Even Hollywood, so skilled in fantastical depictions of urban apocalypse, would have struggled to imagine the horrors of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. As well as resonating unnervingly with staples of urban doom in popular culture, the tragedy has remorselessly exposed some of the darker sides of metropolitan USA in the Bush era. It has acted as a window revealing how decades of Federal urban disinvestment, exurbanization and White Flight have helped leave large swathes of the central cores of US cities demonised, neglected and increasingly abandoned. The tragic consequences of Bush’s recent efforts to radically reduce the public service efforts of the Federal State in the mitigation of natural catastrophes have emerged in startling focus. Katrina has revealed the deep and troubling politics surrounding varying definitions of the ‘security’ of metropolitan America with uncompromising clarity. Finally, Katrina has underlined the ironies and contradictions that run through the politics and geopolitics of the Bush administrations’ post 9/11 strategy with unprecedented power.

In what follows, I want to examine these points in more detail. First, though, we need to explore exactly why urban catastrophes are so powerful in revealing the often hidden politics and geographies of the cities they devastate. Very simply, this is because, on a rapidly urbanising planet of more than six billion people, “natural” disasters can no longer merely be understood as ‘Acts of God.’ They are never simply the result of the whims of some realm of some ‘Mother Nature’ completely separable from the human
world. Nor are the failures of urban infrastructures which inevitably characterize such disasters ever really purely ‘technical’ events.

Rather, these days, the ‘natural’ world mingles inseparably with the urban world. Increasingly it is impossible to separate the natural world from the man-made one of cities, infrastructures, and technologies: they are made and function together, as a whole. What goes on in cities actually shapes ‘nature’ more and more powerfully: the sourcing of distant food, water, commodities and energy; their transportation to cities; their consumption and the resulting production of wastes; and the sheer physical impact of urban landscapes on the planet’s biosphere.

To enable these flows and processes, and the cities that depend on them, to exist requires vast complexes of infrastructure, public works, and hazard mitigation systems. These, quite literally, are the ‘public realm’ of cities that have traditionally been put in place for collective good. The politics of the city – who gets what, where, and why – is thus heavily shaped by inevitably biased efforts to build infrastructures to remould the nature of cities in certain ways and not others. When catastrophes happen, as with Katrina, these politics are revealed, often in gruesome clarity. This is because the ‘normal’ constructions of nature through cities and infrastructure is suspended or destroyed. If the ‘public realm’ of a city is weak, frayed, or being undermined for any reason, disasters will expose this with unerring clarity.

With this perspective in mind, I want to argue that Katrina and its aftermath powerfully reveal three deep-seated and often hidden features of the politics of US cities under the Bush administration.

‘At War’ With Cities?

Bush’s ‘Revanchist’ Anti-Urbanism

The first is the further entrenchment of a deeply anti-urban political and media culture within the mainstream of US society during Bush’s tenure. Whilst anti-urbanism in US
politics has a long history, the whole neoconservative project that underpins the Bush administration is based on its entrenchment to unprecedented levels. Almost every action of the Bush government has been overwhelmingly concerned with meeting the aspirations and needs -- as well as addressing and manipulating the fears -- of the largely affluent, suburban, exurban and rural Republicans who are the mainstay of Bush’s support. Bush has been spurred on by the deep distaste of many of his Christian Fundamentalist followers for US central Metropolitan Areas – which are widely demonised as sites of decay, ghettoisation, promiscuity, moral pollution and unerring welfare dependency.

Bush has also followed Reagan and his father in taking forward an ideological program to cut-down the perceived ‘Big Government’ policies associated with large-scale public works, welfare programs, and the delivery of mainstream public services. As a result, the Bush administration has done much to dismantle policy programs that they deem to be geared towards US central cities and the people who live there. Neil Smith, anthropologist at CUNY in New York, has labelled such a strategy a ‘revanchist’ urban politics.

Commentators like Mike Davis have even argued that this has amounted to little less than an all-out Republican ‘war on the cities’. Such a strategy has involved a wide variety of interrelated policies. There have been drastic reductions in Federal support for welfare, education and housing programs geared towards poor urban communities. Large-scale tax cuts have been handed out to wealthy exurban elites. Meanwhile, and ironically, a massive expansion of state activity is occurring in the military, corrections, counter-terrorism and ‘homeland security’ spheres. The costs here have spiralled with the growing crises surrounding the invasion, occupation and reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq, eating into ‘civil’ urban programs further.

