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A Perfect Storm

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Linda Rodriguez Flecha/AP Images

Hurricane Maria, Juncos, Puerto Rico, September 20, 2017

In the Caribbean, hurricanes—it was this region's native people who coined the word "hurakan"—have always been a fact of life. On islands like the one they called Borikén and that we know today as Puerto Rico, the indigenous Taíno knew better than to live by the sea. But the Spanish who colonized the Antilles and then the nearby mainland were less wise. Their coastal settlements were repeatedly leveled by storms "of the four winds" unknown in Europe, and they wrote home to their king that "we suffer many travails when these winds and the furies of Nature occur." Few who have inhabited these islands since would disagree, or fail to attest to how hurricanes, thrashing their homes with biblical rains and palm-felling winds, have shaped their history.

This October, Columbus Day found not a few of the "Indies" into which Columbus bumped devastated by the most damaging hurricane season on record. From tiny Barbuda to most of the Virgin Islands to populous Puerto Rico, people may henceforth hesitate to call their kids Maria or Irma, the names of this year's two fiercest storms. People across the region know the feeling. There's no island here—as you'll learn from speaking to a Jamaican inn owner who still recalls the income lost because of Gilbert in 1988 or a nutmeg farmer in Grenada lamenting how Ivan ravaged his crop in 2004—where the names of past storms don't resonate, as if they were evil spirits who come to crush livelihoods and force those lucky enough to start over to do so in New York, Orlando, or Montreal. But the hurricane season of 2017 has been especially awful, in both the number and the sheer intensity of storms.

When Maria bespoiled the lush Windward Island of Dominica with 160-mile-an-hour winds before rushing on to Puerto Rico, it was only the second time in a century that two Category 5 storms had made landfall in the same year. And these storms, heavily affecting not just the islands but also the US mainland, have also fed a larger conversation about the causes and effects of "extreme weather events" on our warming planet. In the two months since Hurricane Harvey crawled off the Gulf of Mexico in August to dump fifty-plus inches of rain on Texas, we've had a few lifetimes worth of catastrophes to wrestle with.

The succession of storms has been staggering. In early September, Irma, whirling westward from Africa like a continent of wind, became one of the strongest Atlantic hurricanes ever and laid flat the Leeward Islands before turning for Florida and prompting the largest evacuation in US history; by sheer luck it spared the state's major cities. Jose, next in line, grew to Category 4 strength but thankfully stayed offshore. Maria didn't. Forming with terrifying speed and barreling toward Puerto Rico before its 3.4 million people had caught their breath from dodging Irma, Maria knocked out the island's power grid, tore open its roads, and ripped trees from the ground and slammed them into homes, unleashing a grim and worsening humanitarian disaster.

That disaster has turned Puerto Rico and the larger Caribbean—which has figured in most Americans' minds, over recent decades, as a place to vacation—into a landscape of anxiety. This perception of the islands not as places to relax but as the source of possible threats isn't new—though historically, these threats have usually had more to do with geopolitics than with the weather. In the age of the Haitian Revolution, which was inspired by the American and French ones, our republic's founders were terrified of Haiti-style slave revolts. Soon after, the Monroe Doctrine codified the lasting US aim of maintaining the Caribbean as an "American lake" and preventing foreign powers from gaining a foothold there. As the region's most prized territories began to fall from Spain's grip in 1898, the US moved decisively to seize control of Puerto Rico and Cuba. During the cold war, threats posed by the islands were often exaggerated to justify interventions in places that posed no threat whatsoever, such as Grenada. (Cuba's brief hosting of Soviet nuclear missiles in 1961 was the exception.)

Today, the Trump administration seems far better at exaggerating the help it has provided in places harmed by storms than at taking seriously the new threat those storms may represent. This isn't surprising: Trump has claimed that climate change is a Chinese hoax. Worse, he watched the devastation on the news and concluded, at least as far as Puerto Ricans were concerned, that he was seeing a mess "largely of their own making." But we would do better to try to learn from a region where "extreme weather events" not only shape history but reveal it. Rather than blaming the victims, we should examine the forces bringing them to their knees.

On islands whose relative poverty makes them particularly vulnerable to the weather's effects, the social costs of natural disasters have long been anything but natural. Hurricanes in the Caribbean, as the Yale historian Stuart Schwartz recounts in *Sea of Storms* (2015), have had the power to make and unmake governments since long before the arrival of a monstrous hurricane in the Dominican Republic in 1930 helped the young president Rafael Trujillo—who declared martial law after the storm and then left it in force for decades—become a monstrous dictator. In Puerto Rico, a pair of storms in 1928 and 1932 dealt a fatal blow to the island's coffee trade, ensuring that ever more of its economy would be run by the US-owned sugar companies that already controlled its capital, San Juan. In 1963, not long after the National Hurricane Center began naming storms in alphabetical order, Hurricane Flora—a Category 4 beast that killed thousands in Haiti—saw Fidel Castro's young regime bolster its credibility among Cubans by ably evacuating them from harm's way. This year, Irma spared Cuba a direct hit but destroyed tourist resorts on its northern keys and deprived Raúl Castro's government of much-needed cash as it contends with a fraught decline in relations with the US and a planned handover of power early next year.

This year's hurricane season is not over yet. Warming waters in the Atlantic have fueled an unprecedented string of storms—ten tropical depressions in a row, beginning in August, became hurricanes—offering terrifying proof, in social-media-ready photos taken from space, that our long-promised stormy future is now. Of course, both sober scientists and agenda-driven pundits on Fox News, two groups not often in accord, were quick to point out that these storms could have formed even if our species hadn't spent the past century pumping the atmosphere full of carbon dioxide. But scientists have also been telling us that hurricanes, once formed, gain strength from warm water, and that surface temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico in late summer this year were 2.7 to 7.2 degrees above average. As people in Houston recently learned firsthand from Harvey, warm air holds more moisture and can unleash more rain the warmer it gets.

Politicians and climatologists may still argue over the degree to which humans are responsible for the fact that, since 1851, sixteen of the seventeen warmest years on record have occurred since 2000, and that 2016 was the warmest year yet. This fall, though, one has sensed a significant shift in how people in areas vulnerable to storms are understanding the threat. The year in which the US pulled out of the Paris Climate Accords may turn out to be the one in which we started to view climate change not as an abstract worry but as a concrete fact, the year in which we learned to habitually gaze with worry at late summer clouds forming over the Atlantic.

In the Caribbean, it's been ever thus. That's part of the reason we in the US would do well to start paying a different

kind of attention to these islands—not as mere playgrounds or battlegrounds, but as reconnaissance posts from which to look for encroaching dangers and be ready to quickly act to protect and save lives. The Caribbean is not far from us, really; the menace on the horizon is already here.

The Caribbean, it's sometimes said, resembles a giant social science experiment. The region's far-flung islands are populated mainly by the descendants of enslaved Africans who were taken there over three centuries to cut sugarcane for Europeans. They brought with them the complex religions, intricate social relations, and rhythmic music of West and Central Africa, evolving a new Caribbean culture rich in "creole" cuisines and traditions of carnival. But because of the accidents of history and of long-ago battles between far-off powers wanting to control their wealth, the islands' people also speak different languages. They inhabit commonwealths or sovereign nations or "overseas territories," each with its own distinct relationship with its former or current colonial owner.

In British-owned Tortola and Anguilla, Boris Johnson, the UK foreign secretary, turned up after Irma to apologize for the slow pace with which aid reached islands now mostly ignored by the British except as places to store money. French President Emmanuel Macron came to the ruined Franco-Dutch St. Martin to say much the same thing (while also taking pride in how the French *départementes* of Martinique and Guadeloupe, with their stronger ties to the mother country and their EU-standard infrastructure and preparedness, were little damaged by the storms). After Maria struck independent Dominica, which is located between Martinique and Guadeloupe but which England took from the French in the eighteenth century, islanders looked first to the UK's Department for International Development for aid. But Dominica's prime minister, Roosevelt Skerrit, who reported live on Facebook as the storm tore off his house's roof, also prevailed on neighboring islands to send the helicopters he needed to survey damage to his mountainous land. (Martinique and Trinidad and Tobago both obliged.)

