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When is looting acceptable?

THE MORALIST

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The once-beautiful city of New Orleans is in chaos. There is no other way to describe the dark aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The city's prized pump-and-levée system failed, leaving most of the city under water.

For days there was no potable water, no sewage system, no electrical power and no telephone service. Thousands of wet, hot, hungry and exhausted people roamed the streets with no place to go. Untold numbers were trapped on roofs, porches and balconies. Thousands are sick, injured, missing or dead.

Looting broke out in the devastated city. People busted into homes, cars and stores, taking what they pleased - everything from food to sneakers to firearms. Without the usual resources of cruisers and jails, the New Orleans police force struggled to restore law and order.

Although the whipped city was plagued with crime, local, state and federal authorities continued rescue and evacuation efforts with the help of the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and countless individual volunteers. But looting slowed things down. Police were diverted from search and rescue to keeping the peace.

One category of "looting" doesn't deserve the name. Instead, call it "self-help humanitarian relief." Taking what is not yours can be critical to immediate survival. If you have just lost your home in a monumental natural catastrophe and have nothing to eat or drink, peaceably taking necessities from the shelves of a supermarket is understandable.

Likewise, with access to information cut off, taking a battery-operated radio and a supply of batteries to find out what to do and where to go makes sense.

Whose sense of morality could genuinely rank sparing the insured property of Winn-Dixie or Wal-Mart above addressing profound human suffering? Who could stand by while helpless children and the elderly died of dehydration, just to protect the property rights of unlucky businesses?

The most we should expect of hurricane victims who take a meal, bottled water, dry clothing, a radio or a life-saving rubber raft is that they make future efforts to pay restitution.

Not all looting is excusable, of course. The morally reprehensible looters include the astonishing people who made a beeline to retail stores to steal items they did not need. They seemed oblivious to the extent of the suffering around them. They could not have realized how deeply the hurricane would affect the future of their city. I suspect the consumer goods the early looters gleefully tossed into shopping carts and plastic bags are of little genuine comfort to them now.

Most distressing, looters have used force and violence against the innocent. A New Orleans police officer was shot in the face. A National Guardsman working to evacuate the Superdome was reportedly shot. Certain rescue efforts were terminated or relocated, all because of violence in the city. There's no telling how many injuries and fatalities will eventually be attributed to civil disorder in the Big Easy.

Convinced that authorities would not care for their needs after the hurricane, some of the New Orleans poor may have seen violent theft and intimidation as the only way to ensure their survival. Once a few dangerous or desperate individuals take up arms and take to the streets, however, other people may follow suit to protect themselves.

More likely, poor people turned to looting as a misguided chance to improve the quality of their lives. Sadly, no big-screen television set, gold watch or car stereo can do much to improve the quality of life for anyone in New Orleans for a very long time.