Bush is pushing through major programmes for privatising much of what is left of public social, health and welfare provision. Much of what exists as an explicitly ‘urban policy’ at the Federal level now emphasise voluntary provision by churches and nonprofits to
help the poor. This is backed up by increasingly punitive, authoritarian and militarized crime and security programs geared largely towards the ‘war’ on drugs, mass incarceration, the criminalisation and demonisation of those in poverty (especially black men), extensions in high-tech surveillance, and the improvements in quality of life for richer, predominantly white urban areas through ‘zero tolerance’ policing (which address the symptoms but not causes of poverty and crime).

Financially, then, the national government reducing its support for the public fabric of US central cities. The result has been increasingly decrepit public infrastructure and deepening deficits amongst urban municipalities and States that are the heartlands of Democrat power. These amounted to over $150 billion in Fiscal Year 2004. The already tenuous position of the largely non-white poor communities in the cores of US cities has thus become even more perilous as absolute and relative levels of poverty have grown. This process has been compounded by the years of economic recession that followed the 2000-2001 ‘dot.com’ crunch.

The combination of antiurban policy and fiscal shifts, and increasingly punitive surveillance and policing, are deeply troubling for central city communities like New Orleans. In many ways, these policy shifts, and the wider representation of inner cities as (largely African American and Latino) sites beyond the (largely white) suburban US norm, work to cast out large tracts of metropolitan America from the increasingly exurban mainstream of Republican politics. The result has been to make such places intensely vulnerable to social and natural catastrophe, and to raise levels of violence and disorder (which, as we have seen in New Orleans, deepen further in response to such catastrophes). “The more the State retreats from meaningful commitment to urban social, welfare and management of balanced, equitable development,” writes Paul Street in the February 2004 issue of Znet Magazine, “the deeper grows the chaos of inner-city life and the more public officials relay on scandalously expensive and inefficient means of urban militarization” to deal with these problems.
Such a discussion raises a central question: why the catastrophic delay by Bush’s Federal Government following the impact of Katrina on New Orleans and the wider Gulf Coast? It is, of course, far too early to detail the precise chain of events surrounding the Bush administration’s catastrophic lack of response. Certainly, the scale of the tragedy must not be underemphasised. Nor was the effort helped by the absence of large chunks of the National Guard who were in Iraq fighting the war. However, following the inevitable inquiries, it is reasonable to expect that the deep-seated anti urbanism of the administration, and its profound antipathy to the ideas of the State as a deliverer of public services for the social good of central US cities in times of need (and especially those populated largely by African Americans), were key factors.

In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, as the vast majority of New Orleans’ affluent, suburban and white communities evacuated themselves north using their private cars after the order to do so, Michael Chertoff, Bush’s Secretary of Homeland Secretary, made a striking remark. Defending his administration’s decision to basically abandon those who failed to leave using their own transport to their own devices, and ignoring the fact that most poor residents stayed because they simply had no means to escape, Chertoff argued that “the critical thing was to get people out of [New Orleans] before the disaster. Some people chose not to obey that order. That was a mistake on their part.”

Such rhetoric, backed by an almost complete absence of organised, public, evacuation procedures, suggested one simple but powerful thing: if you can’t get out of the city (like rich, suburban, auto owners) it’s your fault. End of story. The escapees are normal, respectful, citizens. You’re not. The socially Darwinist, individualist and deeply anti-urban ideology that underpins so much of Bush’s neoconservative world-view are rarely revealed so succinctly.

Who’s ‘Security’ and Security From What?

Secondly, and relatedly, the Katrina disaster revealed the stark politics which surround ‘security’ in post 9/11 United States. A dark irony emerges here. On the one hand, a large
proportion of Bush’s rhetoric since 9/11 has emphasised the fragile exposure of US
urbanites to purported ‘terrorist’ risks. These have been endlessly stressed to legitimise
Bush’s overseas military invasions and massive spending hikes to feed the burgeoning
military-security-corrections complex. On the other hand, US cities’ preparedness for
much more devastating and likely impacts of catastrophic ‘natural’ events like Katrina
have actually been undermined because of fiscal cuts and the construction of the vast
‘homeland security’ and anti-terror drive which tends to ignore or downplay such risks.

