

The Killer Quadrant

Just before midnight local time on the night of 27-28 August, 2005, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) weather buoy #42003, located in the Gulf of Mexico roughly at the intersection of a line directly south of Panama City, Florida and directly west of Naples, Florida, suddenly stopped transmitting. The buoy, a 10 meter (32.8 ft) diameter disc with a 10 meter (32.8 ft) tower, designed specifically to withstand any possible storm, had capsized.

It was the first time in the history of the NOAA that a 10 meter buoy had ever capsized in the Gulf of Mexico.

Before it capsized, the buoy dutifully reported a huge low pressure weather system, rotating counter-clockwise, 63 nautical miles (72.5 statute, or “land” miles) away to the southwest at a heading of 195 degrees. At 63 nautical miles distant from the storm, the buoy recorded sustained winds of over 75 miles per hour (MPH) and a barometric pressure of 988.1 mbs. Its last transmission reported a 20 minute average wave height of 10.58 meters (34.71 ft). Based on this average, statistically extrapolated peak waves of 20.1 meters (65.95 ft) were battering the buoy at the time.



There can be no accurate estimate of the actual wave height required to capsize a 10 meter weather buoy that is designed to be essentially impossible to capsize. Wave science tells us that when multiple wave patterns combine, rogue waves 2 - 10 times the average wave height are often created, even without severe weather.

The next reporting station in the path of the storm was BURL-1, near Southwest Pass, Louisiana, located on a peninsula extending into the Gulf of Mexico southeast of New Orleans, almost directly south of Gulfport, Mississippi.

BURL-1 was a permanently mounted reporting station built on pilings driven into the sea bed. It was a rigid platform well over 20 meters (65 ft) across with an instrument tower 30.5 meters (100 ft) tall.



The last wind reports from BURL-1 came at 10:30 PM local time on 28 August, 2005. At that time the storm was 61 nautical miles (70 “land” miles) away at a heading of 184 degrees, or about due south. The station reported sustained winds of 71.53 knots (82.31 MPH) and five second gusts of 87.67 knots (100.88 MPH).

By this time, the storm’s sustained winds had pushed a large amount of the Gulf of Mexico’s waters into a huge mound out in front of the advancing storm. This mound of water was up to 5-8 meters (16.4 – 26.24 feet) higher than the normal sea level. The mound of water was swelling up in front of the storm, with the storm’s massive wind driven waves rising out of it. This mound of water was the “storm surge.”

The last data transmission from BURL-1 was a barometric pressure of 979.7 mbs at 11 PM local time on 28 August, 2005. At that instant, it was engulfed, pummeled and destroyed by the advancing storm surge.

Located to the west, station GDIL1, placed on top of a Coast Guard building, was still operating. Its location to the west ensured that it would escape the concentrated fury of the north east corner of the system, the dreaded “killer quadrant.” Since these storms rotate in a counter clockwise motion in the northern hemisphere, the worst possible place to be is in the upper right corner of the storm’s path. That is where the maximum wind speed, wave height, storm surge and resulting destruction are concentrated. GDIL1 was located south of New Orleans, and thus out of the path of maximum fury, so it was able to survive longer than the stations previously destroyed along the storm’s path.



GDIL1 lasted until the storm was only 20 nautical miles (23.01 “land” miles) away. It was still reporting at 5AM local time on 29 August, 2005, when it sent out a report of a barometric pressure of 944.3 mbs. Its wind reports had ceased about 2:30AM local time, 29 August 2005 with a report of 10 minute average wind speeds of 75.75 knots (87.17 MPH) and five second gusts of 99.46 knots (114.46 MPH).

About 5AM local time on 29 August, 2005 the Coast Guard building that GDIL1 was perched on was destroyed and the station fell silent.

Directly east of the shattered remains of GDIL1 was the three meter discus weather buoy station #42040. It was located southeast of Biloxi, Mississippi and was in the upper right corner, or “killer quadrant” of the storm, the section of maximum concentrated power, force and destruction. At about 5AM local time on 29 August, 2005 station #42040 reported a 20 minute average significant wave height of 16.91 meters (55.479 feet).

The measured wave height of 16.91 meters (55.479 feet) surpassed the 15.92 meter (52.23 feet) wave measurement by this same station #42040 the previous September, which had heretofore been the record wave height for the Gulf of Mexico. The 16.91 meter (55.479 feet) high average wave height also matched the highest NOAA measurement of all time recorded in the tumultuous Northwest Pacific near the Aleutian Islands in 1991.

