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When The Saints Don't Go Marching In

E.J. Graff**September 06, 2005**

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E.J. Graff, a Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center resident scholar, most recently collaborated with former Massachusetts Lt. Gov. Evelyn Murphy on her book Getting Even: Why Women Still Don't Get Paid Like Men--And What To Do About It, newly published by Simon & Schuster. Graff is currently working on a book about American moral values.

You want moral values? This government doesn't have them. That lack is visible in the fetid Third-World swamp we've all been watching in horror. What we're watching is not the consequence of a corrupt government or even an incompetent government. It is the consequence of an immoral government.

Morals, in case Bush et al. have forgotten, grow from the central commandment to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Caring for others in extreme distress is the most basic tenet of morality. Doing so requires a decision to act. Our federal government decided instead to abandon those in need.

Yes, decided. Bush's government decided—in advance—not to protect an American city from an inevitable disaster, despite years of warnings from tediously fact-based sources. Our government decided—in advance—to [cut the funding](#) that the New Orleans Corps of Engineers had requested to forestall precisely this flood.

Our government decided—in advance—to suck the guts from the science-based [Office of Technology Assessment](#), which had been writing flood plans and other useful instruments for the nation's collective good. Our government decided—in advance—to [eviscerate funding and staffing for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA](#), the agency charged with planning for precisely this kind of disaster.

Our government decided—in advance and for an appalling five days afterwards—not to send in buses, trucks, ships or National Guard convoys to evacuate [people so poor they did not have \\$20 for a bus ticket out or a credit card to pay for a motel room when they arrived somewhere](#). Our government decided not to evacuate people so sick that they lay immobile in [nursing homes](#) or hospitals, or whose dementia or autism or psychosis deprived them of the sense or ability to get out.

Our president and his government decided that the worst-ever American natural disaster did not require their full attention or return from vacation. They decided not to fly to the disaster to show that the entire United States was standing with Katrina's victims, or to physically serve citizens in their hour of most extreme need.

Ours has shown itself to be a government willing to turn its back on the most basic of American moral values: banding together to take care of each other in ways that no one of us can do alone. Yes, it's a commandment central to the Abrahamic traditions, embedded deeply in Deuteronomy's and the prophets' injunctions to care for poor, the needy, the widows and orphans, in Jesus's tale of the Good Samaritan, or in Islam's mandatory charitable contributions to the poor. But it's also a moral commandment for any American—any human being—with a heart.

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Katrina and its aftermath show us the gaping moral holes in the far-right's ideology of shrinking government to the size that it can be [drowned in a bathtub](#), replacing government with personal responsibility. No one person could have done in New Orleans what we expect government to do. No wealthy beneficent individual could have restored those levees or stopped those hurricane-protective wetlands from being turned into private developments. No Salvation Army corps could have checked the census, the tax rolls, the nursing home lists, and the hospital registries to assess who needed to get out, or could have sent in the appropriate military convoys to accomplish that mandatory evacuation. No church group could have sent in a militia to distribute food and keep order as desperation increased. No charitable foundation could now be planning and rebuilding what's so tediously called "infrastructure"—roads, pumping stations, bridges, power stations—or disinfecting an entire city swamped with raw sewage and toxic chemicals. No generous corporation—not even the wealthy Wal-Mart—could systematically check the spread of rodents, snakes, feral dogs, mosquitoes, and other pests that will, in coming months, threaten public health.

That's why we assign all those moral functions to government. That's why we ask a legislature to assess our shared needs. That's why we elect an executive to administer essential programs. That's why we pay taxes: to fund all the boring and necessary amenities and protections that we call "civilization."

There are some things we can only accomplish together, as a nation, across all the lines that divide us: religion, race, ethnicity, native language, gender, sexual orientation and all the rest. Only by working together, through the agent we call "government," can we find and deploy the necessary information, equipment, experts, managers, and everything else needed to fulfill the moral commandment that most of us, watching this past week, yearned so desperately to see satisfied: Prevent what suffering can be prevented, and relieve it as quickly as possible when it inevitably arrives.

So what's the right phrase to describe what many of us are feeling as we've watched this preventable disaster unfold in front of us? To describe what even [blow-dried television reporters and anchors](#) are giving voice to in the face of official callousness and neglect?

It's not just shock and shame that this can happen in America. This is genuine moral outrage, righteous indignation at how our fellow citizens have been failed. Don't let that outrage fade into complacency. We have a moral responsibility to grab hold of our government and force it to serve its citizens once again.