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Author(s): Arffman, Atte; Holmila, Antero

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Race, Environment, and Crisis: Hurricane Camille and the Politics of Southern

Segregation

Atte Arffman

University of Jyväskylä

Email: atte.e.arffman@jyu.fi

Antero Holmila

University of Jyväskylä

Email: antero.holmila@jyu.fi

Abstract:

In August 1969 Hurricane Camille hit the Mississippi coast. We argue that the disaster caused by the Hurricane was an outcome of the entanglement between human and non-human agents. As a non-human agent, Hurricane Camille thrust the prevailing socio-economic situation in the segregationist South into the spotlight, with all its political and cultural ramifications – much to the annoyance of the local political elite that had long sought to isolate southern politics from civil rights and desegregation agenda. Consequently, it (re)invigorated and furnished the civil rights movement and the politics defining that era with new arguments and approaches that would have been impossible to develop from the perspective of human agency alone. By examining both local and national press discourses relating to the crisis caused by Hurricane Camille in the state of Mississippi in August 1969, we argue that historical agency should not be seen in purely anthropocentric terms but as an entanglement between human and non-human events.

Keywords: Environment, Civil-rights movement, non-human agency, crisis, Hurricane Camille 1969

Race, Environment, and Crisis: Hurricane Camille and the Politics of Southern Segregation

Introduction

Hurricanes are quite possibly the strongest atmospheric phenomena on earth. Stronger than the force of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima by several times over, a big hurricane can deliver, in just a couple of hours, the amount of energy needed to supply the United States for a year of electricity.¹ The strongest of these storms leave behind warlike imagery, as if a massive explosion had eradicated the area. However, notwithstanding the physical destruction, the storms have also had the notable impact at other levels of society – sometimes even triggering a social crisis. One such case was Hurricane Camille.²

In the early hours of August 18, 1969, Hurricane Camille hit the coast of Mississippi at Bay St. Louis, not far from Pass Christian, Gulfport, Biloxi, and the state border of Louisiana. To this day, coming close second after the hurricane which hit the Florida Keys on Labour Day in 1935, Camille remains the second most intense hurricane to have ever hit the U.S.

¹ Mark M. Smith, *Camille, 1969: Histories of a Hurricane* (University of Georgia press, 2011), 1.

² Hurricane Camille is not the first disaster to gain scholarly attention with regard to racial inequality. See, for instance, Andy Horowitz, ‘The complete story of the Galveston Horror’, in Cindy Ermus and Ted Steinberg (eds), *Environmental Disaster in the Gulf South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018), pp. 62–79; Andrea Rees Davies, *Saving San Francisco* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012); and several books and articles on Hurricane Katrina 2005, such as Craig E. Colten, ‘Floods and Inequitable Responses: New Orleans Before Hurricane Katrina’, in Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud and Richard Rodger (eds.), *Environmental and Social Justice in the City: Historical Perspectives* (White Horse Press, 2011), pp. 113–130; Jeremy Levitt and Matthew Whitaker, *Hurricane Katrina: America’s Unnatural Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009). Andy Horowitz’s article regarding Hurricane Betsy of 1965 in his book *Katrina: A History, 1915–2015* (Harvard University Press 2020), shows how accusations of racial discrimination regarding relief were raised by the victims especially in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. However, a survey into *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* reveals quickly that these issues were not a part of national level public discussion in 1965. By contrast, problems with aid after Camille were publicised in the national press almost immediately. Thus, it can be asserted that, even though racial discrimination regarding relief was an issue in 1965 after Hurricane Betsy, Hurricane Camille in 1969 was the first large-scale disaster to spur heated debate in the national press over segregation in the South after the Civil Rights Act had come into force in 1964.

mainland.³ With maximum sustained wind speeds of 150 knots (277 km/h), the winds of Camille were strong enough to rip clothes off people. In 1935, it was reported that people's skin had actually been torn off.⁴ As the hurricane made landfall, waves measuring over 6 meters surged into coastal areas wreaking devastation and sometimes levelling whole buildings.⁵ In terms of casualties, the hurricane claimed 256 people's lives, 150 of them along the Mississippi shoreline. Several days after the hurricane there were press reports about how the storm surge had lifted corpses from their graves and left bodies hanging from trees.⁶

Americans witnessed this cataclysm at the peak of high modernity – when confidence in science and technology was at its peak. The implementation of weather radar in the 1950s and weather satellites in the 1960s had greatly improved meteorological remote sensing capabilities, and even though forecasting hurricanes is still today anything but easy, the fact that the hurricane's exact position could be measured days before landfall clearly appealed to people's belief in technology and modernity.⁷ Moreover, only a month earlier, on July 20, humankind had made the 'giant leap' of putting men on the moon, only to have this optimistic perception of human progress stripped back to reveal the sobering extent of human vulnerability before the raw power of nature. In this respect, Hurricane Camille was – as environmental historian Mark M. Smith has put it – 'an atavism'.⁸ Similar opinions were

³ The last major hurricane (category 3 or above) to hit the State of Mississippi was in 1916; though Hurricane Betsy was a category 4, it had made its landfall in SE Louisiana in 1965 (160 kilometres from Biloxi and the Mississippi Coast), so its effects were relatively mild. Many residents on the Mississippi coast had thus never experienced a hurricane, let alone a category 5. Subject: "E14) What have been the most intense hurricanes to strike the United States?", accessed August 19, 2021, <https://www.aoml.noaa.gov/hrd-faq/#most-intense-hurricanes>; Margaret E. Kieper, Christopher W. Landsea and John L. Beven II, "A Reanalysis of Hurricane Camille", *American Meteorological Society* (March 2016), 380.

⁴ Stefan Bechtel, *Roar of the Heavens* (New York: Citadel Press Books, 2006), 38.

⁵ Smith, *Camille*, 15.

⁶ "Bodies Hanging From the Trees" *The Washington Post*, Aug 21, 1969, A1.

⁷ Patrick J. Fitzpatrick, *Hurricanes. A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2006), 133; Kevin Anthony Teague and Nicole Gallicchio, *The Evolution of Meteorology: A Look into the Past, Present, And Future of Weather Forecasting* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc. 2017), 43–48.

⁸ Smith, *Camille*, 4.

voiced in the press straight after the catastrophe, too: ‘If scientists and engineers can bridge the quarter-million mile gulf between earth and its natural satellite’, reasoned *The New York Times* (NYT), ‘why can’t they tame these deceptively named hurricanes?’⁹ In another case, a letter to the editor of *The Washington Post* expressed the view that “[i]n this age of technology and space and undersea research, it is inconceivable that so many people should be so completely wiped out.”¹⁰ It was almost as if people were laying the blame for the deaths at the feet of experts, rather than the hurricane itself. This bafflement at how a powerful natural phenomenon could somehow be beyond the control of humankind was at the core of the progressive and modernist mindset of the late 1960s and 1970s, but similar complaints were already voiced in 1926 in the wake of the Great Miami Hurricane. Simply put, modernity was seen as the antithesis of disaster.¹¹

Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

American environmental historian, Donald Worster has described the central premise of environmental history as being “interested in all the ways people organise themselves into patterns of power, production and ideology in the presence of what we conventionally call nature – the nonhuman world.”¹² This should nevertheless be understood as an interactive presence rather than some kind of passive coexistence, as ecology, production and cognition are very much interrelated.¹³ In the last few decades, environmental historians and scholars in

⁹ “Taming Les Femmes Fatales”, *The New York Times*, Aug 20, 1969, 46.

