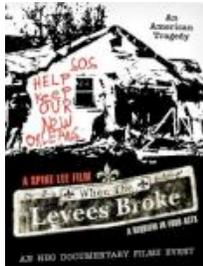


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## Video/DVD Reviews

# When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts - NR



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Spike Lee's masterful and disturbing Katrina docu.

**Rating:** NR for not rated **Studio:** [HBO Home Video](#) **Directed By:** [Spike Lee](#) **Running Time:** 256 minutes **Release Date:** 03/05/2006 **Genre:** [Documentary](#)

## Common Sense Note

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Parents should know that this documentary, about Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, is understandably disturbing. There are multiple images of dead, decaying bodies, descriptions of death and suffering during and after the flood, as well as the deaths of children and the pain and anger at the government's response to the crisis. People are angry, grieving, and shell-shocked as the documentary goes on, and those strong emotions, as well as director Spike Lee's meticulous description of how government officials responded, are likely to be too intense for sensitive viewers.

Families can talk about some of the ideas presented in the documentary. Do you believe, as some of the residents Lee interviewed do, that the government could have dynamited the levees to save richer neighborhoods? What role do you think race played in the way the levee breaches were handled? How do you think elected officials fared during the crisis? The documentary also offers a good opportunity to talk to teens about altruism, helping others, and how to recover from traumatic events.

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## Common Sense Review

Reviewed By: [Heather Boerner](#)

When a tragedy like the attacks on the World Trade Center or Hurricane Katrina happens, what story gets told? Is it the official story, passed down in history books, full of the numbers killed and the cost? Director [Spike Lee](#)'s exhaustive and brilliant WHEN THE LEVEES BROKE: A REQUIEM IN FOUR ACTS answers with a resounding "no."

Instead, the acclaimed filmmaker produced a masterpiece of journalism that puts the story in the hands of the people who survived it. There's the man who wheeled his elderly mother onto a boat to the relative safety of the Superdome only to watch her die in the heat waiting for buses to arrive. There's the mother who must bury her 5-year-old daughter. There's the police chief, so overwhelmed with his own grief and fear about the safety of his own daughter, who tells people that babies are being raped in the Superdome.

It is, in short, a harrowing, vivid documentation of the lives of the people affected by Katrina. Told over more than four hours, the film uses home video footage, news broadcasts, and interviews with regular people, actors, politicians, and musicians to piece together a living history of the hurricane and the flood caused by inadequate levees and poor government response.

But because this is a Spike Lee joint, this documentary is also incendiary, sharing the theories of the largely African-American population of the city (New Orleans is as much as 70 percent African American) that the government destroyed the levees in the poor black neighborhood of the Lower Ninth Ward to save richer neighborhoods. It also shares the rich African-American history of New Orleans and explains how much of a trauma it is for African Americans to be torn from their ancestral home after generations of African-American families were ripped apart by slavery.

More than that, *When the Levees Broke* is an undeniably American story that asks and begs: Why was the response so shamefully slow? At one point, police chief Eddie Compass, struck by the suffering around him days after the flood, says, "I need someone to get me a cruise boat or some type of boat, a cruise ship or some type of ship that I can put my people on, that I can give my people some comfort, so I can help my people." He breaks into tears and his voice catches. "We have people that have lost their families and have not got out of this for two days..."

In answering the question of the year, Lee spares no one, up to and including the president, New Orleans' mayor, and a culture that abandoned the poor, black people of New Orleans long before Katrina hit. "I think this is a great moment in American history because I feel that in this moment we see a lot of what's wrong with us," said New Orleans native and musician Wynton Marsalis. "It's a signature moment. It's like sometimes you walk past a mirror and you see yourself in a position you don't like. It's like, 'Damn, I thought I was 10 pounds overweight. I'm 50.' Well, this is like you stayed in front of the mirror. You couldn't turn away from it. You stayed in that pose. And everything from that pose shows us what's wrong with us."

*When the Levees Broke* is challenging viewing, but it's also hopeful, and full of the power of the human spirit, laced with some wonderful musical performances and a deep faith in the power of the people of New Orleans to come back.

People who enjoy this documentary may also like [Fahrenheit 9/11](#), [An Inconvenient Truth](#), and [Say Amen Somebody](#).

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Content	CS	adults	kids
<b>Sexual Content</b> One woman jokes that she'll have to "give someone a blow job" to get a FEMA trailer.			
<b>Violence</b> Considerable graphic imagery of the fatal effects of the hurricane and levee breaks. People talk about watching others drown. There are numerous images of dead, bloated, and discolored corpses. An image of a woman hanging. A man talks about his mother dying waiting for buses to arrive at the Superdome, and images of dead people in wheelchairs. Talk of men who killed themselves in despair after the hurricane. The documentary shows the funeral of a 5-year-old killed in the floods following the levee break. Aside from actual violence and death, there are numerous pictures of adults and children in despair, crying and scared, as well as enraged. People attempting to escape the flood waters are prevented from crossing a bridge, using guns. A man describes being shot with buckshot. The New Orleans Police Chief talks about babies being raped during the fall-out of the flood.			
<b>Language</b> Considerable salty language, including "hell," "s--t," various permutations of "f--k," "ass," "godd-mn," "bulls--t." A man tells Vice President Dick Cheney to "go f--k himself" and a woman says "President Bush can kiss my ass." A t-shirt says, "Run, motherf--er, run."			
<b>Message</b>			

**Social Behavior**

People act heroically to save themselves and others in the face of a catastrophic storm and the inept government response. Elected officials act to save their political careers instead of the lives of people stuck and suffering in New Orleans.



**Commercialism**



**Drug/Alcohol/Tobacco**

A woman drinks a beer as she talks about her struggle through the flood and with the flood relief effort.



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