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It was bad news

By Marco R. della Cava, USA TODAY

POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE, Calif. — In a patch of woods near the Pacific is a place of beauty, tranquility and terror.



Hurricane Katrina blasted ashore Aug. 29 along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, flattening a string of beach towns and flooding New Orleans.

By Michael Madrid, USA TODAY

When the earthquake that decimated nearby San Francisco ripped through this area in 1906, the earth here split and shifted some 20 feet. The evidence is an eerily interrupted fence line in this wind-swept national park, where visitors literally straddle the ever-irritable San Andreas Fault.

But nearly 100 years after that ghastly commotion, it doesn't take a stroll along nerve-tweaking Earthquake Trail to be reminded that sometimes the world can slip frighteningly off its axis.

The year was chockablock with events — some natural, others societal — that seemed to validate the pessimism of Chicken Little. If the sky wasn't actually falling, it certainly was blackened by storms that savaged New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

On their own, hurricanes Katrina and Rita had the power to render 2005 an *annus horribilis*. But those sweetly named scourges were neither the beginning nor the end of a year filled with tough times.

It didn't start promisingly: A January USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll found that 46% of respondents were optimistic about the state of America in the coming year, down from 56% when President Bush took office in 2001. Rather than offering relief, the year proceeded to set dramatic new lows that conspired to create a collective "When will it end?" sigh.

Time to toss in the towel? "Look, if you think there were greener pastures in another era, I have one word for you: dentistry," says historian Douglas Brinkley, who is working on a book about the flooding of his beloved New Orleans. "The crucial role of history is to remind us that our times are not uniquely oppressive."

But 2005 did its best to take the crown. It all started a year ago Christmas, when a tsunami in Southeast Asia claimed more than 275,000 lives. Summer brought us the hurricanes and then news of an earthquake in Pakistan. Bush's approval rating plummeted on the heels of the administration's slow response to Katrina and the still-brewing Valerie Plame investigation. And not a moment goes by without someone mentioning avian flu, a potential killer that looms over the globe like a vulture.

Grim, yes. But there are five reasons why this year wasn't as bad as you think:

•We've survived worse.

This fall brought news that 2,000 Americans have died in Iraq. A tragic figure, but Brinkley adds a respectful postscript: "That's less than in one day at (the Civil War battle of) Anti-etam, and far less than the 48,000 killed in Vietnam. This hasn't been a sterling year, but I wouldn't even put it in the worst 50 of our nation's 229 years."

Natural disasters are capable of even more staggering death tolls. The Black Death wiped out more than a third of Europe's population, while two floodings of China's Huang He River have killed more than 4 million over the past two centuries. Modern times make it easy to forget the fragile underpinnings of human existence on this spinning, molten sphere.

"The only advice I have is try to accept that the planet has a vast and cool indifference to humankind," says Simon Winchester, author of *A Crack in the Edge of the World*, a geologic retelling of the San Francisco earthquake. "We are infinitesimally unimportant."

"As (historian) Will Durant once said, 'Civilization exists by geological consent, subject to change without notice.' "

•2005 could turn out to be a tea party.

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"We live in a seismic world, and this appears to be another unusually active time," says Winchester, whose book places the famed 1906 calamity amid a year of extreme volatility that included the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

It's feared that next year might bring hurricanes of greater intensity, an outbreak of avian flu that experts predict could kill as many as 2 million, and prolonged American engagement in Iraq.

"No question, 2005 was a bad year, but there's no indication 2006 will be any better," says Rick Shenkman, history professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., and editor of the online History News Network. "George Will wrote that the '90s were a holiday from history. Well, it seems history is busy smacking us in the face now."

It doesn't help that so many of our faces are right in the line of fire. "There are larger and larger portions of the population being exposed to harsh weather," says James Halpern, director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at the State University of New York-New Paltz. "While there is a huge denial on the part of folks living in these areas, reality is getting harder to ignore."

•We're getting all the bad news.

Because news now travels the world at the pace of a high-speed Internet line, it just seems like these are the end of days. In 1906, few San Franciscans were aware of the tremors rocking citizens in distant lands; so while their lives were in shambles, they didn't have their worries compounded by the misery of others. Ignorance wasn't bliss, but it was a bit easier on the nerves. "In this age, when we're all fed by Fox News and CNN, there's no escape," says Winchester.

And there isn't one forthcoming. "Expect more from us, not less," says Jonathan Klein, president of CNN/U.S. "The inner clock of the viewer has sped up, their information metabolism has increased."

One fairly obvious caveat that comes with being so in the know: Watch your kids just as carefully. Images of tragedy tend to "linger longer in the young," says Halpern. "Your kids don't need to be exposed to dead bodies floating in rivers, though they should be told about the event itself."

•Mankind is one stubborn animal — in a good way.

What else explains why San Francisco, far from being a ghost town, is now home to some of the most expensive — and most unstable — real estate in the country? Why else would folks be talking about the rebuilding of New Orleans, if not to prove that man can triumph over the elements?

"It's our nature, we build on fault lines and live near storm-swept beaches," says Lee Davis, author of *Natural Disasters: From the Black Plague to the Eruption of Mount Pinatubo*. "Those habits die hard."

•2005 showed that, rain or shine, we're all in this together.

There are two ways to react to an avalanche of grim news. One is to run away. The other is to embrace it as evidence of a common struggle for survival. "That's the silver lining that I prefer to see, an indication of our common humanity and vulnerability," says Jamie Drummond, executive director of the Bono-founded activist group DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa). "Compassion fatigue happens not when there are lots of disasters, but when people don't understand what has happened and disconnect."

Americans connected in a big way last year, contributing \$1.5 billion for tsunami relief and nearing twice that after Katrina and Rita; as funds still pour in, the hurricane tally is poised to surpass the \$2.8 billion donated after 9/11.

So as the new year rolls in, packing who-knows-what, there is comfort in knowing that mankind likely has seen it and survived it before. And done so not through rugged individualism so much as shared humanity. So bring on 2006; together, we can take it.

"As bad as these tragedies were, in the long run, we all realize that most of us are compassionate people," says freelance writer Kevin Lockett, who watched the year's disasters unfold from the safety of his Akron, Ohio, home.

"I still feel the future is bright."

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