The risks of ‘cyberterrorism,’ bioterrorism, chemical terrorism and nuclear ‘dirty bombs’
have been a particularly recurrent feature of Bush’s ‘war on terror’ discourse. On the
back of these, multi-billion dollar investments have been made to further inflate an
emerging complex of correctional-security-military industries (which have very close
personal and financial links to key members of the Bush inner core). Closely linked to the
major defense contractors and universities, they have started to develop and install a
whole range of high-tech antiterrorist sensors and systems in and around strategic US
metropolitan areas. At the same time, these corporations have benefited from the defense,
research and reconstruction budgets associated with the US military’s invasion and
occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ironically, these budgets and programs are all about ‘urban security’. But here they
obsess only with the lucrative business of ‘security’ that involves vast new anti-terrorist
surveillance and ‘urban combat’ systems. The prosaic business of securing increasingly
perilous US cities from a whole range of other, less profitable, risks, is downplayed.
Rather, the aggressive, militarised paradigm spreads to encompass such risks and events.
However, it brings ‘combat operations’ rather than mitigation, and authoritarian heavy-
handedness of the sort seen in Iraq, rather than compassionate humanitarianism towards
fellow citizens. Even in response to Katrina, US Army commanders talked about the need
to launch ‘urban combat’ operations to ‘take back’ the city from ‘insurgents’ who had
bred anarchy and violence.
Much of the funding for Bush’s homeland security drive has been achieved through the cuts in broad-scale urban funding mentioned above. Elsewhere, however, resources have been stripped from essential infrastructure maintenance and other hazards research budgets. Given the age and decrepit nature of much of the infrastructural fabric of metropolitan America – a function of the long-standing neglect of public works in US politics -- such cuts are extremely problematic. They threaten to bring with them a whole slew of increased risks in the face of volatile climatic change, rising temperatures and sea-level rises. But because such risks seem far from the ubiquitous discourses of the ‘war on terror’, they have increasingly been ignored – until Katrina, that is.

Such a policy shift may have directly contributed to the scale and devastation of Katrina. In early 2004 the Federal Government withdrew moneys from levee maintenance around New Orleans to pay for the homeland security and the Iraq war budgets. With levees sinking, local US Army Corps of Engineers actually had to go around local funders begging for small donations to contribute towards maintaining their level against the wider, sinking, city. As the 2006 budgets were drawn up, a $35 million programme of levee maintenance was identified. But scheduled funding for the year was cut from $5.7m to $2.9m which barely covered the salaries of existing engineers. Just as damaging, the costs of the Iraq war led to the abandonment of an important research project tracing the dynamics of hurricane risk, levee maintenance and urban sinking in the New Orleans area.

More worrying still is the saga of the key US government organisation tasked with responding to events like Katrina -- the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). A world-class model of disaster mitigation before 2001, FEMA was a shadow of its former self as Katrina hit because of cuts and cronyism. Expert managers had been replaced by Bush’s friends and allies who had no relevant skills and experience whatsoever. National disaster mitigation plans had been abandoned. Many demoralised experts have left. An increasingly privatized contract culture had replaced core, in-house competences, with localities increasingly competing for central money. And FEMA had been bundled into the Department of Homeland Security behemoth which concentrated
its resources and discussions overwhelmingly towards terrorist risk. The Federal Government increasingly stressed that hazard mitigation and disaster response should be dealt with at State level. But the States, suffering huge deficits because of reduced central support, have been unable to replicate FEMA services.

Whether a full levee maintenance and research program, and a world-class FEMA would have ameliorated Katrina’s devastating impact we will never know. But the broader denial of non-terrorist risks, combined with the wider anti-urbanism and anti-public service ethos of the Bush administration, must surely be contributing to a growing vulnerability of US cities to catastrophic weather and seismic events. The September 2004 words of hazards expert William Waugh, a Professor at Georgia State University, now seem eerily prescient. “If you talk to FEMA people and emergency management people around the country,” he remarked, “people have almost been hoping for a major natural disaster like a hurricane, just to remind the Department of Homeland Security and the Bush administration that there are other big things – even bigger things – than al Qaeda”.

**Oil and Water: Bush’s Central Contradiction**

Which leads neatly to my third point: the fatal contradictions which run through the Bush administration neo-conservative energy and geopolitical strategy post 9/11. Most glaring here is the darkly ironic vicious circle that Katrina may well in due course be shown to exemplify. This vicious circle goes something like this. First, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the Bush administration’s pursuit of unfettered access to, and control over, the World’s diminishing oil supplies, has been the fundamental geopolitical principle driving its ‘war on terror’ and the associated, and extremely bloody, invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

For the Bush administration, ‘energy security’ means controlling these diminishing resources so that the United State’s disproportionate consumption of global oil supplies – 25% of all supplies for 5% of the world’s population – can be continued. The imperative
here is to indefinitely support the exurban lifestyles of Bush’s Republican heartlands – with their large homes, very high levels of consumption, sprawling cityscapes, highway networks, and gas-guzzling SUVs. Such a strategy requires that cheap gas and oil supplies somehow be maintained, even as global supplies diminish and the geopolitics of oil become more volatile and contested.

