

## **Rick Heydinger and Curt Johnson: New Orleans revisited**

For a working trip to the Crescent City, we arrived with some often-heard but erroneous assumptions. What a difference a week makes.

The reelection of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin on Saturday briefly put his city in the spotlight again. Nine months after Katrina, though, the media and most of us have moved on.

We were there in early May to help St. Paul-based Public Strategies Group produce a working conference on ways local government could do a better job. In the process our group spent hours with the Katrina Krewe picking up trash in a mid-city neighborhood. We drove up and down countless streets, seeing what a place looks like with three-fourths of its homes uninhabitable, with 8 million tons of debris stacked or strewn in yards and streets.

We talked with the mayor, with firefighters from St. Bernard Parish, and with all kinds of people whose lives have been overturned. We realize that we'd arrived with some assumptions. After five days of seeing and analyzing what is there, every assumption gave way to reality.

### **2 "Americans always rebuild, so this recovery must be underway."**

Reality: In much of New Orleans, there is little evidence of recovery.

More than ever, New Orleans is a tale of two cities. Night life bustles in the French Quarter; some middle-class Lakeview homes have restoration crews. The Garden District and Uptown neighborhoods seem almost normal.

The rest of the city is another story. The floodwaters are gone, but in many places, so is the electricity. Mountains of debris await money, machinery and destinations.

Everyone recalls those pictures of homes turned sideways and straddled by refrigerators or even cars on the roofs. Even contained within the narrow frame of your television, these images pull at your heartstrings. Being there forces you to widen the screen and accept the larger magnitude of this storm's impact.

### **1 "New Orleans officials and their politics created this problem."**

Reality: The failed infrastructure was entirely due to defective work by a federal agency, which officially has total responsibility for managing the river levels.

In the 19th century, the federal government took control of the lower Mississippi River valley, a control tightened after the 1920s floods. In 2005, the levees failed in six places. All the failed levees were built by the federal government.

Water came roaring into St. Bernard Parish from the Gulf of Mexico. Why?

Levees built on the Mississippi by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers straitjacket the river and keep its silt from replenishing delta wetlands. For every mile of coastline lost, we lose 1 inch of surge protection.

**3 "New Orleans geography is inherently unsuitable. People with any sense would pick up and go somewhere else. We should not spend good money rebuilding where people shouldn't be."**

Reality: Engineering reasonable storm protection is not out of reach.

It is interesting that we Americans have not sent this message to people in Florida who built homes in dry forests or in hurricane alleys along the coastline, or to people on ocean bluffs in California. What if the politically powerful Sun Belt politicians say no sane person should live where you could freeze to death in a blizzard?

People live where they live because of roots and connections and the sentiments of family history. It is not a cold calculation of risk-adjusted insurance eligibility.

**4 "Rebuilding is only about preserving culture. America would do fine without New Orleans."**

Reality: What New Orleans does every day is vital to the American economy.

No, it's not about Bourbon Street revelry and all those narrow lanes and Spanish colonial buildings which we call the French Quarter. That soggy blend of Disneyland and Las Vegas -- with better food -- will survive without help.

What we didn't know was New Orleans is the busiest port in the world. Sixty percent of our grain exports, 20 percent of all exports, 40 percent of our natural gas supplies pass through the port. Two of the largest refineries in the United States are there. Ask Cargill, General Mills, Xcel or CenterPoint whether there's a national interest at stake here. New Orleans earned its resilience through occupations, epidemics and floods. People there often speak of "soul" when describing the place. How the rest of us respond to the recovery challenge sure seems like a serious test of our national character.

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