes, and only points out that the while the Corps is investigating the failure for its own purposes, the public is being left out on the specifics of the failure [4]. Seed goes on to explain that with more funding and adequate manpower before the storm, the levees could have been improved [6].

On the other end of the spectrum, the Director of Civil Works for the Corps, Major General Don Riley, refutes many accusations made by critics [2]. His opinion is most likely biased because he works for the Corps; however, he did state in the news report, Engineers accused of cover-ups, that many of the people in the Corps that helped build the levee and participated in reconstruction live in the area. This brings up the point that people that lived in the New Orleans region would most likely not be involved in a cover up against their neighbors.

A third world-renowned structural engineer is Abolhassan Astaneh-Asl, who seemed to have a complaint against the society in charge of the investigations [2]. The Army Corps regularly hires the society to investigate engineering problems, ranging from Katrina to the World Trade Center. Astaneh-Asl reviewed the investigation made on the World Trade Center and concluded that the report was misleading. He pointed out that most New York skyscrapers could endure the impact of an airplane and that the investigation crew was headed by two biased individuals, both possibly wanting to cover up mistakes made in the towers design. Because Astaneh-Asl is not a specialist on levee systems, his opinion on the levee failure was not included in the News report [5]. His opinion does not directly relate to the investigation on Hurricane Katrina but is more speculative and only adds doubt regarding the competency of the investigations.

Discussion of the Opposing Views

Once enough information is collected for a more complete opinion, each detail of the argument should be analyzed. One of the strengths for the critics is that the government should pay to update the levee system once new technology was available. The weakness with this statement is that the government would have to increase taxes or cut funding for another program in order to comply. Critics could argue that it was the engineers fault that the levee design did not withstand the hurricane flood. But the engineers who built the levee built it to category three hurricane specifications and did it within a budget. With more money, time, and men, the levee system would have been much stronger.

Still someone could insist that there is a cover-up or that investigations are helping to hide engineers from taking responsibility. ASCE President David G. Mongan refutes this statement [1]. He says that a cover-up goes against the very principles of engineering. A trust between civil engineers and the public has always been indispensable in times past. There would be no reason to hide or try to destroy the trust that has been built up.

The best argument that critics could make is that engineers are not taking the opportunity after the disaster to upgrade building standards [2]. This deals indirectly with the hurricane, so it is hard to rebuttal against its weak points. Another way to look at the building code subject is to say that it does not have relevance to the debate regarding the cover up.

Taking a Position

The Army Corps of Engineers should be defended because an attack on their sincerity is unfair. It is not in the nature of engineers to try to cheat the public. If anything, the engineers hold the safety of the public paramount. By supporting the Army Corps, they are not absolved of any mistakes they have made in the past. In the current circumstance, critics just do not have the evidence that justifies their claim of a cover up [5]. And most people would agree that any decision made on hearsay is unjust.

Some could say that any opinion that comes from a corps engineer or any civil engineer is biased. Another objection would be that the higher ups in many government organizations must be a little corrupt to get to the position they hold [5]. Critics may point fingers and make conjectures but there is no proof of a cover-up. Conjecture and an anarchism philosophy are no way to look at this situation. The Army Corps of Engineers has done a great job building America and will continue to do so.

Conclusion

The lesson to take away from the situation is that critics are necessary to raise questions of liability and to assert claims that could eventually strengthen and improve current procedures. Without regard for proof however, the accusations can get wildly out of hand. There is no way to prevent an act of God such as a hurricane, but, because so much has been destroyed, a new opportunity arises. America has the chance to rebuild not only the homes of the civilians along the coast but to reorganize the structure of engineering projects. Instead of building back category three hurricane levees, the highest level of technology and efficiency should be used [6]. This can apply to other areas frequently plagued by hurricanes and other severe storms. America and its engineers should prepare for the worst possible disaster because money invested wisely now will pay off in the future [3].

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