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After the Deluge, Some Questions

By JOHN M. BARRY OCT. 13, 2005

Washington - THE most important questions about rebuilding New Orleans are simple ones. Can the city be made safe, and if so, how? Who should chiefly bear the burden? Only by answering these questions can the city restore the confidence of would-be residents, investors, insurers and visitors that a rebuilt New Orleans won't be devastated by another hurricane.

Without that public confidence, the city will never be able to thrive. But earning it will require two important measures, both of which were recommended by the flood control working group I recently headed at the request of the Louisiana congressional delegation. Clearly, New Orleans needs a new comprehensive flood control plan for the future -- yet no legislation yet introduced has called for developing one. Just as important, we need to understand the failure of the city's old levee system, both in order to build a better one and in order to apportion responsibility for the losses that New Orleans suffered. As it turns out, much of the destruction resulted not from an act of god but from human error.

Three teams of credible experts have initiated investigations into the failure of the levees. One is from the National Science Foundation in

conjunction with the American Society of Civil Engineers; another, from the United States Army Corps of Engineers; and the third is from the State of Louisiana, led by scientists at the Louisiana State University hurricane center. Although each investigation is independent, the scientists have shared data and come to the same surprising preliminary conclusions, one of which has enormous ramifications.

We know that Hurricane Katrina made landfall with enormous power, devastating the Gulf Coast, and that the levee on the Industrial Canal in New Orleans was overtopped by a storm surge coming directly from the Gulf of Mexico. When a levee is overtopped, there is basically nothing that can be done. Water pouring over a levee long enough will, in effect, wash part of the levee away. That's what happened on the Industrial Canal, resulting in the flooding of part of the Ninth Ward, along with much of St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes.

But most of New Orleans was not flooded by water coming directly from the Gulf. It was flooded from the north and rear by Lake Pontchartrain, when levees failed along the 17th Street and London Avenue drainage canals. Initially, the Corps of Engineers said that the storm was so great that it overtopped these levees also. But after inspecting the levees and reviewing storm data, all three investigating teams agree: Hurricane Katrina hit Lake Pontchartrain with far less strength than it did the Gulf Coast, and the storm surge fell well short of the tops of the levees. In fact, a design or construction flaw caused them to collapse in the face of a force they were designed to hold. In other words, if the levees had performed as they were supposed to, the deaths in New Orleans proper, the scenes in the Superdome and the city's devastation would never have taken place.

Who is responsible? Many accusations, some of them valid, have been hurled at the Orleans Levee Board, a local body. But these accusations are irrelevant. The levee board did not design or build these levees. That was entirely the responsibility of the federal government, through the Corps of

Engineers.

Just as a surgeon who improperly sutures an artery is responsible if the suture ruptures and the patient bleeds to death, the federal government is directly responsible for the loss of life and property in most of the city. Although people cannot sue the federal government as they could sue the surgeon, the government still has a moral obligation to repair the damage it caused and to try to make the victims' lives whole again.

But instead of helping, Treasury Secretary John Snow recently told Congress that the administration would not guarantee the city's municipal bonds. So the city government announced the layoff of 3,000 workers. The Catholic archdiocese will let nearly 900 go. The largest employer in the city, Tulane University, may soon have to make similar cuts, and Xavier and Dillard universities, also large employers, are in even more desperate straits. How does one rebuild a city if one destroys its public services and intellectual capital?

It is still less obvious how the city can be rebuilt without a comprehensive and credible flood control plan for the future. Scientists believe that all of New Orleans, including the Ninth Ward and the parishes flooded by the Industrial Canal break, can be protected against hurricanes. Plans for that already exist, but in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina failures, they need close re-examination, both to correct for past mistakes and to account for changes the hurricane wrought in the geography of South Louisiana.

The working group I led called for the Corps of Engineers, in concert with the National Academies of Science, to develop a thoroughgoing new flood control strategy. Coming up with a new plan should not take long. The head of the relevant arm of the academies has projected that one could be prepared within four to eight months. Work on repairs to levees that would certainly be included in any comprehensive plan is already under way.

That does not make the need for such a plan any less urgent. Many of the

rebuilding decisions depend on it. At the same time, the federal government needs to take responsibility for first the devastation and now the slow strangulation of one of the world's great cities.

In 1927 the homes of roughly one million Americans -- then nearly 1 percent of the American population -- were flooded. President Calvin Coolidge recognized the responsibility of the federal government to fix that problem, and it did. Now New Orleans needs neither rhetoric nor "enterprise zones," but concrete and immediate help.

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