These colonial relationships have also been crucial to those territories formally controlled by the region's main power today—namely the Virgin Islands, which the United States purchased from Denmark for $25 million in 1917, and Puerto Rico, which the US won as spoils from the Spanish-American War. Well before Maria worsened Puerto Rico's plight, the island was embroiled in a grave economic crisis accompanied by a historic bankruptcy and ceaseless emigration. There are many reasons for this. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Puerto Rico's economy was organized by US-appointed governors to enrich US-owned sugar companies but not the Puerto Ricans they hired. During the ensuing decades of nominal self-rule but continued US dependency, a series of local governors grew better at paying their cronies than at tending to the public good. Since the 1990s, the gradual expiration of a tax policy that drew US manufacturers to the island by allowing them to operate there nearly tax-free resulted—once the federal government ended those incentives for good in 2006 and companies pulled out—in an island both shorn of jobs and deeply broke.

Such are some of the roots of Puerto Rico's current crisis. Among the more striking effects of this fall's catastrophic hurricane is a surge of interest among Americans in the question of why Puerto Ricans are US citizens without a voting representative in Congress. Many were also struck by the damage done by denying this island, which is a thousand miles from Florida, the ability to accept aid from much closer neighbors because of an obscure law, the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 (also known as the Jones Act), which bans any ships but US ones from unloading goods in San Juan. Many were perplexed by the US's unapologetic refusal to provide the required help, and at the president's seeming need to add his own fury to Maria's.

Carolyn Cole/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

San Juan mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz at the Roberto Clemente Coliseum during relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, October 2, 2017

Donald Trump's temporary lifting of the Jones Act on September 28 was about the only thing his administration got half-right in an initial response that whipsawed from the president tossing paper towels at people who'd just lost their homes to extending off-key congratulations to the island for an official death toll that he said fell short of "a real catastrophe." (That number didn't include the hundreds or thousands more people, especially the old and infirm, whose fate in outlying areas remained unknown in the storm's immediate wake and who are likely to continue dying in large numbers from a lack of water, electricity, and medical services.)

The catastrophic damage to Puerto Rico's infrastructure resulted in part from decades of negligence and will take years to address. Four weeks after the storm, 78 percent of the island remained without power; in many areas, it's not expected to return for months. Thousands have already concluded that their best option isn't to rebuild, but to do what millions of Puerto Ricans have done since another law named for the otherwise obscure Virginia congressman William Atkinson Jones (the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917) made it possible for them to enter the mainland US without a visa: they're buying one-way tickets north.

This storm's awful aftermath, as well as the anemic federal response and criticism of it by local leaders like San Juan's charismatic mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz (to say nothing of Trump's typically appalling response that the mayor had "such poor leadership ability"), has put Puerto Rico's situation in the news. It remains to be seen what effect this will have on an island whose government owes its creditors some $72 billion, and which last spring declared bankruptcy in what was by far the largest municipal default in US history. If Trump's attacks on Yulín are any indication, things don't look good.

For months before Maria, most of the essential decisions about how Puerto Rico's government could spend its funds were being made by a federal oversight board on whose watch schools have been shuttered and basic services cut in the name of enforcing the "austerity" needed to make debt payments on bonds held by wealthy hedge funds in New York and local pensioners alike. Since the island's bankruptcy became official, the person with the most power to decide the fate of its debts has been US District Court Judge Laura Taylor Swain, who is charged with ruling on dozens of lawsuits filed by the island's creditors to recover their money. She decided in September, for example, that Puerto Rico's highway authority should be allowed to keep its revenue from tolls in order to maintain the island's roads, rather than sending it to service debts in New York.