¹⁰ “Letters to the Editor: Hurricane Foresight”, *The Washington Post*, Aug 27, 1969, A26.

¹¹ Raymond Arsenault, “*The Public Storm: Hurricanes and the State in the Twentieth-Century America*” in *American Public Life and the Historical Imagination*, eds. Wendy Gamber, Michael Grossberg & Hendrik Hartog (Notre Dame, India: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003); Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 10.

¹² Donald Worster, “Introduction”, *Environmental Review: ER* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1987), 251–253.

¹³ Arthur McEvoy, “Towards an Interactive Theory of Nature and Culture: Ecology, Production, and Cognition in the California Fishing Industry”, *Environmental Review: ER* 11, no. 4 (Winter, 1987), 289–305.

related fields have developed new ways of understanding the entangled history of the human and non-human. One of the most important and highly controversial of these is the idea of non-human agency.

Among others, Linda Nash, Raymond Murphy, Timothy Mitchell, Kate Rigby, Bruno Latour, and Dipesh Chakrabarty have all argued, for example, that the role of human agency in historical events is not as linear and self-evident as the dominant understanding of history implies.¹⁴ According to Timothy Mitchell, neglecting the non-human aspects of agency serves to reinforce the prevailing understanding of power relations, which place technical expertise above all else – as the citations above clearly show.¹⁵ According to Latour, both human and non-human agency are inextricably bound together. In general, Latour’s work has sought to understand modern societies’ relationship with the material world that surrounds it. He argues that the dichotomy between two different kinds of cultures (or agents) – material and non-material – is actually an illusion and one of the products of modernisation. Like Passoth, Peuker and Schillmeier among others, we too share the notion of there being some kind of collective agency that is not the sole privilege of humans.¹⁶

Collective agency offers an opportunity for historical studies to problematise the notion that nature and the environment are some kind of slow-changing backdrop that has no agency of

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 18–20; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71–72; Linda Nash, “The Agency of Nature or the Nature of Agency?” *Environmental History* 10, no. 1 (January, 2005), 67–9; Raymond Murphy, “Disaster or Sustainability: The Dance of Human Agents with Nature’s Actants”, *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 41, no 3 (June, 2004), 249–255; Kate Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 14–15; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 13.

¹⁵ Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Nash, *The Agency of Nature*, 68.

¹⁶ Jan-Hendrick Passoth, Birgit Peuker and Michael Schillmeier, “Introduction” in *Agency Without Actors? New Approaches to Collective Action*, ed. Jan-Hendrik Passoth, Birgit Peuker and Michael Schillmeier (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 3–4.

its own. As Kristin Asdal has aptly noted, ‘Latour wants to bring nature back to collective, political life [...]’¹⁷. We argue that historical agency is best understood as an entanglement of human and non-human events, in which natural phenomena provide opportunities that politicians then either capitalise on or put to good use. By focusing on Hurricane Camille, we will show how hurricanes make certain political maneuvers possible and meaningful, and how conceptual struggles can be closely connected to material boundary conditions. We are not arguing that without Camille different political issues would not have been debated at all, but that Camille gave a whole new impetus to these existing debates by making some political maneuvers more feasible than others.

By examining the discourses relating to the Camille crisis in both the local Mississippian and national press, we can see how human and non-human representations of agency have been weaved into the discursive landscape and to what extent non-human agency ‘is there’ – even if invisible and somewhat displaced. Although social action is a human undertaking, it is not only contingent upon, but also often heavily influenced by non-human agency – a fact that if not completely ignored in the literature, is often not emphasised enough. To fully understand how different natural phenomena are politicised thus requires more than an investigation of only human agency – although this acknowledgement does not actually mean *replacing* human with non-human agents.¹⁸

In this article, we are interested in the ways in which the ‘crisis’ was firstly caused by a non-human agent and thereafter became an integral part of the segregation debate in the South. For the sake of clarity, we use the term crisis as an analytical category, for the event was a crisis in the sense that it laid bare problems of the South that were already bubbling under. It

¹⁷ Kristin Asdal, “The Problematic Nature of Nature: The Post-Constructivist Challenge to Environmental History”, *History and Theory Theme Issue* 42, no. 4 (December, 2003), 71.

¹⁸ Passoth, Peuker and Schillmeier, “*Introduction*”, 3–4.

was an event – as crises usually are – that led to widespread political mobilisation, and different actors sought to use it to their advantage.¹⁹

As Hurricane Camille illustrates, the severity and depth of a disaster is context-bound, insofar as social and human-made contexts are caught up in non-human forces. Environmental history has, according to Connie Y. Chiang, the ‘potential to illuminate the complex dynamics of human societies.’²⁰ She has also noted that the environment has had a significant role in how race and ethnicity have been socially constructed.²¹ In this respect, Pero Gaglo Dagbovie has similarly remarked that Afro-American environmental history has remained in an embryonic state.²² Even though the present article touches on but a small piece of Afro-American history, it should certainly be seen as a contribution to the field, exploring as it does the material and non-human factors that had become entwined with social ones such as segregation.

Although Camille brought a number of troubling issues to the surface, such as building regulations and the ability of science to forecast weather accurately, the most important (and

¹⁹ Crisis research is once again in vogue and so a comprehensive list of recent and established crisis literature would be unfeasible. However, key works include Lin Chalozin-Dovrat, “‘Crisis’ in Modernity: A Sign of the Times Between Decisive Change and Potential Irreversibility”, in *Discourse and Crisis: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Antoon De Rycker and Zuraidah Mohd Don (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013), 67–100; Michael Freeden, “Crisis? How Is That a Crisis?! Reflection on an Overburdened Word”, *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 12, vol. 2 (Winter, 2017), 12–28; Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press Company, 1975); Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis”, trans. Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67 (2006), 357–400; Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988); Brian Milstein, “Thinking Politically about Crisis: A Pragmatist Perspective”, *European Journal of Political Theory* 14, no. 2 (2015), 141–160; Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Myriam Revault d’Allonnes, *La Crise Sans Fin. Essai sur l’expérience moderne du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2012); Amin Samman, “The Idea of Crisis”, *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies*, 4 (2011), 4–9; and Randolph Starn, “Historians and ‘Crisis’”, *Past and Present* 52 (1971), 3–22.

²⁰ Connie Y. Chiang, “Race Ethnicity in Environmental History” in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew Isenberg (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 573; See also Nash, *The Agency of Nature*, 68.

²¹ Chiang, “Race Ethnicity in Environmental History”, 574.

²² Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *What is African American History?* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 127.

most discussed) matter was racial segregation: ‘[...] race, and the history that underwrote the idea’, notes Mark M. Smith, ‘was nestled deep in the debris of Camille.’²³ While Smith has summed the course of events regarding Hurricane Camille and its aftermath well, it is not clear just how this history of race and the environment had been constructed. Our intention here is not to repeat what is already known. Instead, by shifting our focus from what humans did after the hurricane to what was the role of the hurricane itself, we can uncover the deep entanglement between the human society on the Gulf Coast and the hurricane. It is not only that hurricane Camille, alongside the physical destruction, rendered certain political decisions more feasible than others, but it also more extensively changed the whole circumstances where these decisions were taken. By implementing the theoretical perspective of collective agency, we can prevent Camille from being considered only a part of a passive background context and show how it was an important constituent of the political turmoil long after the landfall and the dissipation of the meteorological phenomenon.²⁴

To this end we have examined national, local, and specialised press – such as the NAACP’s *Crisis Magazine* and the pro-segregationist *Dixie Guide*²⁵ – to show how Hurricane Camille became a politically charged issue in the months that followed its landfall. To our surprise, the *Crisis Magazine* published only one item regarding Hurricane Camille (in Vol 77 (2), Feb 1970, 61) but only after the Senate Hearing in early 1970. The article severely criticised the American Red Cross – after the Senate Hearing had also been critical of the Red Cross. However, we can also observe that the similar scenario had already taken place regarding Hurricane Betsy in 1965. Even though Andy Horowitz has shown that in 1965 there was also

²³ Smith, *Camille*, 23

²⁴ Smith, *Camille*, 26.

²⁵ Our empirical body consists of the following national papers: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and; the following local press: *The Hattiesburg American* and *The Clarion-Ledger*; and the following partisan press: *The Crisis* and *The Dixie Guide*.

discussion about the known discrimination over aid, there is hardly any evidence about this in the *Crisis* magazine.²⁶ The reasons why the most important African American Civil Rights mouthpiece did not discuss the issue can only be guessed and is not within the scope of this article.

As well as collective agency, we use the concept of crisis to frame our interpretation. The conceptual repertoire of crisis – as pointed out by many in the humanities and social sciences – is now so great that it calls the usefulness of the concept into question. Despite these misgivings, however, it nevertheless remains a useful template for examining historical change and continuity. In this article, ‘crisis’ refers to something which is greater than any single event because, as it unfolds, it has the power to reveal.²⁷ When crisis is understood this way, it also becomes easier to understand that Camille had considerable agency in itself as a natural phenomenon. Crisis, then, can be understood as an entanglement of two asynchronous, yet simultaneous historical processes; the long tradition of segregation in the South, as discussed by Dittmer and Danielson for example, and equally violent encounter of the natural world and human society in the form of Hurricane Camille.²⁸ Consequently, we conceptualise crisis as a material-discursive process, borrowing the term from Kate Rigby, who emphasises how describing a hurricane simply as *an event* overlooks the longer, sometimes chronic, social developments, which she calls ‘maldevelopments’.²⁹ These are typically buried under the assumed norms and cultural practices that exist when the crisis unfolds. Anthropologist Janet Roitman’s definition of crisis as something that challenges this ‘assumed normativity’ is particularly useful here: ‘crisis moments are defined as instances

²⁶ See chapter two in Horowitz, *Katrina*, 2020.

²⁷ Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 3-4; Milstein, “Thinking Politically about Crisis”, 147.

²⁸ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Chris Danielson, *After Freedom Summer: How Race Realigned Mississippi Politics, 1965-1986* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011).

²⁹ Rigby, *Dancing with Disasters*, 15.

where normativity is laid bare, such as when the contingent or partial quality of knowledge claims – principles, suppositions, premises, criteria, and logical or causal relations – are disputed, critiqued, challenged or disclosed.’³⁰ On reading Roitman, it would seem she is arguing that the ‘contingent or partial quality of knowledge claims’ is due to human action (or lack of it) but, as Hurricane Camille illustrates, it could equally be non-human action that puts these knowledge claims under scrutiny.

In our case, the immediate framing of Hurricane Camille was that of ‘catastrophe’, ‘disaster’, and occasionally ‘crisis’. However, while the situation developed, and the initial shock passed, the focus shifted from the immediate events to longer-term problems that included race and economy ‘In Camille’s wake: An Economic Crisis’ ran one NYT headline in early 1970, indicating that the initial catastrophe had turned into a longer-term crisis situation in which prevailing norms were challenged.³¹ The economic crisis had two aspects: the first was that, under Mississippi law, property owners had to pay their taxes based on assessments made back in January 1969 – but in the wake of Camille, that property no longer existed. The paper then went on to mention the more delayed aspect to this: ‘a crisis will develop when the tax rolls in some communities will be forced to absorb a drastic loss of taxable property based on the new assessment.’³²

As Brian Milstein has pointed out, crisis is a mobilising concept: ‘the power of the crisis concept consists precisely in the way it is used by communicative actors to stimulate collective reflection and action with regard to the way we live together in a society.’³³ In the context of the South and the crisis that was triggered, Hurricane Camille offered something

³⁰ Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 3–4.

³¹ “In Camille’s Wake: An Economic Crisis”, *New York Times*, Jan 5, 1970, 32.

³² “In Camille’s Wake: An Economic Crisis”, *New York Times*, Jan 5, 1970, 32.

³³ Milstein, “Thinking Politically about Crisis”, 156.

tangible for many political actors to refer to in their quest to either restore the status quo (e.g., segregation) or to make society more equal. This opportunism led the disaster itself to become political, insofar as existing norms were being challenged. Different quarters struggled for the right to define the extent of the disaster and who qualified as a victim needing help.³⁴

Scope of the Destruction: Crisis Extends

Three days before the eye of the hurricane reached the Mississippi coastline, the Weather Bureau (WB) was clearly quite aware of the dangers that Camille posed, but only offered a vague warning; Robert Simpson, Director of the National Hurricane Center, told the *NYT* that it was still unknown where Camille would even make its U.S. landfall, but advised all Gulf Coast residents to follow future advice and bulletins closely.³⁵ The next day, Camille had reached a wind speed of almost 136 knots (251 km/h) and the WB was calling it extremely dangerous.³⁶ According to their statements in the *NYT*, civil defense officials estimated that almost 200,000 people had heeded the warnings and fled inland.³⁷ The evacuations seemed comprehensive and the *NYT* reported that low-lying areas had been cleared well before Camille reached land,³⁸ and yet the death toll of some 150 people in the Mississippi coastal area tells quite a different story. Evidently, a considerable number of people had either not heeded the warnings, were unable to leave, or had nowhere else to go and so decided to weather the storm at home.

³⁴ Sarah Pritchard and Carl Zimring, *Technology and the Environment in History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 100–113.

³⁵ “Hurricane Hits Cuba in Drive Towards Florida” *The New York Times*, Aug 16, 1969, 55.

³⁶ “Hurricane Winds Grow to 150 M.P.H.”, *The New York Times*, Aug 17, 1969, 65.

³⁷ “Hurricane Stuns Mississippi Coast as 200,000 Flee” *The New York Times*, Aug 18, 1969, 1.

³⁸ *ibid.*

As homes, businesses, schools and public buildings were destroyed, newspaper reports understandably endowed Camille with a certain degree of agency. The Hurricane had left behind ‘desolation’, and 3,000 people ‘had lost their property to Camille’, the NYT reported. The headline of this story left no doubt as to the perpetrator either: ‘Storm Victims Return to the Ruins, Then Leave again in Despair’³⁹. Similarly, the front page of the *The Christian Science Monitor* reminded readers how this desolation was a form of ‘destruction by water’ that ‘Camille pushed in front of it’.⁴⁰

As the Mississippi coastal area lay in ruins, newspaper reports quite understandably described the hurricane in warlike terms. According to the front page of the *Washington Post* (WP), the Gulf Coast area appeared like a war zone. ‘Body counts, damage surveys, refugee camps. Check points. Search and rescue. For a week this region has crackled with all the military jargon’, Phillip D. Carter wrote, adding ‘it has been a quick war, however, a local war [...] but like all local wars, Hurricane Camille has savagely scarred the places and people it touched.’⁴¹ The terms ‘evacuees’, ‘victims’ and ‘refugees’ were constantly used – in another WP article, the headline was ‘Storm Victims Recall Long Night of Terror’.⁴² While the majority of reports made only implicit references to war, on occasions the frame of reporting explicitly drew from it – only the enemy was no longer a ‘Heinie’, ‘Jap’, ‘Commie’ or ‘Charlie’ – it was Camille.

