

EDITORIALS

The Power of Storms

The sun shone on schoolchildren scuffing their way home through the first fallen autumn leaves that September afternoon, but then the birds ominously stopped singing and the sky turned sulfurous as a great wind came up from nowhere. Trees crashed and glass began to shatter everywhere. Roofs tore through the air, great sheets of rain began falling and a whining wind tumbled people through the streets of Hartford.

The Great Hurricane of Sept. 21, 1938, tore the heart from New England, and Connecticut bled worst of all. "Wednesday evening brought to an end what is likely to go down as the most calamitous day in Connecticut's history," a *Courant* editorial lamented two days later. "New Haven is still dark and battered. . . . New London is in smoking ruins. So many dams have burst that no accurate count is possible. Estimates of the cost in lives and property are still pure guesswork, for it will be days before complete reports can be compiled. Together, fire, wind and flood have made September 21, 1938, a day of black catastrophe."

The mourning had just begun. For days afterward people would die of shock and injury. The final tally of Connecticut lives lost would top 125, and damage mounted to \$400 million — in 1938 dollars. "Much of the beauty of old New England has gone with the wind and the flood," the *Associated Press* said. "The greens and commons of New England will never be the same."

On Friday, no such calamity occurred. Hurricane Gloria threatened 40 million people on its northward rampage up the Eastern Seaboard and in Connecticut caused widespread flood damage, massive power failures and several deaths as it blew through the

state. Still, Connecticut suffered little compared with that terrible time 47 years ago.

Gloria, billed as one of the three worst Atlantic hurricanes of the century, was inevitably compared to that awful earlier storm, but it may well be remembered most for the damage it didn't do. Its winds blew fierce, but they were warm and sultry as the tropics, and as the eye of the storm passed, the sky turned impossibly blue.

So we were luckier than the people of Connecticut were in 1938 — the effort of man and the forces of nature conspired to spare us the worst of the storm. Indeed, our many good fortunes extend not only to what might have been the ravages of the natural world.

Four days after the 1938 hurricane, the headline on *The Courant's* lead editorial read, "As Catastrophe Looms," but it was not a hurricane editorial. "The question of peace or war in Europe seems likely to be decided in hours rather than days," it said. "The vast military preparations now under way, from the North Sea to Malta, from the Maginot Line to Bucharest, together with the perfervid oratory of the Duce and the ominous silence over Moscow, all point to an early culmination of the crisis, and they all point, furthermore, in the direction of catastrophe."

In those dark hours, Adolf Hitler had demanded that Czechoslovakia cede him the Sudetenland. Neville Chamberlain's talks with the Fuehrer had broken down and German troops had pushed to the Czech frontier.

Although the hurricane-dazed people of Connecticut could not know it in 1938, another terrible storm would soon engulf the world. Beside such terrifying power, no natural cataclysms can frighten.