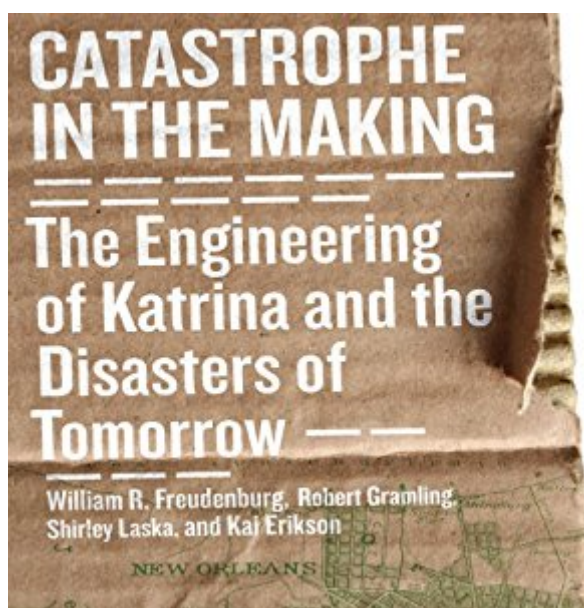




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# Catastrophe In The Making: The Engineering Of Katrina And The Disasters Of Tomorrow



## Synopsis

When houses are flattened, towns submerged, and people stranded without electricity or even food, we attribute the suffering to "natural disasters" or "acts of God." But what if they're neither? What if we, as a society, are bringing these catastrophes on ourselves? That's the provocative theory of *Catastrophe in the Making*, the first audiobook to recognize Hurricane Katrina not as a "perfect storm," but a tragedy of our own making - and one that could become commonplace. The authors, one a longtime New Orleans resident, argue that breached levees and sloppy emergency response are just the most obvious examples of government failure. The true problem is more deeply rooted and insidious, and stretches far beyond the Gulf Coast. Based on the false promise of widespread prosperity, communities across the U.S. have embraced all brands of "economic development" at all costs. In Louisiana, that meant development interests turning wetlands into shipping lanes. By replacing a natural buffer against storm surges with a 75-mile long, obsolete canal that cost hundreds of millions of dollars, they guided the hurricane into the heart of New Orleans and adjacent communities. The authors reveal why, despite their geographic differences, California and Missouri are building - quite literally - toward similar destruction. Too often, the U.S. "growth machine" generates wealth for a few and misery for many. Drawing lessons from the most expensive "natural" disaster in American history, *Catastrophe in the Making* tells why thoughtless development comes at a price we can ill afford.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

There must be a couple dozen books out there with "Katrina" in their titles, but almost all of them have focused on how awful things were and/or on how mother Nature attacked New Orleans. This is the first book to put the disaster in a broader context. It argues that Hurricane Katrina wasn't just a case where humans were attacked by nature, but a case where (a small number of) humans first did significant damage to nature -- with consequences that came back to haunt us all. As the book spells out, New Orleans isn't a coastal city like London or New York -- it was founded 120 river miles from the Gulf of Mexico. One consequence was that, for centuries, the city was protected by two layers of defense -- a thin ring of levees and floodwalls, constructed by humans, and a broad band of coastal wetlands, "constructed" by nature. The book argues persuasively that if another storm exactly like Katrina had hit the city just 40 years earlier -- as did two other equally nasty hurricanes, Betsy and Camille -- it wouldn't have created anything like Katrina's damage. In that last 40 years, unfortunately, so-called "economic development" projects managed to leave the wetlands in shreds. Once Katrina hit, New Orleans was, as well. There are some lessons there. A particularly notable example is provided by what may be the dumbest pork-barrel project that most of us have never heard of: The Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, or MRGO, generally called either "Mr. Go" or "the hurricane highway." Thanks to the same U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that built the more famous floodwalls, we generous American taxpayers have managed to pour the better part of a billion dollars into this boondoggle, which is basically just a 75-mile long ditch, parallel to those last 120 miles of the Mississippi River. Just the initial excavation required the moving of more dirt than did building the Panama Canal, but that was only the beginning. Salt water poured into the ditch with every high tide, killing the fresh-water plants that formerly held together the fragile wetland soils -- after which more soil slumped into the channel, after which the Corps would "invest" more taxpayer dollars into dredging the channel again, making it still wider, after which even more salt water would pour in, doing still more damage. That, by the way, is also one of the key reasons why, if you've flown into the New Orleans airport in recent years, you've seen so many dead trees. The important ones are the cypress trees, which are some of the most effective barriers against hurricane storm surges ever invented by nature. They can live for 700 years under "normal" conditions, but they can't live for 700 minutes under salt water. Most of the salt water that killed them was delivered by MRGO. But it gets worse. MRGO was built in the name of "economic development," with its backers claiming that it would be as busy as the Los Angeles freeways during rush hour. In fact, it was practically obsolete by the time it was finished. It never saw all that much use, and by the last full year before Katrina struck -- a year in which we helpful taxpayers poured yet another \$19 million into dredging it, once again -- MRGO was used for less than a dozen round trips by ships that

