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Two Storms, Ample Warning

Last week brought us one big story -- and one almost incomprehensibly huge one. The huge story, of course, is the still-unfolding devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The merely big one was a report out of the Census Bureau that the number of Americans falling into poverty has increased again, for the fourth straight year.



If the two stories have anything in common it is the willingness of Americans -- the political majority, the politicians and the media -- to ignore clear portents, right up to the point when disaster strikes.

Back in June 2004, Walter Maestri, chief of emergency management for Jefferson Parish, La., was lamenting in the New Orleans Times-Picayune that the president's budget was transferring money meant for reinforcing the levees that were keeping the waters of Lake Pontchartrain out of downtown New Orleans to homeland security and the war in Iraq.

The Institute for Public Accuracy found at least nine articles in the Times-Picayune about the unavailability of federal money for hurricane and flood control projects -- including a five-part 2002 series on the threat of a major hurricane. It was titled "Washing Away."

That is to say, while no one could have predicted the ferocity of Katrina -- a storm of unprecedented fury -- it *was* known that New Orleans was in jeopardy from deteriorating levees.

And back in 1998, former senator Fred Harris and Alan Curtis, president of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, the private-sector continuation of the 1968 Kerner Commission, were warning of resurgent poverty.

"If anything, the numbers out of the Census Bureau underestimate the problem of poverty in America," Curtis said in an interview last week. "The bureau's definition of the poverty threshold is \$19,300 a year for a family of four. But a lot depends on where you happen to live. By one scale I'm familiar with, that family of four -- if they lived in Baltimore -- would cross the poverty threshold at \$44,000 a year.

"But the major mistake is to take the census report as a one-year phenomenon. This is the fourth straight year of increasing poverty, following a seven-year decline, from 1993 to 2000. Shouldn't wise journalists be asking why?"

But the why may not be as simple as Curtis's comment implies. He said his foundation has identified programs that demonstrably reduce poverty -- from Head Start ("the most cost-effective poverty-reduction program we've ever devised") and full-service community schools to the Delancey Street Foundation for ex-offenders and job training programs. The trouble, he says, is that we don't fund these efforts at a level sufficient to meet the problem. And so another million people have slipped into poverty.

Peter Goldmark, director of climate and air at Environmental Defense and a former president of the Rockefeller Foundation, offers a similar explanation for the potential devastation of global warming, which, according to many scientists, accounts for the increasing frequency and intensity of hurricanes -- though he warns against concluding that Katrina (or any particular hurricane) is the result of global warming.

"We know the chief sources of the warming -- fossil fuels and, in the tropics, the burning of trees for cooking -- but we haven't moved to stop it," Goldmark said. "It really isn't that difficult to begin reducing carbon emissions, as Europe and Japan are doing already. We could certainly put a cap on the quantity of greenhouse gases industry can emit."

The easy thing is to blame the politicians -- as both Curtis and Goldmark implicitly are doing. But politicians like being reelected. And the one sure bet is that the politician who proposes that we sacrifice our personal convenience and pay higher taxes in the long-term interest of society will be turned out of office.

To put it another way, the politicians do what the voters want done.

It occurs to me that a real-time video of the inundation of New Orleans -- not of the hurricane itself, but of the disappearing barrier islands, misapplied engineering and political inattention -- might, if played back very slowly, provide a visual approximation of the potential effects of global warming on the lower-lying coastal areas of the world.

And maybe if we could videotape the growing chasm between rich and poor and the persistent increases in our nation's poverty and play *that* back at *high* speed, we might be shocked into doing something sensible about reducing poverty and inequality in America.