Of course, a major reason that war imagery was used in these reports was because the National Guard and State troopers had actually been deployed.

³⁹ “Storm Victims Return to the Ruins, Then Leave again in Despair”, *The New York Times*, Aug 21, 1969, 26.

⁴⁰ “Hurricane Lesson: Heed Warning”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Aug 22, 1969, 1.

⁴¹ “Gulf Coast Like a War Zone: Industry Disrupted Coffin on Rooftop”, *The Washington Post*, Aug 24, 1969, 1.

⁴² “Storm Victims Recall Long Night of Terror”, *The Washington Post*, Aug 23, 1969, A6.

State troopers and National Guardsmen had set up a command post at the high school in Buras, which was stained a scummy green on the outside up to the second floor. Down the highway [...] were parked Army amphibious “Ducks” that had spent two days patrolling the salt water marshes below Venice looking for victims.⁴³

Despite all woes, worries and war-like imaginaries noted in the reports, the overall reaction in the national press of any possible long-term effects was optimistic. This was largely based on a liberal view that the hurricane would have the power to change Mississippi racial norms. The NYT cheerily claimed how the storm had erased the ‘colour line’ in Mississippi, when the army’s Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg was turned into a refugee camp, describing it as ‘[...] the biggest exercise of integrated living in the state’s history’.⁴⁴ Camp personnel offered similar positivist assessments. For instance, referring to people’s skin colour, one director of relief operations did not believe that “[...] people pay any attention to those things in a crisis” [...]’⁴⁵. Nevertheless, one can also detect the seeds of tension, as the same news article cited the second-in command officer at the camp saying that they were “[...] under orders to integrate” [...]’⁴⁶. Although the Civil Rights Act had been standing for five years, the fact that orders still needed to be given to ensure the equal treatment of refugees regardless of colour shows how much of the ‘racial etiquette’ of segregation remained – even in a time of crisis. Whether or not the readers of the NYT picked up on these nuances is hard to say, but it is clear that, right from the start, the national press framed the situation in civil rights terms rather than as simply a case of catastrophe relief.

⁴³ “Storm Victims Return to the Ruins, Then Leave Again in Despair”, *The New York Times*, Aug 21, 1969, 26

⁴⁴ “Mississippi Color Line Erased In Refugee Camp After Storm”, *The New York Times*, Aug. 23, 1969, 1.

⁴⁵ “Mississippi Color Line Erased In Refugee Camp”, *The New York Times*, Aug. 23, 1969, 16.

⁴⁶ “Mississippi Color Line Erased In Refugee Camp After Storm”, *The New York Times*, Aug. 23, 1969, 1.

Similar statements are absent, however, in local Mississippi newspapers. For instance, *The Clarion Ledger* (CL) and *Hattiesburg American* (HA) did not mention anything about any emerging racial integration happening in the wake of the disaster illustrating not just existing tensions between the national and state levels of press but also a vastly different way of interpreting the whole situation. Even when racial tensions did become visible in the Mississippian press, it did not automatically connect Camille with the race question per se. Before long, civil rights leaders were expressing their concern that there was discrimination in the Shelby refugee camp.⁴⁷ On August 26 and 27 1969, The WP wrote how Afro-American refugees had to use mass toilets and showers that were under guarded surveillance while white refugees did not. Civil rights leaders therefore argued that there was only a token form of integration in the camp. As a public facility, Camp Shelby should have been racially integrated as per the Civil Rights Act, which had been in force since 1964.⁴⁸

After this, a group of Afro-American refugees who had been sheltered in Jackson State College, Mississippi refused to be transferred to Camp Shelby. Civil rights leaders expressed their concern over the refugees and blamed Camp Shelby for inadequate conditions.⁴⁹ On August 27 and 28, however, the CL and HA both reported how refugees had accepted the transfer, but by calling the group ‘balky’, it was clear that the editorial disapproved of them. One Jackson resident brought out his annoyance at the whole notion of providing relief for these thankless people in one letter to the editor of CL asking if refugees would rather sleep under the starry sky than have a roof over their head.⁵⁰ In his view, the refugees were in no

⁴⁷ Press discourse did not categorise or discuss the differences between “refugees” or “evacuees” but used the terms interchangeably.

⁴⁸ Judith Howard and Ernest Zebrowski, *Category 5: The Story of Camille: Lessons Unlearned from America’s Most Violent Hurricane* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan press, 2007), 220.

⁴⁹ “Negro Refugees Refuse the Transfer to Camp Shelby”, *Hattiesburg American*, Aug. 26, 1969, 1; “Outsiders Blamed As Refugees Balk” *Clarion-Ledger*, Aug. 27, 1969, 1.

⁵⁰ “Ridiculous Refusal to Accept Refuge”, *Clarion-Ledger*, Sep. 2, 1969, 12.

position to complain about the level and quality of the relief. One Local Red Cross spokesman even went so far as to accuse ‘outsiders’ for making misleading allegations about the living conditions at Camp Shelby, with the implicit suggestion that civil rights leaders and the *National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People* (NAACP) had persuaded the refugees to balk.⁵¹

Both the Federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) and the (Democrat) Governor of Mississippi – John Bell Williams, known as a hardline segregationist – assured the press that facilities were adequate at Camp Shelby.⁵² Meanwhile a member from the Mississippi House of Representatives, Robert Lennon, was so outraged by the accusations of inadequate facilities, he even visited the camp to make his own inspection and prove otherwise.⁵³

From Camp Segregation to School Segregation

The debate over adequate facilities in Camp Shelby had soon escalated to encompass the far larger question of school integration. On August 30, an official from HEW, Guy H. Clark, announced that the department could not provide aid to any educational agency not fully abiding by the Civil Rights Act.⁵⁴ Frustrated with the slow process of implementing the act, the HEW had passed a mandate in early 1969 which decreed that by August 11 of that year, all public schools in Mississippi needed to be integrated⁵⁵ – yet, as of August 18 (when

⁵¹ “Outsiders Blamed As Refugees Balk”, *Clarion-Ledger*, Aug. 27, 1969, 1; “Jackson State Refugees Leave For Camp Shelby” *Clarion-Ledger*, Aug. 28, 1969, 1; “Balky Refugees on Their Way to Shelby” *Hattiesburg American*, Aug. 27, 1969, 1.

⁵² “Miss. Hurricane Refugees Moved to Guard Camp; Blacks Distressed”, *The Washington Post*, Aug. 26, 1969, A3; “Storm Refugees Balk at Transfer to Shelby”, *The Washington Post*, Aug. 27, 1969, A2; Howard and Zebrowski, *Category 5*, 221.

⁵³ “Solon Says Shelby Adequate but No Sun and Sand”, *Hattiesburg American*, Aug. 28, 1969, 8; “Says Shelby Facilities Adequate”, *Clarion-Ledger*, Aug. 29, 1969, 23.

