

On Risk and Disaster

Lessons from Hurricane Katrina

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PENN

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Foreword

AMY GUTMANN

The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them.

—Albert Einstein

More than four months have passed since Hurricane Katrina struck. We now know that our affluent country failed both to take adequate precautions against the hurricane's deadly impact and to respond effectively to its devastation of New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas. We do not yet know what lessons will be learned—or heeded—from one of the greatest catastrophes our country has ever experienced.

As the suffering grew ever more alarming in the hurricane's immediate aftermath, we at the University of Pennsylvania rapidly mobilized our community to help survivors rebuild their shattered lives. We invited 100 displaced students to take their fall classes at Penn. And as generous donations poured into relief agencies, students and staff volunteers traveled to the Gulf Coast to support efforts on the ground.

At the same time, we began to confront the problems that contributed to making the devastation of Katrina so troubling not only in its breadth and depth but also in its unbalanced effects across different segments of the population. Katrina's aftermath raised perhaps the most profound and disturbing moral question that our society has yet fully to confront: How willing is the United States to compensate for the increased risks to life and health associated with poverty, race, growing economic inequality, inadequate emergency preparedness, and antiquated urban infrastructures? This overarching question cannot be answered by one person thinking alone or by a single institution acting alone.

Nor can the underlying social, economic, and environmental problems that have been magnified by Katrina be solved by the level of institutional thought and action that created them. A shocking amount of shoddy thought and action—from the denial of scientifically manifest risks to the

disavowal of morally apparent official responsibility—will need to be transcended to resolve the problems that have victimized hundreds of thousands of Americans.

We must find a way to distribute risks equitably in order to push our democracy closer to its promise of liberty and justice, not only for the affluent but for all. Rising to this challenge demands that the public and private sectors collaborate to develop effective prevention strategies and coordinated responses to natural disasters, industrial accidents, terrorist attacks, and pandemics.

We at the University of Pennsylvania pride ourselves on being one of the world's major research universities. But we cannot rest on our laurels. Institutional contributions to effective prevention and response are a matter not only of technical expertise but also of moral and social responsibility. Collaborating with others, we have the capacity and expertise to develop a framework within which to address such daunting and urgent challenges. We are committed to embracing our civic responsibilities to help inform public debate and discussion.

For all of these reasons, Penn Provost Ron Daniels took the lead in organizing a symposium on Hurricane Katrina in Washington, D.C. on December 1, 2005. The symposium brought together approximately 250 policymakers, public and private sector leaders, and scholars from many disciplines to raise the level of thinking on risk management issues and develop more effective strategies that can save lives and speed recovery when disaster strikes.

At the core of these discussions were two recurring questions:

- How can—and should—the nation come together to rebuild the storm-ravaged Gulf Coast?
- What broader lessons does Hurricane Katrina teach about the public and private sectors' role in helping citizens and firms deal with the inevitable large-scale risks we all face in the twenty-first century?

This book represents the first attempts to answer these questions. As this book goes to press, we are already planning a second Katrina conference—organized by the Penn Institute on Urban Research—that will build on the analyses and strategies contained in this volume. I am thankful to Provost Daniels, Professor Donald Kettl, director of the Fels Institute of Government at Penn, Professor Howard Kunreuther, codirector of the Wharton Risk Management and Decision Processes Center, and the many eminent scholars and policymakers who are doing their best to bring a higher level of thought and action to bear on the many profound problems of societal response to risk that Hurricane Katrina put into high relief. Our thanks go also to the University of Pennsylvania Press for so quickly bringing the symposium's findings to the attention of a wider public.