

Unlike Perricone, Corps of Engineers employees got away with post-Katrina online attacks

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Sandy Rosenthal, founder of Levees.org, holds up a megaphone Jan. 21, 2006, for Charles Duffy III, as she walks from person to person holding the device up so that people at the Army Corps of Engineers can hear them voicing their concerns about levee protection and wetland restoration. (CHRIS GRANGER)



By Sandy Rosenthal, guest columnist

Sal Perricone, a former federal prosecutor who worked for U.S. Attorney Jim Letten, was recently disbarred for comments he made anonymously on NOLA.com, comments which resulted in Letten's resignation and several new trials.

Times have changed. Ten years ago, this exact sort of behavior resulted in a wrist slap.


After Hurricane Katrina, multiple people with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers engaged in the same behavior as Mr. Perricone did. Specifically, corps personnel — people in a position of public trust — were disguising their identities, pretending to be objective onlookers and using NOLA.com's comments feature to attack anyone who criticized the corps.

One of their targets was me and the grassroots group Levees.org, which I founded with my 15-year-old son after the levees broke.

From the beginning, Levees.org was heavily critical of the corps for its design mistakes. It appears that, in response, the corps dedicated considerable resources in attempting to discredit me and anyone who supported the fledgling grassroots group. The motive was clear. There was a lot of money at stake.

A class action lawsuit had been filed that could have resulted in many billions in a court judgment. So, corps personnel engaged aggressively in online warfare.





Keep in mind that this was 10 years ago. It was still the wild West in the world of online commenting. The concept of posting an anonymous comment to a news story was still new. Furthermore, 10 years ago, the process was unregulated. Media houses generally used a hands-off approach.

Levees.org was one of the victims of online warfare, namely, when a squadron of foot soldiers wages warfare on social media with the goal of defamation.

This behavior went on from 2005 until 2008. Then, in December 2008, using tools available to any amateur blogger, I discovered proof that the vicious comments were coming from corps headquarters on Leake Avenue.

Backend tools and a free tracking website allowed me to see the IP addresses associated with the comments. The IP addresses showed – in bright red numbers – that the comments were emanating from corps computers in New Orleans.



When I brought the proof to the attention of then corps commander Col. Alvin Lee, he insisted that it was the work of “one individual among 1600 people” and he sent a general memo to his staff instructing them to “stop that.”

In early 2009 – well after Col. Lee had issued his memo – former NOLA.com editor Jon Donley provided an affidavit about more than 700 comments he found in one six-week period alone coming from corps HQ. The comments were attributed to about 20 regular posters.

So, in June 2009, Levees.org requested then U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu to demand that the Pentagon investigate. Sen. Landrieu agreed to do so and kept her word. The Pentagon inquiry took six weeks. John Crane, assistant inspector general for the Department of Defense, concluded that Col. Lee “took appropriate actions once informed of the allegations at issue.”

The Pentagon concluded that the colonel asking his subordinates to “stop that” was sufficient.



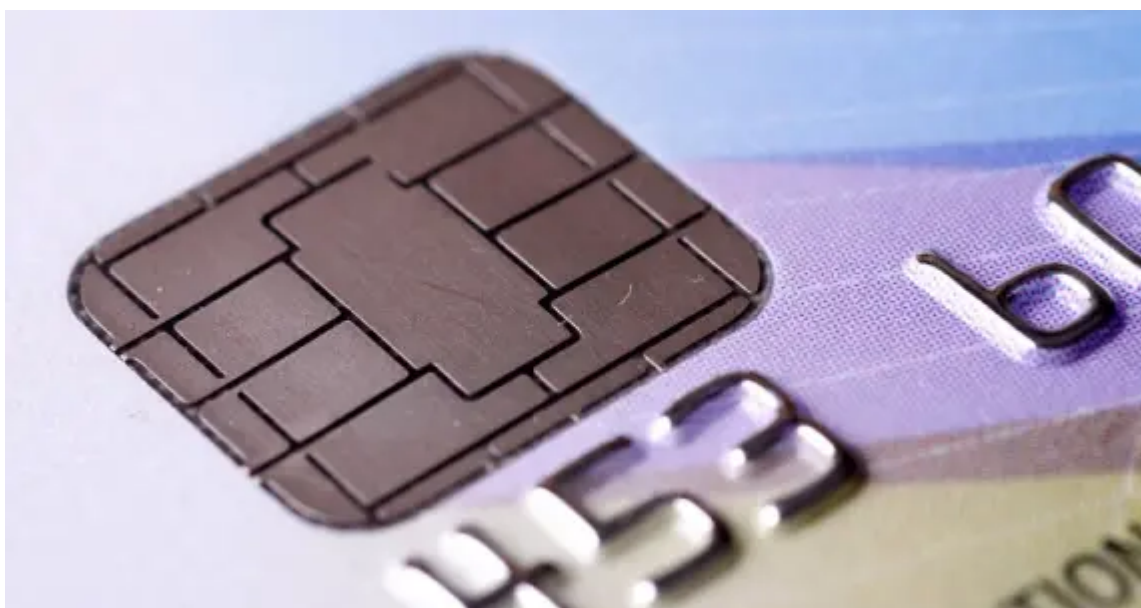
Fast forward to today, someone in a position of public trust doing the exact same behavior – abuse of a public forum – received much more than a wrist slap. And rightly so.

Sandy Rosenthal is founder and president of [Levees.org](https://www.levées.org).

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