⁵⁴ “Aid to Segregated Schools in Storm’s Path Studied”, *The New York Times*, Aug. 30, 1969, 22.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Camille*, 27.

Camille struck), this was still not the case. Clark pointed out that several schools in Mississippi still segregated white and black students in spite of the fact that way back in 1954 the Supreme Court had deemed segregation in public schools unconstitutional; and a further *five years* had passed since the Civil Rights Act (1964) had put a legal framework in place to finally end the Jim Crow laws⁵⁶. The crisis unleashed by Hurricane Camille revealed this inconsistency in all its ugliness, making it now an unavoidable part of the discourse.

Richard Nixon's Vice-President Spiro Agnew, who had inspected the storm area on August 20, was infuriated by the HEW statement and said in a news conference that withholding aid from anyone affected by the storm would have been the last thing to come in his mind. In a similarly conflicting statement, Democrat congressman from Mississippi, William M. Colmer claimed he had been in contact with the White House and received word that HEW's statement did not represent the position of the Nixon Administration.⁵⁷ By August 29, the HEW's reply to this was that 'the matter is under study'.⁵⁸ What is also interesting is that Leon Panetta, who was vigorously pushing more rapid school integration as a counter for President Nixon's slower implementation policy, is absent in the press discourse. HEW was only using a spokesperson and neither Panetta, the Director of the Office for Civil Rights nor Robert Finch, the Secretary of HEW, appeared in the press commentary.⁵⁹

Colmer, who had made a political career opposing school integration, said he was confident the HEW's statement would be overruled, as this was an emergency requiring that aid be

⁵⁶ "Jim Crow laws" (also the "Jim Crow era") refers to local and state laws that enforced racial segregation and were widely in place from the 1870s to 1964 in former Confederate States.

⁵⁷ "Aid to Segregated Schools in Storm's Path Studied", *The New York Times*, Aug. 30, 1969, 22; "Colmer Makes School Appeal", *Stone County Enterprise*, Sep. 4, 1969, 10.

⁵⁸ "Aid to Segregated Schools in Storm's Path Studied", *The New York Times*, Aug. 30, 1969, 22.

⁵⁹ According to Stuart Schwartz, Leon Panetta was a major figure behind the 'no integration, no aid' - policy. See Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 314-315.

granted to all schools in need.⁶⁰ This scored him political points in Mississippi as it simultaneously chastised the HEW for essentially blackmailing state schools to implement integration; aligned him with the Nixon administration; and detached him from the Democratic Party's general support for the Civil Rights Movement – further widening the internal rift in the Democratic Party over civil rights. It was also politically smart for a segregationist, as if relief was made unconditional for all schools in need, then it would override Title IV of the Civil Rights Act that prohibited the use of federal money in any program upholding discriminatory principles.⁶¹ Hurricane Camille therefore opened up new possibilities for Mississippi politicians to challenge the policy of integration and to sow seeds of disagreement within the Nixon government and Democratic Party in the hope that this would stem the party's loss of support in the still largely segregationist South. The debate and political struggle over Civil Rights of African-American people in general had its roots at least in the Reconstruction era, but much of the emphasis had been on the voting rights. Known as the “America's dungeon”, many of the hard-won post-civil war reforms were nullified by the 1940s in the State of Mississippi.⁶² What Camille showed was that Mississippi was still thoroughly segregated in 1969 and this manifested itself very clearly in the school system.⁶³

White parents from Mississippi wrote to John Stennis – a local Democrat state senator who was a staunch segregationist – and expressed their concerns, in sometimes quite vivid terms.

⁶⁰ “Colmer Makes School Appeal”, *Stone County Enterprise*, Sep. 4, 1969, 10. Colmer was one of the politicians who signed the “Southern Manifesto” in 1956 that publicly opposed racial integration in public places.

⁶¹ “78 Stat. 1964, 252–253”, Accessed Aug 19, 2021,

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-78/pdf/STATUTE-78-Pg241.pdf>.

⁶² Dittmer *Local People*, 9-14.

⁶³ Danielson, *After Freedom Summer*, 2-7; Smith, *Camille*, 25 and 28. This question of desegregating schools, and indeed the whole integration debate, went at least as far back as the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, which simply ruled that segregation in any public school was unconstitutional.

According to historian Charles Bolton, one anxious couple suspected that the whole school integration plan was a communist plot to weaken morals in the U.S.,⁶⁴ while a newspaper in Biloxi, Mississippi (with the telling name of *The Dixie Guide*), declared that integration would lead to a nation where children are ‘reared under totalitarian tyranny.’⁶⁵ Similarly, one apprehensive reader of the *Clarion Ledger* wrote in from Chicago to say that ‘forced integration of any kind, is[...] un-natural [sic] [...] immoral[...] illegal[...] and un-constitutional’ [sic] in the eyes of God.⁶⁶ A distinctive armory of colourful rhetorical devices ranging from the Cold War to the divine were thus being employed in defense of segregation.

If Camille gave integrationists and the HEW a concrete context to force the integration process forwards by threatening to cut any ‘misused’ funding, it also provided new impetus for pro-segregationists in Mississippi to get their political views across. In the early days of September, however, the topic of linking federal relief to phasing out segregation suddenly faded from the newspapers. This was no coincidence when we take a certain Senator Stennis into account. As Smith points out in *Hurricane Camille: Histories of a Hurricane* (2011), Stennis forced Nixon to keep integration out of federal funding issues by threatening to otherwise link the issue to other federal funding (this time regarding the President’s foreign and security policy). In short, Stennis had written to Nixon to say he would torpedo negotiations for funding his Safeguard plan – an anti-ballistic system for securing U.S. missile silos – unless federal relief and integration requirements were kept separate.⁶⁷ Nixon had virtually no choice and he ordered the Director of HEW, Robert Finch, to delay the integration deadline to December 1969.⁶⁸ The official reason for postponement was the chaos

⁶⁴ Charles Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of all the Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870–1980* (Jackson, MS: University press of Mississippi, 2007), 110.

⁶⁵ “Fatal Decision”, *The Dixie Guide*, Nov. 1, 1969, 2.

⁶⁶ “Word of The Lord Forbids Integration”, *Clarion-Ledger*, Sep. 3, 1969, 8.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Camille*, 31–34.

⁶⁸ Smith, *Camille*, 32.

caused by Hurricane Camille, but at the federal level, it was clearly the Cold War taking precedence over implementing integration.⁶⁹ Behind all of this, was the political circumstances changed by hurricane Camille. The fact that HEW denied the funding of segregated public schools in Mississippi had much more weight once Camille had created a desperate need for relief. This again agitated Senator Stennis to push the Nixon administration against the wall and decide what was more important: integrated schools or national security.

This keeping issues separate or linking them also divided the press approach. Both the *Clarion Ledger* (CL) and *Hattiesburg American* (HA) systematically covered the topics of school integration and federal crisis relief in separate articles, whereas the *NYT* and *WP* clearly connected them. But by September 1969, the relief discourse had faded at the national level too, and only the integration issue was covered. Stennis and other Mississippian segregationists had won the first round even if the postponement for integration was only some four months: the HEW's plans to use Camille as a catalyst for pushing integration forward in Mississippi had backfired and even Nixon who, according to Charles Bolton, 'had no intention of allowing the South to retain segregated schools at this late date', had to yield.⁷⁰

Hurricane Camille swept up the race issue and dumped it into the center of a debate where many other questions of the day were jostling for attention. Proponents of segregation drew parallels with God's commandments, giving it an almost ritualistic and religious importance.

