

Headline: Congress must look into failure of levees

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Story:

The Democratic congressman who will investigate the Bush administration's for possible wrongdoing has placed the response to Hurricane Katrina at the top of a long list of choices.

Rep Henry Waxman, D-Calif., of the Government Reform Committee didn't say that the response to Katrina was his highest priority, but it was listed first. And that's a good sign that New Orleans and the Gulf Coast are on our 110th Congress's radar.

But it would be even better if Rep. Waxman were to look at the failure of the federal levees built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

True, there has already been a federally led investigation, and the results were released June 1. But that investigation was essentially done by the Corps as it investigated itself. Three independent non-governmental levee investigation teams, including the American Society of Civil Engineers and the National Science Foundation, have criticized that corps' report as incomplete and technically incorrect. The corps' report also included defensive judgments regarding accusations of intentional wrongdoing.

The results of this inaccurate and at times disingenuous study are being used to create the plans to repair and beef up the flood protection system in metro New Orleans, even though scientists and experts are howling that seven out of eight of the corps' more important diagnoses of levee failures are in fact wrong.

With many citizens of New Orleans and the surrounding area still living in FEMA trailers or their upstairs floors, few would argue against the notion that proper flood protection is a No. 1 critical issue. If the corps' report is as flawed as three different independent teams say, then it seems logical that the Government Reform Committee should launch a second study.

A properly conducted investigation may reveal that the levee failures are not the fault of the Bush administration or the Republicans alone, but the result of decades of flawed policy. Therefore, it might not yield the same political damage to the Republican administration that an inquiry into the Katrina failures might. But don't we have the right to a government that looks beyond politics and seeks serious solutions to serious problems?

Rep. Waxman says that it makes no sense to investigate issues where everyone already knows the truth. This is another great reason that a second governmental investigation should be launched to lay bare the facts on the very event that necessitated the gargantuan governmental response -- the breaching of the federal levees.

Like the 9-11 Commission, this second investigation should be bipartisan and independent. This must be done because too many Americans believe the flood protection system broke because the storm was just too big. That is simply not true.

Getting the truth about the New Orleans levee failures in front of the American people will create a much better environment to secure the citizens of New Orleans and south Louisiana the assistance they need and deserve -- and will continue to need and deserve in the decade ahead.

Four decades ago, Congress gave the corps \$738 million to build a flood protection system for greater New Orleans that would protect us from the strongest storm characteristic of our region. Had the corps done its job properly, Katrina's toll on Louisiana would have been some lost shingles, wet ankles and soggy carpets. And Michael Brown might still have his job at FEMA.

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