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Katrina: A Man-Made Disaster

By Michael Grunwald

It's been five years since the levees broke and New Orleans drowned, since an unremarkable storm left behind unspeakable horrors. Five years since those indelible images of corpses floating in ditches and families screaming on rooftops, since that nauseating frenzy of buck-passing and blame-shifting. It was a heckuva job all around.

It took a while, but the prevailing narrative is finally starting to reflect that Katrina was a man-made disaster, not a natural disaster, triggered by shoddy engineering, not an overwhelming hurricane. Even the stubborn generals of the Army Corps of Engineers eventually admitted the "catastrophic failure" of the city's defenses. Now the U.S. is spending \$15 billion to build sturdier flood walls and stronger pumps in smarter locations; the Army Corps even shut down the misbegotten Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, a little-used navigation canal that intensified Katrina's surge and ushered it into New Orleans. ([Watch TIME's video "Reckoning With a Manmade Disaster."](#))

The good news is that the city is somewhat less vulnerable than it was five years ago. It still isn't ready for the Big One, but it should be able to handle a glorified near miss like Katrina. The bad news is that America still hasn't learned the deeper lessons of the 2005 hurricane.

Bad weather and worse engineering were just the immediate causes of the tragedy, like the assassination of the archduke that launched World War I, but not the underlying causes. Katrina was really a calamity of priorities, and those priorities don't seem to have changed. Beneath the structural failure was an environmental crime, a decades-long assault on the Louisiana coast. Beneath that was a political disaster, the work of leaders who talk a lot about restoring the coastal wetlands that once provided natural hurricane protection for southern Louisiana but who spend most of their time promoting the very water-control projects and petroleum interests that destroy those wetlands.

During the past century, 2,300 sq. mi. (5,960 sq km) of Louisiana's coastal marshes, barrier islands and cypress swamps have eroded into the Gulf of Mexico, gradually ravaging an unparalleled spawning ground for shrimp and other seafood, whittling away the Cajun culture of the bayous and leaving coastal

communities a bit more exposed to Mother Nature every day. If the Soviets had destroyed an American landmass the size of Delaware, World War III would have erupted. But most of the erosion was caused by Army Corps water projects that either reduced the silt in the Mississippi River, interrupting its natural land-building process, or sliced directly through coastal marshlands. In addition, the oil and gas industry caused about one-third of the degradation, with 8,000 miles (12,900 km) of canals and pipelines shredding the fabric of the coast. Don't blame the victims for living in harm's way; New Orleans was an inland city before erosion brought the Gulf to its doorstep. ([See a special report on the five-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.](#))

Hurricanes gain strength over water and lose force over land. Scientists believe every mile of marsh can lower a storm surge by as much as a foot. But the coastal scientists and environmentalists who warn that Louisiana is still losing a football field's worth of land every half hour somehow seem like background noise. The Army Corps is still spending billions on new engineering and next to nothing on restoration. President Obama finally proposed \$19 billion worth of projects last year, but Congress hasn't funded them. Not that they would have fixed the problem: cost estimates for a serious restoration effort run as high as \$80 billion.

"There's a lot of recognition that we need to act," says John Lopez, a former Army Corps scientist who is director of coastal sustainability for the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation. "But there's not a lot of action." And while Louisiana's politicians continue to clamor for restoration, they're also pushing new billion-dollar levees that would further degrade the coast. And they're still essentially functioning as taxpayer-funded petroleum lobbyists. "Our delegation has always marched in lockstep on oil and gas issues," says former Congressman Chris John, who is now an actual petroleum lobbyist, the president of the influential Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil & Gas Association. "That's not going to change a bit."

The Petro-State

"this is crippling us! Devastating us!" Ewell Smith was outraged. He represented Louisiana's seafood industry, and three months after the BP blowout, oil was still cascading into the Gulf. But Smith wasn't outraged about the spill; he was outraged by President Obama's moratorium on new deepwater drilling — and he was speaking out at a drill-baby-drill "Rally for Economic Survival" at the Cajundome in Lafayette. "Oil and gas is a way of life down here, just like fishing," he explained later. "The fishermen all have brothers and cousins on the rig. Or they'll work the rigs between seasons. Everyone supports the industry."

Everyone sure did at the rally — Democrats and Republicans, the former president of Shell Oil and current president of the Louisiana Restaurant Association, even Cherri Foytlin, the author of a children's coloring book about coastal erosion. Foytlin spoke lyrically about vanishing wetlands — "the earth is dead there" — but quickly pivoted to her husband's work on a rig. "The spill makes us sad," she said. "The moratorium makes us mad!" ([See TIME's photo-essay "The Scars of Katrina."](#))

The journalist A.J. Liebling once described Louisiana as "the westernmost of the Arab states," and it remains an article of faith in Louisiana politics that what's good for oil and gas — along with the

petrochemical industry and other related businesses — is good for the state. The populist Huey Long made his name fighting Standard Oil, but he made his fortune with his Win or Lose oil firm, and his son Russell faithfully represented the industry in the U.S. Senate for nearly 40 years. "If I wasn't looking after oil and gas," he once said, "I wouldn't be looking after Louisiana." The tradition continued under former Senate Energy Committee chairman J. Bennett Johnston, who fought for more drilling, less regulation and "royalty relief" that became a multibillion-dollar windfall for Big Oil. Johnston is now a lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute, and his positions haven't noticeably changed.