⁶⁹ Smith, *Camille*, 32–33.

⁷⁰ Bolton, *Hardest Deal*, 108. Schwartz, *Sea of Storms*, 315. Carl A. Zimring has noted, however that Nixon had prejudices towards African American people, and for instance, remained concerned about black and white marriages still in 1973 after the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision which rebutted Nixon's denials of racial intent during the 1968 Presidential election campaign. Carl A. Zimring, *Clean and White: A history of Environmental Racism in the United States* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017), 190.

As Charles Reddin argued in the HA, ‘although we know of no official church creed advocating segregation, prejudice is often an unwritten doctrine on the individual level. Furthermore, many religious schools are established in an effort to dodge federal guidelines on integration’.⁷¹ Meanwhile, as noted earlier, Senator Stennis had connected a Camille-centered racial discourse to that of the Cold War and national security, compelling Nixon to choose between the enforcement of desegregation or national security.⁷² The choice was bitter but in the larger picture easy. As both the evoking of Cold War fears and religious debates show, material changes in prevailing circumstances, created by Hurricane Camille, opened up new possibilities for human agents to utilise their political views and rendered the above-mentioned political maneuvers tempting and potential.

The intense debate about integration in schools probably pushed the issue of disaster relief to one side throughout September and October, but in November it was being discussed again. This led two Democratic senators, Edmund S. Muskie (Maine) and Birch Bayh (Indiana) to propose a Senate hearing and investigation into the issue. On November 22, 1969, Chairman of the Senate Public Works Committee, Jennings Randolph (D) promised to organise a hearing.⁷³ On November 25, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and Southern Regional Council (SRC), both known as being advocates of social justice and racial equality, drew attention to a study accusing the Nixon Government and some private agencies – such as the American Red Cross (ARC) and Small Business Administration (SBA) – of racial discrimination.⁷⁴

⁷¹ “Church-State Separation”, *Hattiesburg American*, Aug. 23, 1969, 2.

⁷² Smith, *Camille*, 32–33.

⁷³ “Bias Hearing Set On Storm Relief”, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 22, 1969, B10.

⁷⁴ “Study Assails U.S. On Hurricane Aid: Neglect of Poor and Racial Discrimination Are Found”, *The New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1969, 47.

The report blamed the federal government for shifting their relief responsibilities onto the shoulders of private agencies, such as the ARC who were not subject to public oversight nor answerable to the federal government.⁷⁵ The report also accused the SBA of racial discrimination in their loan approvals – allegedly 99% of all their loans went to white people.⁷⁶ The message from this was quite clear – aid was far more likely to go to white people. The report also highlighted that President Nixon had recognised the relief council of Governor John Bell Williams as the instrument through which all federal funds were to be directed.⁷⁷ The council consisted entirely of white businessmen and when the Biloxi Chairman of the NAACP criticised this arrangement, State Governor John Bell Williams unapologetically explained how all council members were perfectly aware of the needs of coloured people, and that he did not understand what all the commotion was about.⁷⁸

Southern newspapers also demonstrated their political position by the way they framed their news coverage. For example, the HA described the forthcoming Senate hearing as a means ‘to determine [sic] effectiveness of federal disaster assistance programs’⁷⁹ – poignantly neglecting to mention any allegations of racial discrimination.⁸⁰ This is telling because the actual news item came from the Associated Press, also used by the WP, which in contrast reported quite explicitly that the hearing was about ‘alleged discrimination in the handling of federal aid for victims’.⁸¹ But newspapers in Mississippi and on the Gulf Coast as well as on the East Coast not only assumed a purposeful neutrality in these allegations; they also actively sought to politically influence the result of the hearing, by inciting the popular

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Howard and Zebrowski, *Category 5*, 221.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*; “Camille Aid Hearings to be Held”, *Hattiesburg American*, Nov. 25, 1969, 7.

⁸⁰ “Camille Aid Hearings to be Held”, *Hattiesburg American*, Nov. 25, 1969, 7.

⁸¹ “Bias Hearing Set On Storm Relief”, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 22, 1969, B10.

opinions of readers and politicians involved the issue long before the hearing had even started.

Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland (D), together with State Representative Colmer, denied all charges and reassured HA readers that they had not heard of any kind of discrimination before this report.⁸² In their opinion, the relief effort had demonstrated ‘a spirit of unanimity’ among ‘victims of both races’ and showed how the Afro-American community could work with the ARC and the white leaders of other organisations.⁸³

In some cases, these allegations were met with aggressive reactions which left no doubt about where the local newspaper stood on the matter. For instance, a weekly paper from Biloxi called *The Dixie Guide* tried to turn the situation on its head by accusing Afro-American hurricane victims of discriminating against whites. Clayton Rand, the paper’s publisher, claimed how Afro-American recipients of relief were exploiting the relief effort by getting in line again wearing different clothes so they would get more than one handout – referring to them as ‘looters’ and ‘human parasites’ rather than hurricane victims.⁸⁴

This kind of rhetoric was certainly nothing new and it would not be the last time it was used; in *Recovering Inequality: Hurricane Katrina, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the Aftermath of Disaster*, Steve Kroll-Smith, for instance, points out how in the aftermath of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina people carrying goods (including food and bottled beverages) were dubbed *looters* if black, but *finders* if white.⁸⁵ Similarly, after the cataclysmic disaster of

⁸² “Charges of Discrimination are Denied”, *Hattiesburg American*, Nov. 25, 1969, 7; “Deny Unfair Distribution Coast Funds”, *Clarion-Ledger*, Nov. 26. 1969, 2.

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Clayton Rand, “Spinal Column by Clayton Rand: White Discrimination”, *The Dixie Guide*, Oct. 1, 1969, 12; Clayton Rand, “Spinal Column by Clayton Rand: Human Parasites”, *The Dixie Guide*, Dec. 1, 1969, 13.

⁸⁵ Steve Kroll-Smith, *Recovering Inequality: Hurricane Katrina, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the Aftermath of Disaster* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018), 72–79.

Galveston Hurricane in 1900, which claimed around 8000 lives, black disaster victims were also accused of looting. In this case, martial law was declared and a curfew imposed to protect property and prevent the alleged defamation of corpses.⁸⁶ According to Andy Horowitz, many scholars of disasters would agree that disaster victims are generally not looters, since in a situation where many basic necessities are scarce, cumulating personal wealth does not make any sense. However, this kind of rhetoric appeals to people's desire to see that the status quo is being restored, which in this case meant the segregational social structures of Southern society.⁸⁷

In late December and early January 1970, however, there were more allegations of racial discrimination made in the national press, especially regarding the Emergency Relief Council headed by Governor Williams. Not only was the Council criticised for having white members only – an issue already condemned in the reports of the AFSC and SRC in November – but also for having used the relief funds elsewhere. The *Washington Post* commented on the injustice of plans in Mississippi for a supersonic airport and monorail along the coast when thousands of families still remained homeless,⁸⁸ and the *New York Times* reported that when the Governor's Council did finally feel obliged rather than inclined to add three Afro-American members to their number, it was only after White House recommendations, and the fact that a Senate hearing was about to start.⁸⁹

The NYT also wrote about how the Small Business Administration had denied all allegations of discrimination: Hilary Sandoval (the SBA's head) insisted that only a few Afro-American areas had been hit by Camille and most of the damage had been to property owned by white

⁸⁶ Horowitz, "*The Complete Story of the Galveston Horror*", 66.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ "Gulf Coast Rehabilitation After Camille Sharply Criticised", *The Washington Post*, Dec. 25, 1969, A3; Smith, *Camille*, 46.

