

Letter From Miami

by Alan R. Turin

The Unreported Story of Hurricane Andrew



On August 24, 1992, shortly after 3 A.M., Hurricane Andrew hit the coast at Miami, in South Dade County, Florida. A "Category Four" hurricane on the Saper-Simpson Hurricane Scale, Andrew struck with 145 m.p.h. winds, making it the worst hurricane to hit Miami since 1926. In fact, this was the worst hurricane to hit a major American city in recorded history. It was the fifth hurricane I've experienced.

The physical destruction caused by the storm has been well and widely documented, but it is the response of the people in the Miami area to Andrew that now bears attention. There have been acts of great decency, examples of good will, and more than a few instances of heroics. All of this is nourishment for the soul. But there have also been many acts of great *indecent* and *ill* will that have not been reported, let alone discussed.

The one thing that linked Miami to Western civilization last August 23, the day before the storm, was electricity. Electricity was a weak reed. The next day Miami wallowed in barbarity. We were suddenly in the Third World. Though legally a part of the United States, we were no longer *of* the United States.

Miami is a city of transients. It started out less than a century ago as a winter resort for Yankees. First were the retirees from New York and New Jersey. Then came the Cubans in the 1960's. Currently it is the Haitians. After Castro but before now, Miami was an amalgam of Central and South Americans. In the last decade we have had four separate sets of race riots.

Perhaps because of these quickening waves of immigrants, Miami has never provided a sense of community for any one generation. We are not a Southern town, nor a Yankee enclave. We are not

as civil as a U.N. cocktail party, but we are more than a couple of bomb blasts better than Beirut. Take away a booming economy, and things get ugly. Take away electricity, and things get vile.

The looting was a good measure of the vileness. A Jamaican food store, one block from my home, was looted the morning of the storm. It is one block from, and in direct sight of, the North Miami police station. Looters struck in South Dade while the wind was still at gale force. The police warned looters to stay away, sometimes even arresting them. Since arrest itself is hardly a deterrent in the best of times, it never stopped the looting after the storm. At my house we were without electricity for nearly seven days. A month later, 70,000 households were still without power. The neighborhoods with electricity resembled suburban America. Those without were in the Third World.

There were no shoot-to-kill orders issued by any of the authorities. In the old days, when natural disasters occurred, local governments knew that their capabilities to maintain order would be strained. Due to their preoccupation with the disaster at hand, officials would warn looters that they would be shot on sight. Since the disaster would overwhelm civil society's capacity to maintain a complete system of criminal justice, they set up an abbreviated version. This achieved simultaneously two salutary goals: first, it preserved some semblance of normalcy with reduced police; and second, dead looters would "encourage *les autres*." Friends of a free society, being suspicious of the state, don't cotton to these notions. But since such actions were tied to natural calamities, they did not become occasions for state aggrandizement.

The current thinking in Miami is that the police exist to protect lives, not property. Shooting looters, therefore, would mean placing a higher value on property than on human life. Unfortunately, when looters find the pickings easy and the restraints off, they lose other brakes on their antisocial impulses. The refusal to shoot looters only increased the disorder. Relief convoys were shot at and hijacked en route to disaster areas.

The looting decreased as neighborhoods reentered civilization—*i.e.*, got their electricity back. But what ulti-

mately stopped the looting was a *dead* looter. From the beginning, people began toting guns and putting up warning signs. ("You loot, we shoot.") Gun-control rules were widely violated, especially the state-mandated three-day waiting period. Neighborhoods prepared to protect themselves avoided the worst of the looters.

On one occasion a group of thugs in a stolen van drove up to a home whose owner was out front speaking to an insurance adjuster. The homeowner had posted a sign warning looters to stay away. Thug number one jumped out and fired at the warning sign (this is now known as his "last mistake"). The homeowner fired his .357 magnum at less than ten feet and hit thug number one in the head. Thugs number two and three drove off and abandoned the van; thug number one was dead. News of the event spread across the area as a wonderful bright spot to counter recent travails. The looting stopped. Never had so many owed so much to one shot heard 'round the town.

Within a week of the hurricane, Governor "Walkin' Lawton" Chiles had reversed his prior decision not to ask for federal help in the form of the U.S. Army. Many soldiers were sent, including the Army's 82nd Airborne. The 82nd has in the last ten years seen a lot of military action. Grenada in 1983. Panama in 1989. Most recently, in our war with Iraq. Here in Miami, one squad on a search-and-rescue mission was almost disarmed by a criminal gang. The gang knew—as did the rest of Miami, thanks to the thoughtful reporters of the *Miami Herald*—that the Army had been sent on patrols with weapons but without ammunition. A gang accosted this squad and demanded their M-16s and other sidearms. The situation was tense. The officer in charge refused to disarm and eventually talked the gang out of the hand-over. It seems this officer lied to the gang and said the squad really *did* have ammunition and would use it to defend itself. It was a bluff that worked. After the incident the press no longer advertised the ammunition status of the assigned soldiery. Rumor has it that the Army quietly issued ammunition.

