

Fret Over the Dog? Kids Need Help First
Steve Lopez
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Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional Journalists Award for national magazines.



He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

Having learned firsthand in the Gulf states last week that it might not be wise for us to count on much help from the feds when the Big One hits, I was all set to look into California's disaster preparedness. But then I made the mistake of checking the mailbag.

With thousands of human beings presumed dead in Louisiana and environs, the majority of my e-mail expressed heartfelt concern for stranded pets. I was smacked with a rolled-up newspaper by several readers for failing to rescue a dog that swam toward my boat in contaminated water just after I'd passed a floating human corpse in New Orleans.

My apologies, and no, I don't know what happened to the dog. Although I'm a dog lover, it didn't seem practical or prudent to pursue the matter in a neighborhood where the water reached the tops of stop signs and some people were still stranded in their homes.

As for all of you who called or e-mailed defending President Bush's handling of Hurricane Katrina, I have a suggestion:

Get off the sofa, go into the kitchen for some ice water, and throw it on your face.

In other words, wake up, for God's sake.

A number of readers said Bush had warned people to evacuate before Katrina hit but that the president couldn't respond more quickly after landfall because the governor of Louisiana initially didn't want the federal government's help.

Really? It was the biggest natural disaster in history, and the president of the United States was taking orders from a governor?

"I've read my last Steve Lopez column and you won't be receiving my rants anymore," wrote Paul Knopick. "Your gratuitous slurs on President Bush today was [sic] the old last straw."

Gratuitous? I thought gratuitous meant uncalled for.

"I suppose the state and local politicians share no responsibility," said an e-mail from

Dickandpat.

Dear Dickandpat:

That's not quite the full extent of what I wrote, but let me clarify:

Yes, the Democratic governor of Louisiana (who doesn't appear

competent to handle a flooded basement, let alone a flooded state) and the Democratic mayor of New Orleans (who gave conflicting advice to stranded residents) share plenty of blame for colossal failures that contributed to the loss of life.

But it was quite obvious, early on, that this was a multi-state disaster like none we'd ever seen before. So it might have been nice if Bush had seen fit to take charge, as he did when a series of hurricanes blasted the swing state of Florida - where his brother is governor - just before the 2004 presidential election.

Katrina found Bush on an extended vacation in Texas, and Vice President Dick Cheney didn't show any inclination to return from his vacation either. After lollygagging for a couple of days in Arizona and California, Bush used the disaster to make a political point even as bodies floated like balloons through New Orleans, calling for a public and private rebuilding effort.

Can no-bid contracts be far behind?

When Bush finally showed up in the disaster zone Sept. 2, I half expected him to check out the fishing. A few days later, his mother visited the Houston Astrodome and said the evacuees - many of whom lost everything and were still searching for lost relatives - seemed to be fine.

They "were underprivileged anyway," Barbara Bush said, "so this is working out well for them."

What next? Do we find that the Bush twins have been jet skiing New Orleans' east side in search of a bar that's open for business?

Federal Emergency Management Agency boss Mike Brown - or "Brownie," as the president called him when praising him early on for a job well done in New Orleans - was summoned to the nation's capital Friday amid allegations that he had exaggerated his disaster relief experience.

If his head is the first to roll, he may need one of those cots that finally showed up at the Astrodome. Actually, I'd like to get back to Barbara Bush, who made a point worth considering.

If thousands of people had lived in such crummy conditions that they're better off at an evacuation shelter, she might want to mention this to her son. It's only the latest evidence of a social collapse in an economy that doesn't float everyone's boat, to use a bad but irresistible pun.

"We saw a huge population of very poor people who were underinsured and in poor health" even before Katrina hit, said Lynn McMorris, a nurse who worked in the triage unit at the New Orleans airport for a week before moving over to the Cajundome, an evacuation center in Lafayette, La.

"We saw chronic renal failure, people who required dialysis, poorly managed diabetics, lots of hypertension."

McMorris also saw people who hadn't visited a dentist in years, and many of the children she treated had never received vaccinations.

"At the Cajundome," she said, "we were trying to pull out the youngest kids who had no real protection against disease because they hadn't developed good immune systems."

This sounds like lots of places in the country, doesn't it? Sounds particularly like Los Angeles County, where class divisions run as deep as fault lines, a quarter of the residents are uninsured and the road out of poverty might as well be flooded.

And you know what was on the agenda in Washington before Katrina hit, right? More tax cuts at the highest income levels and more Medicaid cuts.

"I work all over the country," said McMorris, who travels from crisis to crisis and understaffed

hospital to understaffed hospital,"and everywhere I go, I see less and less kids insured and getting the care they need, and I see longer lines in emergency rooms. This is a growing national problem that has just been ignored."

Maybe we should finally do something about that national embarrassment.

Or we could instead take a cue from Mrs. Bush's observation that the Astrodome is "working out well" and just build more shelters the size of stadiums. It would be a great way to keep the underprivileged contained and out of sight.

Is Halliburton available?

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