⁸⁹ "Mississippi Adds 3 Negroes to Storm Relief Unit", *The New York Times*, Jan. 1, 1970, 43; Howard and Zebrowski, *Category 5*, 221.

people in the immediate coastal area.⁹⁰ Sandoval was thus limiting loan grants to this geographical area, which also happened to be disproportionately white. However, as Ted Steinberg has noted, framing the disaster as purely natural (or geographical) like this, is a way to ‘justify a set of responses that has proved to be [...] socially, if not morally, bankrupt.’⁹¹

In truth, the surge caused by Camille pushed much further inland and damaged property and livelihoods in many Afro-American areas too – in Biloxi, for instance, there were five-foot deep floods.⁹² Sandoval’s crude underestimate of the extent of destruction clearly politicised the crisis further, and is a prime example of how crises are ultimately political phenomena.⁹³ By invoking such material boundary conditions for the situation, Sandoval was trying to provide a solid basis for defending his position on the relief effort before the Senate hearing.

Politics of the Hurricane in the Senate

The Senate hearing about the relief measures taken to contain the crisis started on January 7, 1970. The panel consisted of four senators: the Democrats – Edmund S. Muskie, William B. Spong, and Mike Gravel, plus Robert Dole, a Republican from Kansas and the future majority leader. During the hearing, civil rights leaders, including Aaron Henry, the President of the Mississippi branch of the NAACP, reiterated the same claims: Afro-American hurricane victims had been excluded from the relief effort and discriminated against by the Governor’s Council, the American Red Cross and the Small Business Administration. As expected, Governor Williams, the ARC and the SBA denied all allegations. Williams

⁹⁰ “S.B.A. Insists Few Negro Areas Were Hit by Hurricane Camille”, *The New York Times*, Jan. 1, 1970, 43.

⁹¹ Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), xiv.

⁹² Howard and Zebrowski, *Category 5*, 217–218.

⁹³ Milstein, “Thinking Politically about Crisis”, 142–3.

reiterated the view of the SBA that the hardest hit areas were not those where the majority of the population was Afro-American.⁹⁴

Newspaper reports again revealed the different positions of the local and national press. The NYT and WP headlines focused on the racial bias of relief efforts and Governor Williams' denial, whereas the *Clarion Ledger* headline clearly illustrated the opposing view: 'Negroes Step Up Attacks On Camille Relief Efforts'.⁹⁵

The following day, the dispute looked more specifically at the basis on which relief had been calculated. The Red Cross, for example, declared that their policy based the amount of relief given on the pre-disaster income of hurricane victims. As Mark M. Smith notes, this meant that a family with an annual income of \$39,000 could get a bedroom fully refitted whereas a \$3,000-dollar income family would only get a mattress.⁹⁶ The Hurricane Camille relief effort was, according to Judith A. Howard and Ernest Zebrowski, clearly an attempt to restore the *status quo ante* carried to ridiculous extremes.⁹⁷ Senator Muskie described it as 'a horrible policy',⁹⁸ adding that disasters should instead offer opportunities to help improve people's lives.⁹⁹

The Camille relief effort thus underscored the core of the debate, namely the conceptual struggle over equality or 'equity'. In Deborah Stone's opinion, 'equity is the goal for all sides in a distributive conflict'¹⁰⁰, but this requires people to define exactly what this equity

⁹⁴ "Camille Relief Hearing Opens" *The Washington Post*, Jan. 8, 1970, A11.

⁹⁵ "Governor Williams Denies Race Bias in Hurricane Aid", *The New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1970, 31; "Racial Bias Hindered Relief Effort After Hurricane Camille, Probe Told", *The Washington Post*, Jan. 9, 1970, A10; "Negroes Step Up Attacks On Camille Relief Effort", *Clarion-Ledger* Jan. 10, 1970, 1.

⁹⁶ Smith, *Camille*, 40.

⁹⁷ Howard and Zebrowski, *Category 5*, 217.

⁹⁸ "Muskie to Seek panel To Direct Disaster Aid", *The Washington Post*, Jan. 10, 1970, A4.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2002), 39.

consists of, and how much of it is truly ‘deserved’. In the case of Hurricane Camille, conceptions of equity evidently differed, and there was no consensus about how relief should be distributed. Governor Williams and the ARC in Mississippi wanted a return to the *status quo ante* – not just in economic terms, but also according to ‘racial etiquette’. In other words, because the ARC was offering to rebuild only the same quality of housing destroyed by the hurricane,¹⁰¹ Mississippi officials were helping reestablish a segregated social system. This is a version of rank-based distribution, only the rank ‘happened to be’ based on the hurricane victim’s skin colour.¹⁰² The basis for delivering relief had thus created a crisis of legitimacy: the relief policy in Mississippi was dubious because in most cases it violated the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which unequivocally prohibited federally funded programs to discriminate according to race, colour, or national origin.¹⁰³

From a federal perspective, the catastrophe presented government with a chance to speed up integration in the South; relief could be awarded progressively, as a means of sorely needed redistribution. These views were certainly expressed by the Senate panel, most vocally by Senator Muskie, who described disaster as just ‘one side of the coin’, going on to describe the other as the ‘opportunity [to help] and there is opportunity here.’¹⁰⁴ As *affirmative action*, this kind of policy would clearly hasten desegregation in Mississippi, as Afro-Americans would have got proportionally more relief.¹⁰⁵

Michael Freeden has noted that ‘if political systems habitually do not deliver what they are expected to deliver, their basic support begins to erode’.¹⁰⁶ As we have seen, a strict ‘racial

¹⁰¹ “Muskie to Seek Panel to Direct Disaster Aid”, *The Washington Post*, Jan 10, 1970: A4.

¹⁰² Stone, *Policy Paradox*, 45–46.

¹⁰³ “78 Stat. 1964, pp. 252–253”, Accessed Aug 19, 2021,

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-78/pdf/STATUTE-78-Pg241.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ “Muskie to Seek Panel to Direct Disaster Aid”, *The Washington Post*, Jan 10, 1970, A4.

¹⁰⁵ Stone, *Policy Paradox*, 46–47.

¹⁰⁶ Freeden “Crisis?”, 20.

étiquette' was still very much in evidence throughout Mississippi when Hurricane Camille struck;¹⁰⁷ and though some discriminatory laws had been revoked in the years following the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Nixon's Southern Strategy had slowed things down by letting states have greater control over the extent of federal intrusion.¹⁰⁸ As Bolton points out, white Mississippi leaders had also interpreted the 1954 *Brown Decision* in the loosest possible way by 'zeroing in on the word "deliberate" [...]'¹⁰⁹ in the verdict stating school integration should be delivered 'with all *deliberate* speed'.¹¹⁰ In effect, the Senate hearing was questioning the ability of the State of Mississippi to distribute relief in a non-discriminatory after a natural disaster.

By highlighting the connection between Hurricane Camille and segregation, integrationists in the federal government could show that the discriminatory relief efforts were part of a chronic, long-term crisis surrounding equality in the Deep South. As Kevin Rozario points out, 'dominant political and economic systems have long relied for their authority and legitimacy on the presence or threat of calamities and other crises.'¹¹¹ In this case, the federal government was relying Hurricane Camille to reassert its authority by questioning the ability of state officials to cope with the disaster.