actually needed any of that dredging. That amounts to a taxpayer subsidy of over \$1.5 million per round trip, or over \$10,000 per ship mile -- mostly for carrying "high value" cargo such as scrap metal and frozen chickens. It would have been cheaper -- and probably better for the economy of New Orleans -- if we had just sent an Air Force helicopter over the city to dump out a big stack of \$100 bills. Still, as the book points out, this is not a pattern that's limited to New Orleans: Elsewhere, as well, surprisingly high levels of environmental damage are done in the name of so-called "economic development" projects that actually do about as much for the economy as did the pirate, Jean Lafitte: A few people make out like bandits, but the rest of us are more likely to get stuck with the bills -- and that's before considering the human or the natural costs of all the damage being done to the environment. At the time when the project was built, environmental scientists did warn about the project's environmental impacts, but they were largely ignored. That may not be all that surprising, but what I did find surprising is that no one seems to have challenged the claims that this boondoggle would be "good for the economy." This book suggests that one of the reasons may have to do with unanticipated consequences of advances in science and technology: The project might have helped the economy, at least a bit, if it had been built when it was first seriously proposed (in the early 1920s), but as such projects get bigger, more and more time is required to line up the political support, to obtain (taxpayer) funds, and then to build them. In the case of MRGO, that whole process took almost half of a century, with the last 10 of those years being taken up in the construction phase alone. The net effect was that not even the project's backers may have realized that they were making bogus claims, and tragically, that the project was effectively obsolete by the time it was completed. Unfortunately, the growth in our capacity to "do" such severe environmental damage seems to have outstripped the growth in our capacity to "undo" the same kind of damage. As is the case elsewhere -- from the Florida Everglades to western dams -- we seem to have created what the book calls a "technological Peter Principle": Our scientific and technological competence seems to have risen to a level where we have become incompetent to deal with some of the worst consequences of our own mistakes. This book, in short, is spectacular. Its argument is brilliant, and although the scholarship is impeccable -- there are about as many footnotes as there are pages, nearly 200 -- they never get in the way of the writing, which is remarkably good. Charles Perrow, the author of *Normal Accidents*, says on the back cover that he was "amazed at the quality of the writing," which often left him "breathless," and I couldn't agree more. This is by far the best book I've read this year, and it's one of the best I've ever seen. Save on shipping by buying one copy for yourself and another for your best friend -- you won't want to give away your copy once you've read it.

This is an amazing book! The author skillfully weaves a story about a "natural" disaster, Hurricane Katrina, into a fascinating cautionary tale for all of us. Was this just an unfortunate act of nature, or did man have a large part in determining what actually happened? Don't expect another book documenting FEMA's failures. They were there, for sure, but the author makes the very convincing point that "Growth" policies that had been taking place for decades before this storm hit had virtually guaranteed that a catastrophe like this was bound to happen. Environmental buffers that for centuries had protected the city from the effects of similar storms had been eliminated or severely compromised. A canal designed to transport prosperity in the form of increased shipping to New Orleans (but in reality scarcely ever used!) served to channel the storm surge directly to the downtown area. New Orleans, for all intents and purposes, had been placed in the middle of a large, man-made Bulls-eye, waiting for the inevitable. The author goes further, pointing out similar man-made "Improvements" in other areas of the country that have placed other large metropolitan areas directly in harm's way should the right combination of atmospheric conditions come together. If these occur, will we then, once more wring our hands at the unfairness of another "Natural Disaster" or will we realize that these UN-Natural disasters are more of our own doing than we would like to believe? A riveting story, and a chilling warning for us all! You will never forget this book.

This is an excellent book that explores the long history of SE Louisiana and the multitude of decisions made by power brokers that changed the geography of the area. The Katrina disaster was worse because of these changes. The past and current process of local and national funding for development is important to understand the consequences of natural events. A very interesting read.

It's a very instructive book. Not only Katrina, but also many "natural disaster" could be attributed to the shortsighted human behavior. But I hope there could be more diagram and map to illustrate to routine of Katrina or the location of New Orleans.

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