

Thursday, September 8th, 2005
Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana

THE STORM IS FAR FROM OVER
THE DAMAGE GETS WORSE! (KATRINA)

In most of the disasters we have witnessed in our lifetime, the cleaning up and assessment of the damage that takes place begins right away. Generally the next day. Even following the tragedy of 9/11, clean-up crews were on the job the following day. But in several south Louisiana parishes, Katrina's viciousness continues day after day. And the harm inflicted will continue for weeks to come.

When Katrina's rage had passed to the north, this region breathed a sigh of relief. It was time to clean up the heavy but containable damage throughout the gulf coast. The real danger could not initially be seen. Then, slowly, but steadily, the waters started to rise throughout New Orleans.

We now are learning that thousands have drowned in and could still be drowning in the murky brew that has now been contaminated more and more each day by sewage and industrial waste. And even worse, there are potentially thousands more who survived the flood yet have perished or will perish from dehydration and disease as they waited or still wait to be rescued.

We now will watch for several months as the effort is made to pump the city dry. And when this is done, the Big Easy and all the surrounding area will have been buried under a blanket of putrid sediment. If only the aftermath of the storm could only be over. But no. We will live through the ramifications of this catastrophic disaster for years to come.

For two days this week, I traveled down the river to Plaquemines Parish, the deepest point of the deep Southern states. The longtime sheriff there, Jiff Hingle, happens to be my brother-in-law. And he made it clear he was looking for all the help he could get. On the way down the river, I stop by Sam's and Wal-Mart in Baton Rouge to load up on socks, underwear, T-shirts and shorts. The sheriff and his staff had not had clean clothes in over week.

Four roadblocks and three hours later, I drove in to what looked like, quite simply, a war zone. The parish line at the highway 28 entrance (the only entrance to the Parish) was blocked by concrete barriers, and with shotgun carrying deputies. The message was clear. You are not going to get back in Plaquemines Parish, unless you have some official public business and you are able to prove it with proper identification.

Two days earlier, the sheriff and a contingent of deputies had a major confrontation with the National Guard. A troop convoy was bussing in several thousand evacuees from the Superdome located in downtown New Orleans. No notice of any kind was given to

the sheriff or other Plaquemines Parish officials. The evacuees were to be dropped at the Naval Air Station in Belle Chase, with no provisions of any kind. No food, no water, no medical facilities, no blankets, no bedding. And no staff to assist them. At the Belle Chase base, there were only three MPs on duty.

"Look, we are just as big a disaster area as New Orleans," said the Sheriff. "What they were doing was moving these people from one disaster area to another. No planning, no provisions, no idea as to what would happen to them when they were dropped off here. It wasn't fair to them, and it wasn't fair to us. I just could not stand by and let this happen."

After much shouting and threats on both sides, the military convoy turned around and went back to New Orleans. "I wasn't happy that we could not have been more help," Hingle expounded. "But we are pretty desperate here right now ourselves. We still have a massive rescue operation going on. I just could not stand by and let these additional problems be put on the backs of the people in my parish."

Hingle makes no bones about the fact that the federal response and most of the state help has been focused on New Orleans. "We've gotten lost in the shuffle, and sadly, have been little more than an afterthought," says the sheriff. He does acknowledge that FEMA representatives are now in the Parish and seem to be making a real effort to be of help. And some 220 New York City police officers arrived the day I left to offer their assistance. Hingle will feed and house them at his office's expense.

When the waters finally recede and the cleanup effort is well underway, then new problems have to be faced. Money becomes a huge problem. Plaquemines and other surrounding parishes face deadlines to make payments on bond issues to finance parish capital outlay projects.

In New Orleans, the Sewerage and Water Board has a payment due on its bonds that financed major construction projects. A multimillion dollar payment will come up in October. But no sewage and water fees are being collected now. So how are they going to make the payments? In Plaquemines Parish, a major detention center was built and paid for by construction bonds, and are being repaid through daily reimbursements of prisoners who occupy jail cells. But all these prisoners have been moved out. There are no payments coming into the Parish. So there is no money to pay off the bond issue.

Other problems abound. On October 1, sheriff's offices throughout this desecrated area will be sending out tax notices. Homeowners will be asked to pay property taxes, and in many instances, their homes no longer exist. How can they possibly be expected to pay this annual assessment? And if the payments are not received, how can these troubled parishes find the funds to pay their operating expenses?

These troubling issues will no doubt be the focus of a necessary special session of the Louisiana Legislature. Look for the governor to call such a session within the next several months.

Unfortunately, those thousands of Louisiana citizens and others on the gulf coast affected by this terrible tragedy can expect no quick fix or easy answers for the difficult consequences and roadblocks in the months to come.

Maybe New Orleans really is a city that care forgot, and Plaquemines and all the surrounding parishes were thrown in for good measure. This human tragedy, being followed in the media from throughout the world, will haunt us as a state and a nation for many years to come.

But now, the real testing time begins. If ever there were a time for local leaders to come together to review and coordinate their emergency and relief efforts, it's now. Otherwise, we may witness another descent into chaos – one from which we may never recover.

“Perhaps catastrophe is the natural human environment, and even though we spend a good deal of energy trying to get away from it, we are programmed for survival amid catastrophe.”

✉ [Greer, Germaine](#)

Peace and Justice.
Jim Brown