My own forays into the War Zone, as we called the area of total destruction,

were as a volunteer attorney. The American Bar Association is contracted to provide free legal advice to victims of disasters, and when the call for assistance went out locally, four hundred of us responded. I spent days under tents set up by the U. S. Army giving *pro bono* legal help. Most of my work involved landlord-tenant law; half of my clients were landlords trying to determine their responsibilities, the other half were tenants trying to determine the same thing.

The strangest legal question I handled was from a fellow who had hot-wired his neighbor's automobile. He was using it and wondering about the legal consequences. He also wanted to know if he could buy the car from its owner. Now, auto theft is a serious felony. In Miami you might actually get incarcerated for six months or more, if you do it enough times. The neighbor's house was utterly destroyed, and he had left his car behind. My "client" had been going to a local hospital to get a fracture reset and taking along a different neighbor for something else, when his car caught a branch that ripped out its tail pipe and gas tank. The two literally limped back home and then hot-wired the neighbor's car. Since then the fellow had been using it to shuttle around for ice, medicine, and food. He had told the auto owner's son of this and was informed that the dad would be back in two weeks.

I drafted a note for him to offer to buy the car. I remarked that if these facts were true, he ran little risk of prosecution. I asked him where he was going now. I had told him to get to the medical station down the road to take care of the hatchet wound to his hand. (Don't ask.) He promised he would get to the aid station, but he was on his way north to Kendall to find a working car wash. He wanted to return the car clean!

Down on South Dixie Highway there is a tourist attraction, the Monkey Jungle. People go around in screened-over paths, while monkeys roam about freely. Hurricane Andrew destroyed the place, whereupon the monkeys fled into the surrounding area.

South Dade County is farm country. A lady who owns a farm and nursery there has a business selling chutney, canned fruits, preserves, and the like. Her place was badly damaged. As she put it to the press, the winds came and flattened everything. Then it was dark

and silent. Power was out, phone lines down. A week passed with no change in the situation. Then the monkeys, wild with hunger, attacked her home. They fell upon the walls, roof, and windows. Screaming and pillaging the remnants of her adjacent shop, they tore through broken shelves and jars to get at the food. She was terrified by the experience, but a sense of the ludicrousness of the whole incident never left her. It was some kind of horrible, terrifying comedy.

The differences between the Miami of today and the one that experienced the hurricanes of the 1960's are depressing to contemplate. We lost power then, but not civilization. In 1964, my mother, sister, and I moved into our Miami home the very day Hurricane Cleo hit. We had no electricity for 17 days. We lined up for ice and gasoline. We cooked with my grandparents' gas stove. We bathed at a friend's house that had a gas water heater. Though I was only seven years old, I have a good memory for times past and I don't recall any massive looting going on. Hurricane Andrew blew through a city different from the one I grew up in. Gone was a respect for property. Gone was a fear of arrest or of being shot for looting. Not gone, exactly, but certainly weakened was a notion of self-sufficiency. Though much more prosperous than twenty years ago, the people of Miami are spiritually impoverished and downright helpless.

On the night of the storm, a local television weatherman, Brian Norcross, made a blunt point on the air. He said, "Folks, in a few hours, firefighters and police will be pulled off the streets. Nothing will be working very well for many weeks. You are going to be on your own. Help will *not* be a phone call away." What is significant is not the message itself, but that the message had to be given at all. The message is one that conservatives—no, that anybody with sense—would know and understand. But this time, it had to be given. And explained. And repeated. And re-explained. And translated into Spanish, Creole, and something less than the Queen's English. The Miami devastated by Hurricane Andrew was not the Miami that had persevered the storms of yesteryear.

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Letter From Puerto Rico

by Geoffrey Wagner

An Artful Success



Half a century ago Puerto Rico was the poorest country in the West, including Haiti. At that time I was living penuriously in what was to become New York's Spanish Harlem, then the preserve of Italian immigrants. This Little Italy of the Upper East Side was virtually ruled by the colorful communist Congressman Vito Marcantonio, my next-door neighbor. From here I was able to monitor the bias and bigotry directed against the incoming Puerto Ricans by the fly-by-night mayors of the period—"Fugitive Bill" O'Dwyer (who coined the term "milk-bottle thieves" to describe the new immigrants) and Vincent Impellitteri—as well as the local bank managers, numbers-racket "civics clubs," and street-side vendors. All this has altered for the better, excepting perhaps the fish markets, then located under the picturesque old El.

In Puerto Rico Hispanics have now created, out of the highest population density in the Caribbean and few natural resources, a model community (for the area) with a standard of living way above that of neighboring countries. The immaculate new American Airlines hub created in the tatty old Luis Muñoz Marín Airport is outstanding testimony to investor confidence. For Puerto Rico has not gone to sleep on the laurels of tourism, with all its ancillary attractions—the vast resort hotels of Condado and Isla Verde, the famous phosphorescent bay at Parguera, the Camuy cave park, the multiple casinos; it has created a back-up manufacturing infrastructure whose share of per-capita gross domestic product ranks higher than any on mainland America, let alone that of adjacent Jamaica, lagging ten times behind and repeatedly forced into devaluations.

This infrastructure has provided a buffer against the fragility of those Caribbean economies that rely so heavily, often uniquely, on that fickle jade called tourism. Once prosperous Barbados, for instance, is today swallowing the kill-or-cure medicine of the IMF,