

'Tale of two cities'

by Robert_J_Caldwell

SAN DIEGO - The images are seared into our recent national memory. Frantic people stranded on rooftops waving signs reading "help." Thousands crammed into a domed sports arena without food, water, adequate sanitation or police protection. Rifle-toting police and National Guard troops chasing away looters and looking for reported snipers. Weeks later, wrecked neighborhoods still abandoned with no public services or government presence of any kind.

That was New Orleans, 2005, in the devastating wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Nothing like that happened in San Diego. Nothing even close, despite the worst wildfires in the history of the city and the county; deadly conflagrations that killed at least seven persons and injured scores more, burned more than 350,000 acres, destroyed at least 1,243 homes and forced the evacuation of half a million people.

Why did New Orleans suffer a catastrophic breakdown in public order and safety and Katrina become a synonym for the failure of government to meet its most basic responsibilities? And why does San Diego's response to its disaster, by comparison, seem almost a model of efficient, effective response and civic cooperation?

Even granting the vast differences in the scale of these natural calamities - fire damage last week countywide here is currently estimated at \$1 billion-plus; Katrina's toll of property damage in New Orleans was put at \$21 billion - these questions are worth asking.

The answers begin with political leadership.

Bluntly put, New Orleans had Mayor Ray Nagin, who proved manifestly inadequate in a crisis. San Diego has Mayor Jerry Sanders, a former police chief schooled in crisis management. San Diego County has veteran Supervisors Ron Roberts and Dianne Jacob, leaders who kept their heads, worked tirelessly and got things done.

At the state level, Louisiana had the dithering Gov. Kathleen Blanco. California has Arnold Schwarzenegger, a man who's still learning politically but who takes his current incarnation as an action-hero governor seriously.

At the federal level, Katrina proved that the Federal Emergency Management Agency was incompetently

run and desperately in need of new leadership and that the Bush administration needed a kick in the pants. Today, there's a new FEMA under better leadership. What's more, President Bush and Michael Chertoff, secretary of Homeland Security, leave no doubt that they learned from the Katrina debacle. Both were on the ground in San Diego last week promising, and delivering, help.

Here's another decisive difference: Cooperation instead of the blame game.

Nagin and Blanco sought to excuse their own Katrina failures (textbook examples of inept crisis management) by blaming Washington, as if local and state governments are not the first responders in any disaster. Contrast that with the reassuring levels of local, state and federal cooperation in San Diego. Bush and Schwarzenegger toured fire-ravaged Rancho Bernardo Thursday together, pledging anew to bring all available resources to bear in fighting fires and aiding victims.

There's one more difference between New Orleans, 2005, and San Diego, 2007. Call it civic culture. In New Orleans, it proved sadly deficient. In San Diego, it's an underlying strength that helped us get through a week of trauma and tragedy.

Lamentably, New Orleans has long been its own worst enemy. That city, perhaps fittingly known as the Big Easy, is plagued by historically corrupt politics, chronically high crime rates, inept policing, bad schools and far too little of the civic glue that holds communities together in adversity.

The nightmarish breakdown of order, public safety and civility at New Orleans' Superdome in the days after Katrina is the enduring image of civic dysfunction. San Diego's counterpoint was Qualcomm Stadium where 10,000-plus evacuees were sheltered amid an outpouring of volunteers and mountains of donated supplies - everything from bottled water, food, diapers and sanitary items to clothing and sunscreen - in perfect safety and relative comfort.

The postmortems that will now ensue (once the fires are out) will underscore what worked in San Diego and what still needs improvement.

Clearly, much has been learned since the disastrous Cedar Fire of 2003. Local governments have learned to work together. The regional Emergency Operations Center performed admirably. The reverse-911 call system of automated evacuation warnings proved a wonder, and a life saver. State and federal cooperation was mostly commendable, if not without glitches - notably the delay in getting federal air assets deployed to fight the fires during the critical early hours and days. It must also be said that San Diego remains short, critically short some say, of the fire-fighting resources required for a city so prone to periodic wildfires.

The postmortems will also, by implication, show how and why San Diego surmounted its trial by fire without coming anywhere close to the catastrophic failures in New Orleans. That, as they say, was no accident.

Robert J. Caldwell is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's Sunday Insight section and can be reached at robert.caldwell@uniontrib.com.

'Tale of two cities' by Robert_J_Caldwell