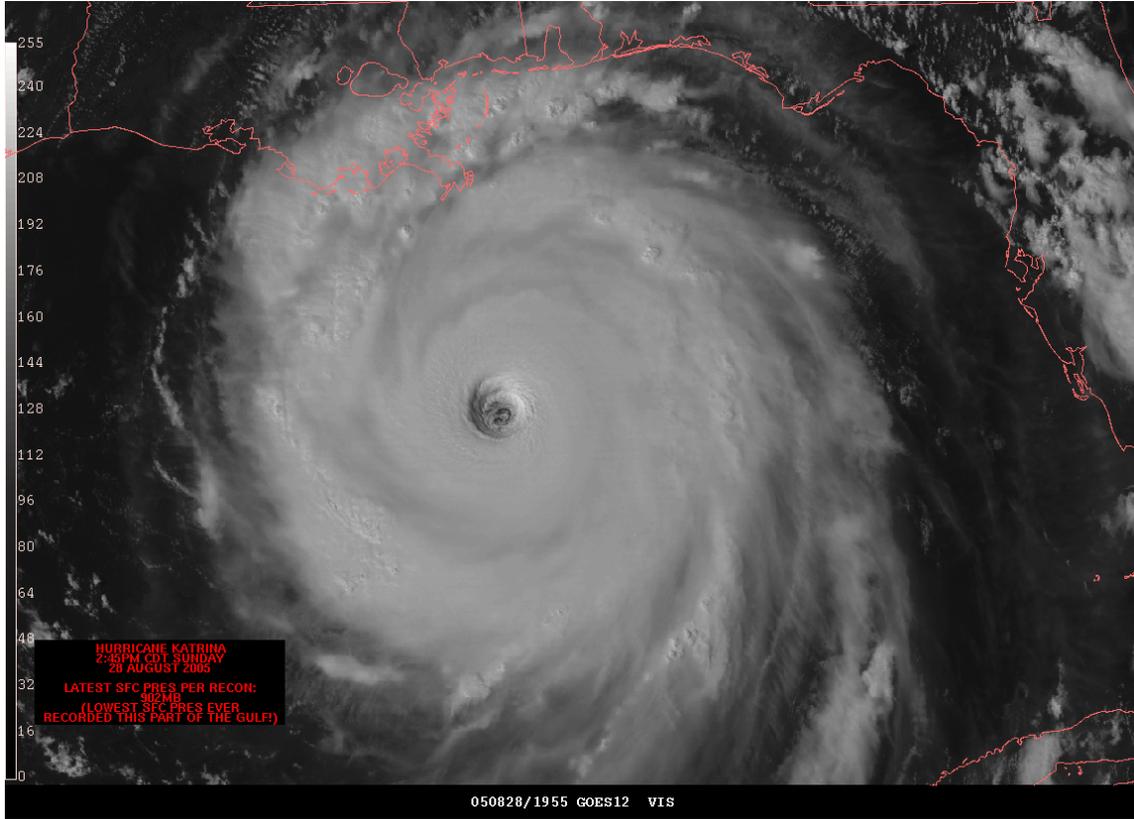


The calculated peak wave height experienced by station #42040 about dawn on 29 August was 32.13 meters (105.41 feet). The peak 32.13 meter (105.41 foot) waves were riding on top of the 4.87 – 7.92 meter (16-26 foot) mound of storm surge, with the resulting wind whipped mountains of water all heading for the coast.

At 5AM local time on 29 August, 2005, when station #42040 fell silent, the storm was 73 nautical miles (84 “land” miles) to the west with maximum sustained winds of 145 miles per hour (Public Advisory 26A issued by the National Hurricane Center). Station #42040, and everything north of it, was directly in the path of the “killer quadrant” of the storm.

Katrina – Year One

What lay north of station #42040 was the Gulf coast of Mississippi. And what was bearing down on it, after destroying every storm-proof weather buoy and station in its path, was Hurricane Katrina.



Katrina – Year One

Not As Seen On TV

Because the worst part of a counter-clockwise rotating hurricane in the northern hemisphere is the upper right corner, everything to the left of the eye of the storm, including New Orleans, received comparatively little damage compared to what lay in the path of the “killer quadrant,” the upper right quarter of the storm.

To make it even worse, Katrina was a “slow mover,” a hurricane that plods along at a slow rate of advance. This meant anyone and anything unfortunate enough to be in its path suffered its fury for an extended period of time.

The Gulf coast of Mississippi took a direct hit from Hurricane Katrina, including 160.93 – 209.21 KPH (100-130 MPH) winds that were sustained for many hours, a storm surge of up to 7.62 meters (25 feet) that flooded everything within reach, and massive, pounding waves riding the storm surge that destroyed everything from the surf line to up to a mile inland.

