

Preface

The 1960s was a long decade of assassinations, race riots, environmental disasters, and war, all beamed directly into American living rooms. The Cold War loomed in the shadows, threatening at any moment to flare into a nuclear Armageddon. The Supreme Court was transforming race relations and gender roles. Congress passed civil rights legislation over the fierce opposition of many southern senators. An iconoclastic generation of youth shocked its elders. Traditional boundaries and social categories were being upset in every corner of American life.

In the face of these changes, many rural American communities receded into themselves. Indeed, some of these regions, particularly in the South, had never been particularly well-connected to the outside world in the first place. Many preached a kind of home-grown isolationism, often expressed in the language of American self-reliance and a wary opposition to centralized government.

Then, in August 1969, Mother Nature yanked three such regions—Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana; the Mississippi Gulf Coast; and Nelson County, Virginia—sharply out of their isolation by delivering the most powerful hurricane to strike the American mainland in recorded history. Camille, as the storm was called, had the highest sustained winds—sea-level measurements topped out at 172 miles per hour, but winds as high as 201 miles per hour were extrapolated from aircraft data—of any hurricane ever to strike the United States. Her storm surge—officially measured at 24.6 feet inside a surviving structure, but almost certainly reaching more than 28 feet—also set a record, as did the thirty-two inches of rain she dumped on rural Virginia in just six hours. The Virginia deluge triggered some 150 landslides and gen-

erated floods of almost Biblical proportions. The memory of these events was so terrible that, almost forty years later, many long-term residents of the stricken regions still marked time in terms of “before Camille” and “after Camille.”

It was almost much worse. Camille turned north in time to narrowly miss New Orleans. Even so, hundreds of people were killed, and thousands more lost everything they had. Recovery of the stricken communities took decades. In the summer of 2005, bare concrete foundation slabs—vestiges of Camille—still dotted many Gulf Coast neighborhoods.

While geographic, sociopolitical, and cultural factors affect the impact of every disaster, such considerations took on even more significance than usual in the aftermath of Camille. As the enormity of the catastrophe sank in, local officials were forced to temper their mistrust of outsiders and accept at least some offers of federal assistance. This change in attitudes was not universal, nor was it equally effective across the board. Even as Camille laid bare the myth of rural self-reliance and opened these once-isolated regions to outside help, the old culture of individualism still claimed justification in the inevitable glitches of the recovery effort.

Although individual initiatives indeed proved necessary, they were not a sufficient response to the overwhelming challenges. It takes more than a cluster of individuals, more even than a local community, to successfully respond to nature on a rampage. And so Camille secured, for the next three decades, Washington’s role in providing disaster mitigation and relief in an increasingly complex society. The result was a raft of new federal programs, improvements in emergency management planning (eventually leading to the creation of FEMA), increased support for scientific and engineering research (resulting in new building codes and the adoption of the Saffir-Simpson potential damage scale, among other innovations), and a clearer understanding of the psychosocial consequences of disaster trauma.

Then, just as we were completing this book in August 2005, nearly 90,000 square miles of the central Gulf coast were devastated by another monster hurricane. Katrina, an enormous Category 4 storm,

was immediately dubbed by some old-timers as “Camille’s evil daughter.”

Katrina was in many respects a replay of Camille, which had made essentially the same landfall back in 1969. And while the historic catastrophe of August 1969 had supposedly awakened everyone—Congress, meteorologists, civil engineers, relief workers, and emergency response specialists—to the multifaceted complexities of disaster management, many of the lessons learned from that experience about the hard work of disaster preparedness, evacuation, and emergency response seemed to have been forgotten.

In response to the events of August and September 2005, we have revised the concluding chapter of this book to speak to a few of the parallels between the two hurricanes. But we have purposely limited our analysis of the response to Katrina, on the assumption that it will take several years to sort out responsibility for the tragic blunders of that effort. The main focus in the pages that follow is Camille, and the many lessons learned—some, sadly, later unlearned—from that terrible storm. We have decided to let the story of Camille speak for itself, essentially as we wrote it prior to the ravages of Katrina. We leave it to you, the informed reader, to draw your own conclusions.