However, the panel also caught the federal government off guard when it ruled that it too had some part to play in failing to adequately deal with the hurricane and its aftermath.¹¹² Despite the government's rhetoric advocating civil rights, and the passing of some of legislation at the national level, Camille had revealed that, in 1969, very little of what had been promised had

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *Camille*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 24–25.

¹⁰⁹ Bolton, *Hardest Deal*, 68.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity*, 2.

¹¹² "U.S. Is Unprepared For Big Disasters", *The Washington Post*, Jan. 11, 1970, A13.

actually been implemented on the ground – the legislation basically had no teeth. Both sides – federal and state – had been unable to deliver what they were expected to deliver, exposing a kind of ‘double crisis of legitimacy’ at both the local and national levels. Nevertheless, the panel placed most of the blame at the local Mississippi level, even though Nixon’s administration had channelled *all* federal relief funds through the Governor’s Emergency Relief Council knowing full well that it was in favor of racial discrimination.¹¹³ While Governor Williams was cast as the main culprit, the panel also noted the need to set up a separate federal agency which would henceforth bear the main responsibility in any future disaster.¹¹⁴

Considering that both Senator Muskie of Maine (the panel’s most vocal member) and Governor Williams were Democrats gives us a glimpse of party politics in the U.S. at this time. Since the 1940s, when the Southern congressmen sometimes referred to as the ‘dixiecrats’ split from the party, the Democratic Party had been hemorrhaging support. This was made particularly clear in the 1968 presidential election when the Democratic vote collapsed in the South, including Mississippi.¹¹⁵ Nixon’s Southern strategy was thus an attempt to bring conservative Southern whites back to the fold who had been scared off by the support of Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson for civil rights.¹¹⁶ In pitching a national Democrat against a Southern Democrat, Camille shows a political party in the midst of trying to ditch its segregationist image.¹¹⁷ This was noted in local papers like the *Clarion Ledger*, for instance, by the journalist Tom Ethridge, who speculated in his

¹¹³ “Mississippi Adds 3 Negroes to Storm Relief Unit”, *The New York Times*, Jan. 1, 1970, 43.

¹¹⁴ The Camille disaster launched the development and eventual establishment of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in 1979. Howard and Zebrowski, *Category 5*, 215; “Muskie to Seek Panel to Direct Disaster Aid”, *The Washington Post*, Jan 10, 1970, A4; “U.S. Is Unprepared For Big Disasters”, *The Washington Post*, Jan. 11, 1970, A13.

¹¹⁵ Nicol Rae, *Southern Democrats* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 47.

¹¹⁶ Smith, *Camille*, 24.

¹¹⁷ Joseph Aistrup, *Southern Strategy Revisited: Republican Top-Down Advancement in the South* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 9.

popular column ‘Mississippi Notebook’ that the whole hearing was perhaps intended to be part of Senator Muskie’s national political campaign.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, Clayton Rand in his ‘Spinal Column’ in the *Dixie Guide* suggested that the NAACP be renamed the ‘National Association for the *Agitation* of Coloured People’, and belittled the hearing by putting it in scare quotes. Rand claimed that ‘every Negro knows they never had it so good’, and that only ‘recently have the Negroes in this area been so well fed and clothed’, clearly scorning the idea that emergency relief should be a form of redistribution.¹¹⁹ As we have argued so far in this article, such claims might not have been made in such a contentious way without the catalyzing effect of Hurricane Camille. As an entanglement of human and non-human agency, the hurricane raised the political temperature – it was not simply a tool or context for action, it played a seminal political role in itself.

Conclusion

The Senate hearing was the culmination of a chain of events initiated by Hurricane Camille. The storm swept through at every political level, from local relief offices in the Gulf Coast area, right up to the Senate and White House. It made it patently clear that segregation in the Southern US was still very much alive and kicking, and showed how little civil rights legislation had in fact been implemented as of 1969 (even if relief efforts were initially seen by national papers in a more positive light). Furthermore, the crisis showed how political and conceptual definitions of equality were intrinsically connected to how relief efforts were to be implemented. When this implementation was found to be lacking, it caused a crisis of legitimacy – the storm laid bare the raw political conflict over racial discrimination which had continued to fester well into the late 1960s. Hurricane Camille also exposed distinct

¹¹⁸ Tom Ethridge, “Mississippi Notebook by Tom Ethridge: Behind The Headlines, Off The Cliff”, *Clarion-Ledger*, Jan. 13, 1970, 6.

¹¹⁹ Clayton Rand, “Spinal Column by Clayton Rand: NAACP”, *The Dixie Guide*, Feb. 1, 1970, 13.

weaknesses in Nixon's Southern Policy. The opportunistic trade-off of votes for Nixon with a weakening in the federal state's governing power meant that anti-segregation laws now had no teeth. Hurricane Camille left a crisis in its wake which made it patently clear just how 'normal' segregation still was, and highlighted the political problems of this normativity in the light of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As Brian Milstein notes, 'crises can be indicative of deeper pathologies in the structure of society',¹²⁰ and, while many of these pathologies were known before Camille, not much attention had been given to them. By raising these issues to a national level, however, Camille made this no longer a political option, which was an important factor in why Camille had so much impact beyond the physical destruction. The focus had been strongly on enhancing the possibilities for African-Americans to take part in politics and, to this end, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was a major achievement. However, the Civil Rights Act had not ceased the need to continue the push towards desegregation in Mississippi, often known as the *primus inter pares* among other Southern States recalcitrant towards Civil Rights of African-Americans. The problems in the disaster relief effort of Camille and the whole issue of school integration in Mississippi highlighted the fact that there was still much to correct.

Like other natural phenomena, hurricanes have a power which extends far beyond their ability to destroy. Hurricane Katrina (2005) is the most recent well-known example of one that had political consequences beyond the wake of destruction it left in New Orleans, but it was clearly not the first. The advantage of an environmental history approach that is sensitive to non-human agency lies in its power to reveal the collective political entanglements between human and non-human actors, which are far more common than much of traditional political history would suggest. As we have argued in this article, by focusing on Hurricane

¹²⁰ Milstein, 'Thinking politically about crisis', 142.

Camille, we are able to grapple not only with events of the past but also with the longer-term changes and continuities that affect the politics of today. Hurricanes are not ahistorical forces; they affect and are affected by the labour and activities of previous generations. Even if a sudden change in the environment – like a hurricane – seems to happen abruptly, the developments that lead up to the changes it reveals may well have been decades in the making; (political) decisions concerning these developments cannot be taken in a vacuum outside the boundaries of these material realities.

The case of Hurricane Camille shows us not just how a natural environmental phenomenon can affect immediate day-to-day politics, but also the importance of critically analyzing how different political actors are, in the long-term, able and willing to manage the risks caused by such non-human forces. Hurricane Camille exposed the most vulnerable parts of society in a way that forced people to react to not only what had happened but what the ensuing crisis revealed about their society – a scenario that is likely to become more common in the future. The strength of environmentally conscious history lies in the fact that it casts a light on exactly how these social, political, and material factors intertwine with each other at any given moment in time. In this respect, it offers tangible options for policy-makers, especially when the challenges of the newly revealed environment call for an equitable and efficient response.