But Puerto Rico's hopes can't rest with Judge Swain. Something much larger is needed. Given the current crisis, it's hard to argue against those who've said that the federal government should simply write off the island's debt. Trump improbably suggested at one point that he was in favor of this himself. But his statement was quickly walked back by the White House; it seems to have been no more than a feckless feint.

Beyond the smaller step of suspending its debt obligations while the current emergency persists—and during weeks when, as Governor Ricardo Roselló recently emphasized, his treasury won't be able to collect any taxes or revenue—Puerto Rico is going to need far more help than the $4.9 billion loan included in the disaster aid bill passed by Congress on October 24. That amount, for an island on the edge of civil emergency whose government's monthly bills total $2 billion, may avert a government shutdown for a couple of months, but it won't do a thing to repair and improve its ruined infrastructure and slow the departure of its citizens. The island's post-Maria plight will no doubt color its ongoing bankruptcy proceedings, which have already highlighted how Puerto Ricans have been harmed by being treated as second-class US citizens for over one hundred years.

The power of destructive weather to shape our societies' well-being can no longer be doubted. This is something we learned only recently on the mainland. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina drowned New Orleans and showed us how hurricanes can serve as fulcrums of our history and politics. Katrina permanently changed a cherished American city, but also helped doom the presidency of George W. Bush, who was blamed for the ways his government failed its citizens. It was the damage those failings did to Bush's approval ratings, more than the damage Katrina did to New Orleans (or that Harvey did to Houston, a city to which many New Orleanians fled in 2005), that ensured that our current commander in chief flew to Texas as soon as Harvey was over to be photographed in a windbreaker and baseball cap, looking concerned. It also ensured that he backed an emergency aid package of $15 billion for the state. The point behind both gestures was that "extreme weather events," and the question of how to prepare for and mitigate their effects—even for a president skeptical that climate change is real—have become central to our politics.

During Harvey's soaking of Houston, Trump's EPA sought to quiet scientists who dared to ask why the storm dumped so much rain by charging them with "an attempt to politicize an ongoing tragedy." But over the past two months, the broader culture has seemed rather more convinced by those scientists than by the president, who recently revoked an Obama-era rule requiring federally aided projects built in coastal floodplains to adapt to sea-level rise. In Miami, local officials have for years been warning that the city's drainage and other systems are woefully unready for sea-level rise and intense storms.

As Irma bore down on Florida accompanied by images of the devastation it had already wrought in the Caribbean—a grim specter of what Miami might look like after a direct hit by an Irma-sized storm—the state's biggest city became a ghost town. It seemed that Floridians had finally come to understand the growing risks of paving over their low-lying state's coasts and living near its waves. This hurricane season was one in which many conversations about the weather became conversations about how it's changing—and about how we need to alter both our politics and our infrastructure to contend in a systematic and sustained way with intense storms now understood not as discrete disasters but as indicators of a global crisis.

And as so often, the Caribbean got there first. In September, during the UN General Assembly, most of the headlines were about Trump's threats of nuclear war. More eloquent were the words of the leader of a small Caribbean island contending with its own existential threat. "Eden is broken," proclaimed Roosevelt Skerrit to the world, as Dominica's leader mourned a devastated isle whose green peaks were rendered gray by Maria's fury. "To deny climate change," Skerrit said, "is to deny a truth we have just lived." His words echoed those of many other Caribbean leaders who implored their peers at the UN, and particularly the industrialized nations whose carbon output has warmed the planet, to help the most vulnerable places bolster their defenses. As Skerrit said: "Heat is the fuel that takes ordinary storms—storms we could normally master in our sleep—and supercharges them into a devastating force." His science was sound.

Perhaps in the US we've finally learned, at least during hurricane season, to look toward the Caribbean to see what's coming next. □

—October 26, 2017