This is standard practice for Louisiana politicians: they go to bat for oil and gas and rake in campaign donations while on the public payroll, then shift to the industry's payroll. Former House Appropriations chairman turned megalobbyist Robert Livingston signed up the shallow-water drilling industry after the BP spill. Former Senator John Breaux's lobbying firm represents America's Natural Gas Alliance. Current Senators Mary Landrieu, a Democrat who publicly dismissed warnings about deepwater drilling before the spill, and David Vitter, a Republican who tried to limit the industry's liability after the spill, have combined to vacuum up more than \$1.5 million in contributions from energy and natural-resource companies during their careers. Vitter, the son of a Chevron engineer, attacked his Democratic challenger this fall for daring to suggest that the oil industry had harmed the coast. ([See more pictures of New Orleans.](#))

A few politicians do fight. Foster Campbell, a populist who looks like Captain Kangaroo but sounds like Huey Long, has battled for years for an oil-processing tax that would raise revenue to fund schools, social services and coastal restoration. He sees Louisiana as a classic victim of the "resource curse," an American Nigeria beset by poverty, illiteracy and ecological devastation while outsiders get fabulously rich extracting its mineral wealth. This year, with Big Oil facing its worst political crisis in decades, Campbell's proposed tax got a grand total of six votes in the state senate.

"The oil companies can use Louisiana as a dump and do whatever they damn please, because they own the politicians," Campbell says. "So we're stuck in the mud with Mississippi, fighting for 50th place in everything, and our coast is dying." The focus of America's Wetland, the primary advocacy campaign for restoring coastal Louisiana, is extracting money for the coast from Congress, not from industry. That makes sense, since the group is heavily funded by oil companies. In his book *Down on the Batture*, Tulane law professor and eco-activist Oliver Houck recounts how a platitudinous New Orleans panel discussion on coastal restoration featuring an unnamed Senator — it was Landrieu — froze when someone asked if there were any plans for oil and gas to help pay the bill. "The Senator, a nice person in every way, looked poleaxed, struck by the Strange Question from Mars," Houck wrote. "The moderator coughed and asked whether any member of the panel wished to reply. But he was laughing. He knew that no one did. And no one did."

"Just Not Yet"

Still, the Louisiana political establishment is right to ask the federal government for money to help restore the coast, because the federal government helped ravage the coast. The Mississippi River built southern Louisiana by carrying dirt down to its delta. America's 80-year war to cage the river into its channel with

dams, levees and concrete structures has done wonders for navigation while providing flood protection for cities like St. Louis, Memphis and, yes, New Orleans, but it has also starved the coast of the sediment it needs to survive. And coastal canals like the finally closed Gulf Outlet wrecked tens of thousands of acres of marshes. ([See the heroes and survivors of Hurricane Katrina.](#))

To put it mildly, stopping this devastation has never been the top priority of Louisiana's political establishment. Billy Tauzin, a former Democrat who later became the House Energy Committee chairman, crusaded to gut the wetlands protections in the Clean Water Act. (It's not for nothing that a southern Louisiana highway was named the Billy Tauzin Energy Corridor.) Vitter tried to slip an amendment into an Army Corps bill that would have lifted restrictions on logging in coastal cypress swamps. And before Katrina, the state's entire delegation helped protect the notorious Gulf Outlet, despite decades of warnings that it was a storm-surge shotgun pointed at a great city's gut.

"Our politicians dance with who brung 'em, and the environment didn't brung 'em," says Mark Davis, director of Tulane's Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy. "They're like St. Augustine: 'Yes, we want to fix the coast, just not yet.' "

It's not that Louisiana has lacked clout on water issues. Before Katrina, the Army Corps was spending more there than in any other state. It's just that the members of its congressional delegation were less interested in restoration projects or hurricane protection than pork. They liked water projects that funneled jobs and contracts to their constituents and contributors, especially when the projects benefited powerful special interests in the shipping, barging and farming industries.

So the money went to navigation boondoggles like a \$2 billion channelization of the Red River. Four of its dams were named after Louisiana Congressmen, and the channel is now the J. Bennett Johnston Waterway. The delegation also pushed for a new \$750 million lock on a little-used navigation shortcut to the Port of New Orleans, just a stone's throw from some of the flimsy flood walls that failed during Katrina. When a \$200 million plan to deepen the Port of New Iberia flunked its cost-benefit test, Landrieu inserted language into an Iraq-war bill ordering the corps to redo its analysis. And since Katrina, the delegation has clamored for a series of coastal levees west of New Orleans that would protect a host of bayou towns, even though this so-called Great Wall of Louisiana would tear up more of the marsh. By concentrating storm surges, it could also increase the danger to New Orleans. ([See pictures of the surreal remains of Six Flags New Orleans.](#))

But hope for real restoration has arrived in an unlikely form: the BP spill. The images of oiled pelicans called attention to the ailing coast in a way that Katrina never did, inspiring warnings that the spill could further degrade eroding marshes and push a stressed ecosystem toward its tipping point. These turned out to be false alarms: coastal evaluation teams have discovered less than 1,000 acres (400 hectares) of oiled wetlands, while Katrina and Rita wiped out 130,000 acres (53,000 hectares). But if the spill may not be a teachable moment, it is definitely a fundable moment. Obama has promised to leave the Gulf Coast in better shape than it was before the disaster, and under pressure from Landrieu and the rest of the

delegation, his Administration has pledged to divert "a significant amount" of BP's fines into coastal restoration and protection.

Of course, that just raises more questions. How much is significant? How much for restoration and how much for protection? Would the protection include the kind of levees that would undermine the restoration? And who will decide?

Unless the U.S. learns the deeper lessons of Katrina in a hurry, there's a good chance that BP's cash will finance what Houck likes to call "a Louisiana hayride." Meanwhile, the coast is still sliding into the Gulf. And the Big One is still on the way.

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