Meanwhile, New Orleans was on the left side of the eye, and escaped widespread wind damage, the 7.62 meter (25 foot) storm surge and the explosive force of the giant waves. Later, after the hurricane passed, the levees failed and New Orleans experienced a catastrophic flood, social breakdown and an exhibition of government ineptness ranging from the dog catcher to the White House unprecedented in American history.

After the storm, the Gulf coast of Mississippi was essentially wiped from the map, blasted from existence. The now tame waves of the gulf lapped up onto beaches littered with the scattered, tattered remnants of human civilization ranging from underwear to Crescent wrenches. New Orleans was a still life painting, an empty city floating in a sea of human and industrial excrement, its native and irresistible rhythms gone, the silence broken only by the chattering of rescue helicopters accompanied by syncopated gunshots of snipers.

Both looked like the aftermath of nuclear attack. Mississippi, seemingly targeted by conventional air bursts about half a mile off the beach, looked exactly like the post-blast black and white photos of example neighborhoods from the desert atomic weapons tests of the 50's, with structures exploded and the scattered toothpick remains blasted inland. New Orleans, replete with silent, empty structures, was the model of a post-neutron bomb high air burst attack, with all the people gone and the structures left intact for the conquerors.

In addition to a post-nuclear coastline, Mississippi suffered widespread destruction all along Katrina's path northward up the spine of the state. As the storm tracked north, it spawned innumerable tornadoes to accompany the non-stop hurricane force wind and rain that lasted nearly a day. In contrast, Louisiana was comparatively unhurt northwest of New Orleans. And while the Louisiana towns and fishing villages southeast of New Orleans were completely obliterated, they would soon be forgotten, just like Mississippi.

For what New Orleans had, and the forgotten parishes of Louisiana and Mississippi as a whole lacked, was a tightly concentrated, easily covered, conveniently packaged and intellectually simple story that proved irresistible to the American press. What resulted was a year of media coverage that created a “Katrina equals New Orleans” false reality.

And as is the rule, actual reality differs significantly from the media portrayal.

One Year Later

We spent the month of September 2005 doing hurricane relief work in Mississippi. We started in central Mississippi and worked south until we hit the surf of the Gulf. I physically worked in and amongst the destruction every day. Even though I was there, and I touched it and breathed it and looked at it and walked in it, I still cannot fully comprehend the extent of the devastation.

I believe that the scope and scale of the destruction in Mississippi was and is beyond human intellectual comprehension. The geographic scale was many, many times the size of the atomic bombs of WWII in Japan. The extent and pervasiveness of the destruction, across all types of structures, across all economic classes, across all communities and rural areas was immeasurable. It cannot be captured in photos, comprehended through videos or distilled into statistics. It cannot be encapsulated by individual stories or extrapolated via scientific algorithm. It cannot be communicated through art or expressed through music. The scope and scale of the destruction in Mississippi was and is simply beyond human intellectual comprehension.

This made it a hard story to cover. The media doesn't like hard stories, or the resulting hard work. The media likes being spoon fed things that can be easily communicated at a sixth grade level. The media likes intellectually simple stories with easy interviews, easy shots and easy locations. The media likes captivating and emotionally manipulative individual stories. The media likes flamboyant personalities and powerful constituent groups. The media likes events and situations that easily serve as proxies for class warfare, racial conflict and partisan politics. Mississippi had few of those elements. New Orleans had them all. In spades. Consequently, New Orleans got all the attention and was targeted for the vast majority of the aid.

One year later, given all the aid money available and the nearly exclusive media focus on New Orleans you'd naturally expect that orphaned Mississippi would be awash in self-pity and debris and New Orleans would be rebuilt, bright and vibrant.

We spent the last week in the region, and what we found was just about the exact opposite.

In contrast, we found Mississippi to be, while not completely rebuilt, incredible in comparison to what it looked like while we were there a year ago cutting trees out of homes.

New Orleans, on the other hand, represents the "how not to manage a recovery" poster child. We toured parishes of New Orleans of all racial and economic mixes. We found that the middle class and wealthy parishes showed no greater evidence of recovery activity than the poorest ones. We found the predominantly white parishes showed no greater evidence of recovery activity than the predominately black ones. Incredibly, after a year and billions of dollars in financial, volunteer and non-profit aid, New Orleans looks a whole lot like it did a few weeks after the flood.

Refuse, trash, debris, abandoned vehicles, destroyed buildings, shattered glass - all the possible remains of a civilization - are everywhere. Whatever washed out of the houses and buildings of the city is simply lying where it ended up. From what we could see, it doesn't look like even 20% of the debris has been removed from the neighborhoods of the city.

