

Pointing Fingers in the Wake of the Flood

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PEJ News - C. L. Cook - While the waters still rise in New Orleans and the monumental task of evacuating the entire city and environs begins, already accusing fingers are pointing directly to the White House and George W. Bush.

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C. L. Cook

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The job at hand has, by turns, been described as overwhelming and impossible. Will New Orleans be rebuilt? And, how to protect it from hurricanes that are both more frequent and more powerful than ever?

Hurricanes are nothing new to those Americans living in Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi. But Katrina, easily the most damaging storm to have ever hit the United States, befuddled many in all three states. Those states most effected were all, in one way or another taken off guard.

Though Floridians were warned when the approaching Tropical Storm Katrina became a full-blown hurricane, many hadn't bothered to take appropriate defensive measures. Louisianans kept a sharp eye as Katrina meandered the Gulf of Mexico, growing to its Category 5 peak, before wheeling back to the coast, but thousands of them failed to heed official advisories to evacuate the city.

How bad could it be?

We now know just how bad it could be. In fact, had Katrina's course been slightly closer to New Orleans and neighbouring Lake Pontchartrain, things could have been far worse. But, as it stands, one of the nightmare scenarios dreaded by SELA, the failure of the levees and subsequent flooding of the city has come to pass. The Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project is a joint federal, state, and local task force designed to mitigate just such an event.

So what went wrong?

The imagined New Orleans catastrophe has been a topic of concern for decades, but in 1995, following rain floods that killed a half dozen people, SELA was set up by congress. For ten

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years, the Army Corp of Engineers spent close to half a billion dollars, shoring up levees, dykes, providing disaster relief, and building pumping stations. They had done a lot, but there was still more to do, a lot more.

[Then, the money dried up.](#)

In 2003, the effects of George Bush's tax cuts, the ongoing war in Iraq, and the implementation of the gargantuan Homeland Security bureaucracy put the Army in a pinch. The Corps cited the war in Iraq, directly blaming it for SELA's effective shutdown.

Local papers wrote extensively, in the years leading to disaster, complaining about the lack of hurricane and flood control funds. The Times-Pacayune wrote no less than nine articles on the subject, and on Tuesday night (Aug. 29) the now abandoned paper's web site posted a poignant reminder, saying:

"No one can say they didn't see it coming. ... Now in the wake of one of the worst storms ever, serious questions are being asked about the lack of preparation."

Early last year, President Bush's budget proposed spending less than a fifth of the money the Army Corp of Engineers requested for precisely the purpose of reinforcing the Lake Pontchartrain levee system. In June 2004 Emergency Mangement Chief for Jefferson Parish remarked on the budget reductions for his area, saying:

"It appears that the money has been moved in the president's budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq, and I suppose that's the price we pay. Nobody locally is happy that the levees can't be finished, and we are doing everything we can to make the case that this is a security issue for us."

Likewise, last year, the Corps' project manager Al Naomi went begging to a local agency, the East Jefferson Levee Authority, saying \$2 million was urgently required because Washington wasn't willing to pony up. He said then:

"The system is in great shape, but the levees are sinking. Everything is sinking, and if we don't get the money fast enough to raise them, then we can't stay ahead of the settlement." Adding: "The problem that we have isn't that the levee is low, but that the federal funds have dried up so that we can't raise them."

Naomi got his money, only to find the Fed had ducked out of a 15 million dollar project to shore

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up the banks of Lake Pontchartrain in the 2005 budget. And, just months ago, despite 2004 being the most lively hurricane season in memory, a further 26 million dollars was being withheld from SELA.

It was the largest budget reduction for preparedness ever made.□

For New Orleans, the irony couldn't be greater; just last year, recognizing the growing number and magnitude of hurricanes, a study was proposed by the Corps that would examine how the city would handle Category 4 and 5 storms. But that too was shot down by the Bush administration. Again citing the cost of the war in Iraq, the New Orleans office was ordered to undertake no new studies.

There was, at the same time, a growing recognition that more research was needed to see what New Orleans must do to protect itself from a Category 4 or 5 hurricane. But once again, the money was not there. As the Times-Picayune reported last Sept. 22.

A Newhouse News Service article published on the Times-Picayune website Tuesday noted:

"The Louisiana congressional delegation urged Congress earlier this year to dedicate a stream of federal money to Louisiana's coast, only to be opposed by the White House. ... In its budget, the Bush administration proposed a significant reduction in funding for southeast Louisiana's chief hurricane protection project. Bush proposed \$10.4 million, a sixth of what local officials say they need."

Senators in Washington had been working on a proposal to reverse the heavy budget cuts to the hurricane and flood programs for fiscal year 2006.

No word if that effort will continue now.

Chris Cook hosts [Gorilla Radio](#), broad/webcast from the University of Victoria, Canada. He also serves as a contributing editor to PEJ News. You can check out the [GR Blog here](#).