



# Capitalism and Natural Disasters

BY DONALD J. BOUDREAUX

Here are the ten deadliest hurricanes to strike the United States since 1900:

1. Galveston, Texas 1900 (between 8,000 and 12,000 persons killed)
2. Florida 1928 (1,836 killed)
3. Hurricane Katrina 2005 (approximately 1,200 killed, still unofficial)
4. New England 1938 (at least 600)
5. Florida Keys 1935 (423)
6. Hurricane Audrey 1957 (390)
7. Southeast U.S. 1926 (372)
8. Louisiana 1909 (at least 350)
9. Atlantic gulf 1919 (at least 287)
10. Louisiana 1915 (275)

The most striking thing about this list is that it contains only two hurricanes from the past half-century: Audrey and Katrina. The other big killers punched into the U.S. mainland quite long ago.

This fact is even more striking in light of the list below: the ten most powerful hurricanes to strike the U.S. since 1900:

1. Florida Keys 1935
2. Hurricane Camille 1969
3. Hurricane Katrina 2005
4. Hurricane Andrew 1992
5. Florida and Texas 1919
6. Lake Okeechobee 1928
7. Hurricane Donna 1960
8. Louisiana 1915
9. Hurricane Carla 1961
10. Hurricane Hugo 1989

Six of these ten most powerful storms have struck during the past half-century, yet only one of them (Kat-

rina) is among America's ten *deadliest* hurricanes. Even given Katrina's awful devastation, the long-term trend is for hurricanes to kill fewer people than in the past.

Many factors explain this pattern, including the precise location of each storm's landfall. But surely the most important reason why hurricanes today are less deadly than in the past is that we are much wealthier. Of course, we have more sophisticated weather-forecasting and hurricane-tracking technologies, which better alert peo-

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ple to danger. But just as important is the spread of radio, television, telephones, cell phones, and the Internet. These communications technologies enable more and more people, increasingly irrespective of their particular locations, to gain instantly the latest information about coming bad weather and about the range of alternatives for escaping it.

In addition, building materials have improved, making walls and roofs sturdier. And in many places throughout the typical American home, ordinary glass has been replaced with plastic-

infused glass that is shatter-resistant.

Automobile ownership is more widespread, and automobiles themselves are more reliable and, hence, more trustworthy to jump into quickly for long drives to safer locations. (It must be said: the much-maligned automobile saved countless lives in New Orleans by enabling car owners to escape Katrina.) In the 1920s and 30s, many fewer people owned cars, and those who did could not trust their vehicles to get them from, say, Galveston to Dallas without breaking down along the way.

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Another benefit of our modern times is better health care. Antibiotics weren't available for much of the first half of the twentieth century; today they are commonplace. Of course, what's true of antibiotics is true of countless other medicines and medical procedures. Many lives that would have been lost to hurricanes before World War II are today saved by routine medical practice.

Not to be overlooked are improved and less-expensive household appliances, such as gasoline-powered generators, solar-powered flashlights, battery-powered televisions, and gasoline-powered chainsaws. Items such as these enable families stricken by violent weather to better survive whatever calamities befall their properties. Likewise with many ordinary grocery items. Bottled water, super-pasteurized milk, and inexpensive canned goods provide survival opportunities denied to pre-World War II Americans.

Finally, search and rescue efforts today are more effective because of our great wealth. For example, more-reliable automobiles, airplane, and helicopters ensure that rescue workers get to disaster scenes more quickly and more surely than in the past. And the greater wealth of fellow citizens enables them *and inspires them* to be more generous with their own time and resources in helping victims of natural disasters.

And what makes all these modern marvels possible? Markets—commerce—entrepreneurs' passion for profitable success at pleasing consumers, and consumers' insistence on getting the best deals that they can. Although typically criticized by intellectual elites as being grimy and unpleasant, markets in fact are unsung heroes at saving lives.

This truth can be seen not only by looking back at our own history, but also by looking at other regions today where markets are not as free—and, hence, prosperity is not as great—as it is now in the United States.


In the summer of 2003, between 35,000 and 50,000 Europeans were killed by a heat wave that struck that

continent. In France alone, the death toll from this severe weather was 14,802; that is, in France alone a heat wave killed thirteen-and-a-half *times* more people than Katrina killed.

Why? Were temperatures in Europe especially brutal that summer? The average high daily temperature during that month-long heat wave, according to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, was 95 degrees Fahrenheit; the highest temperature recorded was 104 Fahrenheit (on multiple days). While these temperatures are indeed intense and much higher than normal for Europe, they are not so high as to be inescapable with air-conditioning. And yet, sadly, Europeans have much less air-conditioning than do Americans because they are less prosperous than Americans.

When in July 2000 the temperature in New York (where my family and I then lived) reached 106 for two straight days, we were decidedly uncomfortable whenever we ventured outdoors, but not once were we close to death. A major reason, of course, is that we had air-conditioning in our cars, in our homes, in our workplaces, and in each of the stores we visited.

Although we didn't think of it consciously—for it is so common in the United States today—air-conditioning not only enhanced our comfort, it might well have saved our lives. It certainly did save the lives of thousands of Americans that summer (as it does every summer) who would otherwise die without it.

Of course, widespread availability of reliable air-conditioning is one of the many fruits of material prosperity. It is truly a lifesaver. Indeed, were it not for air-conditioning, many of the people tragically killed by Katrina would surely have died months or years earlier in New Orleans's brutal subtropical summers. While it's proper to attribute their deaths in August and September 2005 to that awful hurricane, it's also important that we bear in mind that many of their lives were extended by air-conditioning and other too-easily-criticized or ignored benefits of capitalism. 

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