New Katrina book gives honest look at devastation, disparities

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Appearing on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” a week after New Orleans was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, Mayor Ray Nagin gave his host a tour of the Superdome. Assaulted by a stench so strong he could “smell funk,” Nagin asked, “How could the richest country in the world let American suffer the way they did?”

A few hours later, John Donvan of “Nightline” asked the mayor if race was the reason rescue efforts were so inadequate. “I don’t think this type of response would have happened if this was Orange County, California,” Nagin replied.

Racism, corruption and partisanship

Ten years after the hurricane made landfall – on Aug. 29, 2005 – New Orleans has not fully recovered.

In “Katrina,” Gary Rivlin, an investigative reporting fellow at The Nation Institute and the author of “Broke, USA: From Pawnshops to Poverty, Inc.,” documents the incompetence, corruption, political partisanship and racism that, along with nature, laid waste to the infrastructure, social fabric and psyche of an iconic American city.

To make the big picture up close and personal, Rivlin describes the experiences of Black and White ordinary citizens, community activists, businessmen, bankers, teachers and politicians.

Sweeping and searching, Katrina is a Category Five exposé of disastrous disaster relief.

Officers, resources disappeared

Rivlin provides chilling details about the extent of the damage to New Orleans. One hundred of the city’s 128 public school buildings were flooded. Local courts were closed.

About one-third of the police force went AWOL during Katrina, and many of the cops who remained lived on Carnival Cruise Line ships docked on the Mississippi. The city’s principal sources of revenue, sales taxes and property taxes, declined precipitously or disappeared.

Most important, of course, FEMA did not race to the rescue. When FEMA finally supplied 145,000 trailers to house displaced persons, for example, they contained floors and cabinets treated with formaldehyde, at levels five times greater than those deemed safe by the Centers for Disease Control.

Little wonder, then, that a year after Katrina hit, New Orleans had less than 40 percent of its pre-hurricane population.

Ward far from higher and better

In November 2006, Nagin announced that every part of New Orleans had working sewers, drinkable water, telephones and power. He was, at best, stretching the truth, Rivlin reports.
Especially for the Lower Ninth Ward, home to 25,000 people, virtually all of them Black (and poor).

Although it dominated the news in the early days, serving as a proxy for poverty in the city, the Lower Ninth was hardly the centerpiece of the “higher and better” New Orleans described by President Bush, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and Mayors Nagin and Mitch Landrieu.

During a “blight rally,” one resident declared, “I thought this place would have been better a looooooong time ago.”

A tale of two cities

Recently, New Orleans has been acclaimed as a great comeback story. The city was attracting 4,000 new residents a year, many of them young professionals. Atlantic magazine declared it a “start-up city;” Forbes listed it second in its “Best Cities for Jobs” feature in 2011; and the next year, Travel & Leisure ranked New Orleans the “top city” in the United States.

A giant biomedical center promised better jobs – and an industry to supplement tourism. Some claimed that the proliferation of charter schools boded well for the city’s future.

Rivlin, however, portrays the post-Katrina story, more accurately, it seems to me, as a tale of two cities.

Violent crime occurs at twice the national rate in New Orleans. The poverty rate is stuck at 29 percent. Fifty-two percent of working-age Black men are unemployed. Inequality is greater than in any American city except Atlanta. New Orleans looks good, Ted Quandt, a Black man, told Rivlin. “But for whom?”

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