The neighborhoods of New Orleans are eerily devoid of people, pets and life in general. In the poorest parishes, you see a few FEMA trailers, but mostly empty, abandoned streets. In the middle class parishes, you see a few FEMA trailers, but mostly empty, abandoned streets. In the wealthy parishes, you see a few FEMA trailers, but mostly empty, abandoned streets. Listening to the media or watching HBO, you might think that everywhere but the lower ninth ward of New Orleans was awash in cash, rebuilding and luxury. That is not the case. Hurricanes are equal opportunity destroyers. The stakeholders of New Orleans have ensured that their recovery is equally and universally inept, regardless of neighborhood, race or economic level.

In Mississippi, residents of the neighborhoods we worked in told us it took a couple of months for the birds to return. They related how strange it was to not hear the sounds of the birds singing in the trees. After a month or two, the birds came back to Mississippi. You can hear them sing. There are no bird songs in New Orleans.

When we returned to the regions, towns, neighborhoods and families we'd worked with in Mississippi we were nothing less than stunned. The contrast with New Orleans could not have been more dramatic. In retracing our steps from the surf to the central part of the state we saw a total of three (3) piles of debris that had not been removed. New Orleans, in comparison, is still essentially one contiguous field of debris with some clear paths down the streets.

In the Gulf coast area of Mississippi, which took the direct impact of the storm, the recovery is nothing short of miraculous. The commercial areas of Gulfport that served as a tent city for relief workers during our tenure are at least 95% up and running. The grocery stores, tire stores, car dealerships, tractor supply stores, book stores, department stores, discount stores, etc. are all open for business and advertising for "help wanted."

The small community of Turkey Creek we focused on in our last two weeks of relief work last year is remarkably recovered. Just about every property that could be repaired has been. Those that remain were either too far gone to start with, or more commonly, have no clear title of ownership to protect any investment. You would be hard pressed to find any community, anywhere in the disaster area, regardless of racial makeup or economic level, which has made greater strides in recovery and rebuilding than Turkey Creek.

Turkey Creek was rebuilt by its own residents and volunteer teams from all over the United States. The residents and teams gutted homes, rebuilt roofs, installed new floors, walls and ceilings and brought in new furniture. The teams provided building materials, and along with the residents, the labor to rebuild, one by one, almost every home in the community. The debris is gone, the homes are repaired and the residents' lives are, for the most part, back in order. Working side by side with the residents, the volunteer teams have rebuilt and revitalized an entire community that was ravaged by Katrina's winds and drowned by its storm surge.

You would think a place like Turkey Creek would be held up and lionized as an example of what is possible in recovery. You would think that the example of a small black community founded by emancipated slaves being rebuilt by the sweat of their own brows and the goodness of mostly white volunteers would make an irresistible story of what is possible and what is good about Mississippi and America.

It is unlikely you will hear the Turkey Creek story. Turkey Creek may be all black, but it is a mixed middle-class, working class, working poor and welfare community. That makes the Turkey Creek story ineligible for the class warfare Katrina story template. The volunteers were almost all white. That makes the Turkey Creek story ineligible for the race warfare Katrina story template. The volunteers were all from churches. That makes the Turkey Creek story ineligible for the secular social agenda template. Turkey Creek was rebuilt, and its story was both a success and a positive reflection on its residents and the Americans that volunteered to rebuild it. That makes the Turkey Creek story ineligible for the All Things Are Bad In America Today template. The Turkey Creek story doesn't fit any of the media or Hollywood templates that are used to stamp out the daily messaging and indoctrination of our society. But, the Turkey Creek story does bring to light many unsettling facts about what actually happened during the onslaught of hurricane Katrina and in the year since.

What actually happened is that Katrina hit Mississippi, not New Orleans. What actually happened is that hundreds of thousands of volunteers, unsettlingly, most of them white and religious, spent uncounted millions of person-hours and dollars rebuilding the lives of mostly black residents. What actually happened is that Mississippi, the state that historically has ranked at or near the bottom of every possible measure of economic, education and social metrics, and was the most devastated by the hurricane has made by far the most progress towards rebuilding and recovery. What actually happened is that Louisiana's New Orleans, that had 99.99% of the national and international media, cultural, economic and celebrity attention since the disaster, is still mired in recrimination, finger pointing, self-pity and despair.

Having been there, I am often asked why Mississippi has made so much progress and New Orleans so little. My reply has always been, and remains, every single person we met and worked with in Mississippi was of a single mindset – 'give me a two by four and a hammer and let's get this place rebuilt.' The state was of one message – 'let's hitch up our britches and get to work.' The state was of one character, probably best expressed by their governor – 'Mississippians are not into victimhood.' I cannot say the same for New Orleans.