Hence, either directly or indirectly, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars have allowed US oil companies -- and others keen to trade extracted oil in dollars on the US resource markets -- to try and increase their control of the world’s key remaining reserves in and around the Caspian Sea and Gulf, at the expense of Chinese, Russian and French interests.

The second turn of the circle is that this strategy has been pursued whilst systematically denying the overwhelming volume of serious scientific evidence suggesting that growing fossil fuel consumption is a prime contributor to global warming, sea level rises, the degradation of biodiversity, and intensifying climate chaos. As well as pulling out of the Kyoto accord, Bush has supported a tiny number of scientists, often linked closely with the oil transnationals that he, himself, is closely allied to. Such scientists have been well rewarded to pledge their continued scepticism about the scientific evidence for global warming, in the face of overwhelming hostility from the vast majority of the world’s leading climatologists and oceanographers.

The vicious circle closes in rising sea levels and the increasing intensity of catastrophic storm events like Katrina, not only in the developing world, but in and on the vulnerable and urbanised shores of the United States and other advanced industrial regions. Whilst it not without its detractors, or competing theories, a growing body of highly respected scientific work suggests that global warming is substantially increasing the intensity of tropical storms and hurricanes. Kerry Emanuel, an MIT climatologist, for example, has found that major storms in both the Atlantic and Pacific have increased in both duration and intensity by around 50% since the 1970s. During this time mean global temperatures rose by 0.5 C. The theory here is that the warming of sub-surface ocean water allows
hurricanes to continue heating-up when, previously, cooler subsurface water would have acted as a ‘brake’ moderating hurricane intensity.

Here we confront the inseparable connection between global climate change, apparently small and incremental acts of consumption and expectation, and the very structure and shape of contemporary urban civilisations. Perhaps the most powerful microcosm of this vicious circle in action comes from some stories about survivors of Katrina. Isolated, powerless, and abandoned in New Orleans flooding streets, in unbearable heat, many kept themselves cool by sitting in air-conditioned cars with engines on – until, of course, their gas ran out. Amidst a storm probably made more intense by global warming, cars thus provide islands of cool whilst throwing out more heat and more greenhouse gases…

As with the lines of abandoned SUVs at the commuter rail stations in New England and New Jersey on the evening of 9/11, it doesn’t take long for crises in metropolitan America and the rest of the urbanised world to connect, through the automobilised landscapes of sprawl, to the global geopolitics of oil. This happens as the ‘peak’ of world oil supplies is reached, and as intensifying global warming is paralleled by a transnational struggle to exploit and control remaining resources – apparently, at almost any cost.

**Cities Under Siege?**

I have attempted to show how the Katrina disaster, as with all urban catastrophes, has unerringly peeled away at the visible surface of the (US) city to reveal often the hidden and deep realities beneath. Such a perspective demonstrates that US central cities are, in a sense, currently under siege, trapped as they are between an extremely hostile national polity, which seeks to marginalise them from the resources, recognition, and normalisation that they deserve, and the burgeoning threats of climate change and global warming that this administration is simultaneously denying and recklessly encouraging.

More hopefully, however, perhaps Katrina may galvanise a political shift away from revanchist urbanism, aggressive unilateral militarism, and an ideological denial of urban
public realms. Perhaps the legacy of Katrina might point to concrete ways in which US cities can take their rightful place at the centre of US politics – not as sites seen to house little but decay and despair from which all who can must flee, but as generators of hope, wealth, sustainability, and, who knows, maybe even justice.

As the horrifying impacts of the disaster are slowly revealed, however, to even begin to imagine how such transformations might be possible entails a very powerful degree of optimism indeed. But, here, at least, history offers some encouragement. For the many urban catastrophies of the past have often revealed a startling resilience that is fundamental to the dynamics of cities. Such events have commonly acted as startling motors of renewal, renaissance, reimagination, and dramatic political change. Above all, in many cases urban catastrophies have provided golden opportunities to rework the politics of wider societies so that such traumas are less likely to happen again. Let’s hope that Katrina provides one more example of this.

Stephen Graham is Professor of Human Geography at Durham University in the UK. He is co-author of *Telecommunications and the City* and *Splintering Urbanism* and Editor of *The Cyercities Reader* and *Cities, War and Terrorism.*