

The Big Muddy

All night it rained in Jocotepec, my small town in Mexico. Rain isn't unusual, but this was different. It was heavy. It didn't stop. Come morning, my wife and I

looked out the window and saw inches of brown water sluicing down the sloping street from the mountain.

About 9 o'clock that morning, the speakers on the church tower began: "*Necesitamos personas, ropa, comida. Personas, ropa...*" We need people, clothes, food. Something had happened.

The towns of our region—Chapala, Ajijic, San Juan Cosala, Jocotepec—lie along the north shore of Lake Chapala, squeezed into a narrow strip between the mountains, or high hills anyway, and the lake. You can walk from the shore to the upslope in about five minutes. The hills, which have little vegetation, are dotted with roundish boulders stuck in raw earth. When enough rain washes away the soil, the rocks begin to roll. This had happened.

A moving mass of boulders—first small rocks, then those of basketball size, then some as large as Volkswagens—had ploughed through San Juan Cosala. A commonly quoted figure, entirely plausible, is that 200 houses were destroyed. Nobody was killed, but houses were crushed or filled to the ceilings with mud. It was a massive disaster in a small way. Call it Katrina's baby brother.

At about 11, Violeta and I went to the square to offer our services and to buy food to contribute. By that time, a food-distribution center in the church was accepting donations and sending them to the scene in the trucks of volunteers.

The clothing collection point was busy. The town gym had been turned into temporary housing. When you have eight-foot ceilings and six feet of mud, a gym looks pretty good. At a desk in the gym volunteers lined up, waiting to be assigned jobs.

The only road along the lake was blocked by police to avoid interference with rescue teams, whose trucks came and went. Late that afternoon, Vi and I managed to get to San Juan. Things were horrendous. Walls of mud and rock had rolled down the vertical streets and across the main road, leaving walls of debris. We saw a pickup truck squashed like an accordion.

Heavy equipment was arriving from wherever Jalisco, our state, keeps it on what the military would call tank transporters—huge flatbed trucks. We saw bulldozers, front-end loaders, big machines painted yellow. Their scoops made them look like scorpions. A few were already working to clear the rubble, and others were arriving. Heavy white dump trucks labeled "Department of Public Works" waited to be filled.

The response had been fast and vigorous and participation universal. Doctors had come from neighboring towns, though miraculously they were not much needed. A businessman in Chapala had donated a large truck full of five-gallon *garrafones* of bottled water.

The next day, the streets were lined with men with shovels, and the big cats

worked. We talked to a man whose house had been on a sloping street. It no longer was, or at any rate was no longer a house. He said he had heard an odd rattling outside, looked out, and saw a river of water and rocks like softballs racing downhill. A couple of bigger rocks came by. His family escaped through a downslope window and ran hard. No injuries. No house, either.

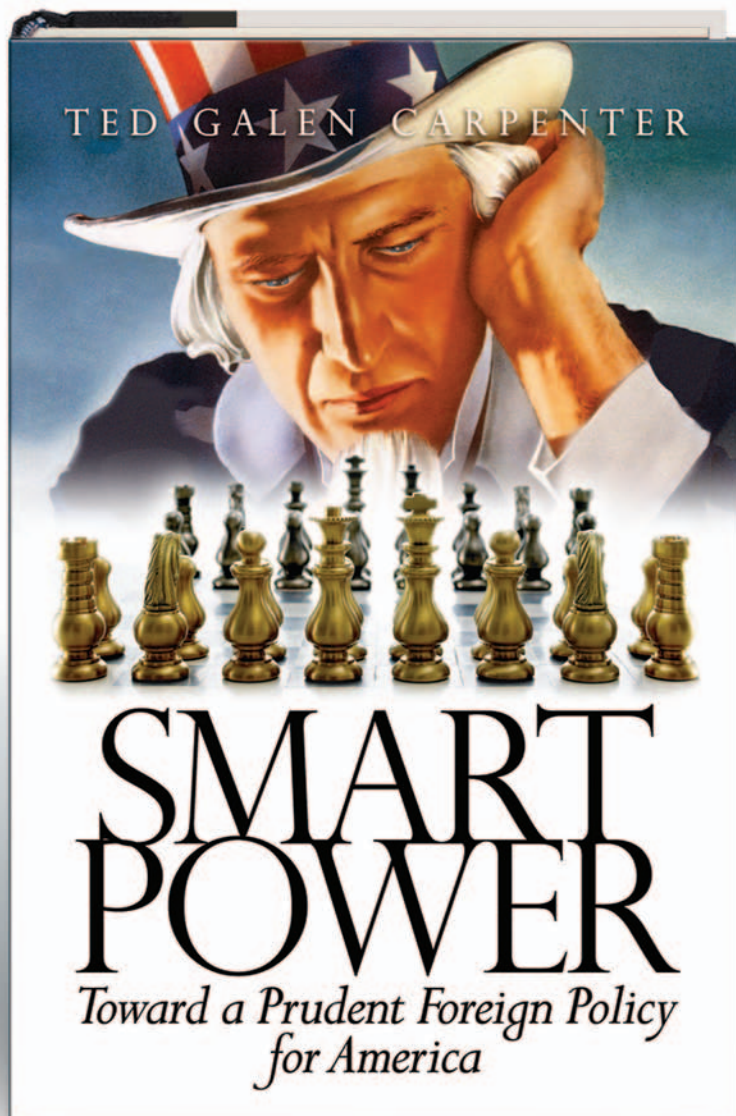
The upper part of San Juan is the Racquet Club, a posh gringo retirement community. Vi and I and Natalia, my stepdaughter, climbed through streets awash in boulders that hadn't been there before and found pricey houses wrecked. Not good, but not as bad as it could have been. Gringos have resources, and some of them probably had insurance. Mexicans in San Juan have neither. They had much to complain about, but didn't, being too busy trying to dig out.

A month or so later, San Juan seemed back to normal, though I'm not sure where those went whose homes were unsalvageable. Kids ran perilously close to the edge of the road as usual, and stores were open.

So far as I know, nothing of the disaster appeared in the U.S. media, apart from a reported one-sentence mention in a world wrap-up on Fox News. The town asked for no outside help and got none. There was no looting, no useless federal agencies to gum things up. The town was devastated so, with far fewer resources than the United States could bring to bear, they undevastated as best they could, which was pretty well, and went about their business.

That's how a small Mexican town handled its Katrina. ■

NEW BOOK FROM THE CATO INSTITUTE



“This is a timely collection of Carpenter’s timeless advice on America’s foreign policy.”

— HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY,
Professor, Massachusetts Institute
of Technology

“In an age of imperial folly and militarized illusions, Ted Galen Carpenter has been a voice of reason and good sense. In this impressive collection of essays, he surveys the wreckage of the Bush era and illuminates the way ahead.”

— ANDREW J. BACEVICH,
Author of *The Limits of Power*

By confronting the global challenges America faces, this insightful book outlines a practical strategy that protects America’s security while avoiding unnecessary and unrewarding military adventures. Whether it’s the war in Iraq, defending our interests in Pakistan, or making threats against North Korea and Iran’s nuclear activities, expert Ted Galen Carpenter shows the dangers of American foreign policy being more belligerent than diplomatic.

\$24.95 • HARDBACK • 978-1-933995-16-8

Buy your copy at bookstores nationwide, by calling 800-767-1241 or visiting Cato.org