

## THEY'RE TRYIN' TO WASH US AWAY! (KATRINA)

Randy Newman's lyrics of twenty years ago sum it up pretty well today.

*"The river rose all day  
The river rose all night  
Some people got lost in the flood  
Some people got away alright.*

*Louisiana, Louisiana  
They're tryin' to wash us away  
They're tryin' to wash us away."*

The experts weighed in on their hurricane forecasts just a few months ago. One of the top climatologists in the country, from Colorado State University, said this past March that "the probability of a direct hit on New Orleans remains fairly low." We all make mistakes but this one was a doozy.

During the twelve years I served as Insurance Commissioner, the possibility of "the big one" was often discussed. When and where was the question. And there was always the rather uncomfortable discussion of why New Orleans was the most vulnerable place in the country.

At the U.S. Corps of Engineers' office on the West Bank outside New Orleans, there is a scale model of the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. Computer modules are regularly run to track the worst case scenario of a major hurricane. It was always a path that passed over Plaquemines Parish at Port Sulfur that allowed an easterly tilt with winds spiraling from the west over Lake Pontchartrain.

That is exactly what happened when Katrina hit. The storm made landfall at 6:11 am, and by midmorning was blasting southeast across Lake Pontchartrain. Then the winds shifted east that allowed the swirl to begin. The winds shifted again, dramatically from the north directly at New Orleans, and finally blew from the west directly at the 17th Street Canal that eventually collapsed. Right out of the book. The Perfect Storm.

Many of us talked about the "bowl" for years in discussions of the worst case that could happen. A city surrounded by the nation's largest river, the Gulf of Mexico and the Lake. Massive bodies of water that, as the winds circulated with huge force overwhelmed the city's protective levee rim. There were three levee breaches in all, much more that the old pumps could handle.

John Barry, in his recent book "**Rising tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America**" called that event "America's greatest natural disaster." Not anymore. Even 9/11 has been surpassed as to the damage and loss of life. And this hellish catastrophe is far from over.

When 9/11 took place, rescue workers were able to go in the next day to assess the damage done. In New Orleans, it may be months. 9/11 was cleaned up in a year and a half. It will surely take much longer in the Crescent City. Simply put, there is a new ground zero and it's much worse than the previous one.

And it's terrible to say, but where do we go from here? So far this year, there have been 14 tropical storms, nine hurricanes and six major hurricanes. Twelve more storms are still projected to come this year.

There is much that should have been done to minimize the tragedy we all have been watching hour by hour. Outdated pumps, levees that have sunk and should have been raised and giant floodgates or locks that were planned but never installed at the eastern end of Lake Pontchartrain years ago.

For now, there is much to do in dealing with immediate problems. In my hometown of Baton Rouge, we could see up to 400,000 evacuees coming in for an extended stay. Can we even imagine the logistics involved in absorbing such a number?

Whatever the final outcome of death and destruction, one thing is certain. What happened in the past few days is a defining event. Louisiana and America will never be the same.

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"The earth is mankind's ultimate haven, our blessed terra firma. When it trembles and gives way beneath our feet, it's as though one of God's checks has bounced."  
Adair, Gilbert

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown