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“New Orleans: A View from Afar”

When tragedy breached the dikes of New Orleans last week, I was in Belgium – the heart of what Donald Rumsfeld not long ago dismissed as “Old Europe,” a backwater too benighted to match American progress on the frontiers of Iraq and Afghanistan.

To judge by initial news coverage and conversations, New Orleans will be remembered in Europe not merely as a catastrophe. Nor will it be simply an event, like the terrorist attacks of 9/11, that evokes, above all, sympathy and solidarity.

New Orleans may instead alter our image abroad for decades to come. Agree or not with America’s wars – most Europeans oppose our invasion of Iraq – they still saw the United States as strong, capable and civilized.

But New Orleans raises deeper questions. Beyond challenging particular American policies, many Europeans now ask what kind of a people we are. Their doubts are more fundamental. Now they worry not only about what we do, but about who are we and what we are made of.

As the incredible images of New Orleans spilled across European television screens and dominated the news, I heard the same questions over and over.

How could all of this happen in the world’s wealthiest and most powerful nation?

Why were public authorities seemingly unprepared, despite ample warning?

Why were rescuers and the forces of public order so slow to respond?

Why were the victims nearly all poor and largely black? Does that have anything to do with the lack of preparedness and the tardy response?

How can people be so alienated from their communities that they shoot at rescue helicopters and besiege hospitals? How profound is the social and cultural cleavage in America, and why?

How can centers of refuge be so poorly protected that women and children are reportedly raped?

How can bodies be left to rot in the streets, only steps away from refugee centers?

Why would so wealthy a nation as America need to appeal to Old Europe for aid?

At bottom, how can a healthy and affluent society permit the foreseeable and avoidable deaths of so many people and the loss of an entire city?

Admittedly, after the stunning failures of the first week, America is fast catching up. Our resources, organizational skills and public generosity are now taking over.

But in some sense it is too late. Europeans, and others throughout the world, will not soon forget the New Orleans they witnessed that first week. A belated fix will not erase their questions, any more than it will bring back the lives lost.

Here at home we already see tendencies to affix blame. This or that public official or politician, we are told, was uncaring, inept or asleep at the switch.

Maybe so. But we should not allow ourselves to be seduced by such small questions. New Orleans was in many ways a collective failure. No one person can take the rap for so many faults.

We need to take a long, hard look at ourselves. At our values. At our ethic of pursuing personal success, and devil take the hindmost. At our tolerance of depths of poverty and inequality, in this self-consciously religious nation, that would shock the conscience of secular Europe.

Yes, we have many strengths. America exudes dynamism, flexibility and pragmatism. We offer opportunity for many, even if not for all. We would not be where we are in the world today without these and other virtues.

But even more than the race riots of a generation ago, the drowning of New Orleans should remind us not to forget those we leave behind – not only during the emergency evacuation of one imperiled city, but throughout their lives.

People everywhere want good schools, decent jobs, and neighborhoods where families can live in dignity, security and community. New Orleans showed the world that for too many people, America is not such a society. And that a majority of Americans and our elected representatives either do not know or do not seem to care.

Will we, too, reach the same conclusions? Not until we begin, at least, to ask the same questions. And until we do, we should not be surprised that Europeans old and new, as well as many people in other parts of the world, will find the American model less than inspiring.

Doug Cassel's commentaries are broadcast Wednesdays during the 1:00 p.m. hour of the Worldview program. All views expressed are the personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.