While we were in New Orleans last week we watched as much local television news coverage and public affairs programming as we could in an effort to understand what the situation was and how they had gotten there. Following are some excerpts that may provide some insights into their path and their plight.

A "hot seat" interview with a local sheriff:

- "We aren't having much problem with property crime. If it was worth stealing, it was stolen a long time ago."
- "Out of my force of over 400 pre-Katrina, I now have about 80 officers available to draw upon at any one time. We were forced to layoff everyone else because we have no revenue base to fund the department."

A panel discussion of Katrina response & rebuilding:

- "I don't see a single aspect of this disaster that can't be laid at the feet of FEMA and the federal government."

A different panel discussion of New Orleans stakeholders:

- Panel member three: "We've got to stop pointing fingers and blaming and instead put our energies into getting something done..."
- Panel member three was then interrupted and verbally assaulted by the moderator and the rest of the panel members for not making "ensuring those responsible, especially in the federal government, are held accountable" the top priority. It was the only instance in the entire hour that any panel member was challenged or criticized.

Today, 29 August, 2006, on the beach in the Gulf coast of Mississippi, there is an event commemorating the one year anniversary of the hurricane. Its theme is "In Appreciation of First Responders and Volunteers." The same day I saw the banner in Mississippi announcing the event I heard a radio show from New Orleans discussing the current situation. It was a panel discussion of local stakeholders (two academics and two community activists) with call-in questions from listeners.

- (caller) "What can be done about all the transient volunteer workers committing all the crimes in our city?"

Katrina – Year One

Year Two

On 29 August, 2005, every weather buoy in the path of hurricane Katrina was destroyed. Every one of those buoys, designed to withstand any imaginable storm, was driven to the bottom of the sea by Katrina's wind and waves. Those same wind and waves, whose strength and ferocity was beyond the abilities of the best marine engineers, subsequently smashed into and destroyed the entire coast of the state of Mississippi, and their periphery caused a flood that devastated Louisiana's New Orleans.

The two states shared a hurricane. The two states shared disaster. They did not share the same fate.

One year later, with typical corruption indictments, a need for 28,000 new housing units and the first half mile inland of the surf still often barren, the recovery and rebuilding of Mississippi could in no way be termed complete. But with the debris removed, communities rebuilt, businesses running and jobs for the taking Mississippi shows that it is possible to dig out, stand up, and recover from a disaster so vast that the human intellect is incapable of perceiving it. Mississippi shows that residents of mixed communities, both race and economic level, can work together to rebuild their lives. Mississippi shows that volunteers of one race can and will make immeasurable sacrifices to lift up from the depths of disaster members of another race. Mississippi shows that citizens of a state that is focused on getting things done can, with a little bit of help, accomplish whatever they set their minds to.

One year later, Louisiana's New Orleans remains in stasis, caught in a time warp, frozen by political ineptitude, government corruption, greed, competing interests, personal vanity, social agendas, power grabs, partisan blood feuds, outsider meddling and the nearly universal inability to take any responsibility for their past or their future. Fueled by unceasing national media coverage, local rebuilding has been hijacked by state and national partisan politics, career advancing academics, craven race & class warfare extortionists, naïve celebrities and newly empowered but incapable community activists. Louisiana's New Orleans shows what happens when media and politicians put partisan politics ahead of people's lives. Louisiana's New Orleans shows what happens when communities and individuals make fixing blame more important than fixing problems. Louisiana's New Orleans shows what happens when classes, races and individuals concentrate on ways to make sure others come behind them on the timeline of recovery instead of everyone helping everyone else recover together. Louisiana's New Orleans shows the results of the culture of victimhood.

If there is any possible upside to the ongoing disaster that is the recovery process of New Orleans it is that the pompous and preening media has occupied itself there with overlaying every possible agenda on the local people's suffering while Mississippi has been able to quietly go about the business of recovery and rebuilding in relative anonymity.

What lies ahead for Mississippi and Louisiana's New Orleans?

For starters there is 110 billion dollars of federal aid money coming down the chute. Most of it is targeted for New Orleans. If history is any guide, most of that money targeted for the Big Easy will line the pockets of corrupt politicians and a year from now the few remaining people of the city will be living in rat infested debris fields much as they are today. If a different history is to be written then the people of New Orleans, from the bottom to the top, must stop spending nearly 100% of their energies seeking out someone to blame and start spending their energies on rebuilding their lives.

They only need to look a little bit to their east to see a functioning and largely successful example of how it can be done.