

Thursday, September 22nd, 2005
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

BUSES, BUSES, WHAT ABOUT THE BUSES?



There could be a new storm in the Gulf affecting Louisiana in a matter of days. The recurring question, asked time and time again, just a few weeks ago was what happened to the buses? Who can forget the recorded images replayed day after day, of school buses lined up in neat rows and submerged. Why weren't they being used?

New Orleans does have a "comprehensive evacuation plan." Here's what it says about getting out of the city if you don't have a car. "If you need a ride, try to go with a neighbor, friend or relative."

City officials had 550 municipal buses and hundreds of additional school buses at their disposal but made no plans to use them to get people out of New Orleans before the storm, said Chester Wilmot, a civil engineering professor at Louisiana State University and an expert in transportation planning, who helped the city put together its evacuation plan.

Instead, local buses were used to ferry people from 12 pickup points to poorly supplied "shelters of last resort" in the city. An estimated 50,000 New Orleans households have no access to cars, Wilmot said.

So why were there not more buses in operation before the storm? This question is not "second guessing." The same scenario may take place again in a matter of days. Apparently the buses were there, but not the drivers. School and Regional Transit Authority bus drivers had the same concerns as other New Orleans residents. How to get both them and their families evacuated and out of town. That left no one to drive the buses.

The lesson hopefully learned is drivers outside the area need to be available and on notice to come into the city and get the buses moving. And where do they come from? Let me share a personal experience that will shed light.

In 1981, there was a major threat bus drivers for the public transportation system in New Orleans were about to go on strike. Emotions ran high, and there was even talk of violence. The bus drivers wanted more money, or were ready to shut the system down. Mayor Dutch Moriel was asking then Governor Dave Treen to call out the Louisiana National Guard. Their mission was simple. Step in and drive the buses.

I had been elected a year earlier to the office of secretary of state, which is second in line of succession to the governor. Therefore, under the law, if the governor and lieutenant governor were out of the state, the buck would stop with me to sign any executive orders. As the impending deadline drew near, I received a late-night phone call from Governor Treen. He was about to leave the country on an industry seeking trip to Southeast Asia. Lt. Gov. Bobby Freeman was attending a convention, and would not be available to sign the order calling out the National Guard, if it became necessary.

The governor asked me to be on call and stay in Louisiana. I still had my home in Ferriday, LA at the time, and the governor sent the state plane to my local airport in case a quick trip was necessary back to the state capital. Two pilots and a state trooper hung out at my home in the country for several days.

As the possibility for National Guard call up increased, I talked at length with General O.J. Daigle who headed up the National Guard and operated out of Jackson Barracks in New Orleans. I served in the National Guard, under General Daigle's command for some 12 years, and knew him well. We both agreed the full preparations needed to be made in case the call up was necessary.

National guardsmen were put on alert in a number of locations throughout the state. The instructions to the local commanders were clear and simple. Get your units ready to activate. And be prepared to arrive in New Orleans with four hours notice. No more. They should get their uniforms ready, gear lined up, and be ready to go. Four hours notice. They would be expected to arrive in the city of New Orleans, in key bus terminals and start driving.

At the last minute, the contractual disputes were worked out and the strike was averted. Guardsmen were taken off alert, and things went back to normal. But preparations had been made, and with short notice. If it had become necessary, with a few phone calls in a few hours notice, buses would have been running in New Orleans.

I'm not about to sit here and pontificate on why the same system was not operative just a few weeks ago in New Orleans. In the future, others at the national, state and local levels will second-guess and determine what should have been.

All I know now is if there's a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico and if it heads again towards New Orleans, some 50,000 households and over 100,000 city residents who describe themselves as disabled need some way to get out of town. Those who we have empowered to run this public system of ours need to learn from the past, and

not allow the same mistakes to happen again. There are a lot of people who can help. But they need to be put on alert.

ROBERTS: WHY ALL THE MYSTERY?

What would you think if you asked a question to a candidate for Congress, Governor or any other elected office, and were told: "I can't answer the question as to my position on that issue because the subject might come up before me in a piece of legislation, and I must have an open mind, hearing all sides before I cast my vote."

That would seem to be what members of the U.S. Senate have to deal with in considering whether to confirm Judge John Roberts as Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court. Many senators, with good reason, want assurances that the judge will be a careful guardian of every American's basic rights. But so far, he hasn't budged. He has continually refused to give any indication of his legal approach to defend a number of core rights and liberties.

I haven't checked but Roberts could well have been a boxer either in high school or college. He has dodged and weaved around many critical issues during the last two weeks in Senate hearings. Want to hear the joke going around Washington about him? Ask him his position on Roe v Wade, and he's likely to answer: "Either way is a good option for people to get out of New Orleans."

And remember one of his notable decisions was where he upheld the arrest and conviction of a 12 year-old girl in the Washington subway for eating a single French fry.

Roberts has received laudable praise from a cross-section of lawyers who have dealt with him over the years. He comes across as a smart, likable fellow with a pleasant demeanor and style. But this is just not another political appointment. We're talking about the Chief Justice of the highest court in the land.

Let's hope he will put the mystery aside, and offer more candor in the weeks to come. Senators have an obligation to give their "advise and consent" on any nominee to the Supreme Court. That's in the Constitution. The judge has an obligation to meet them halfway in expressing his views on judicial interpretation.. There is just too much in stake.

BOOK REVIEW

For those of you that closely follow SEC Football, you have no doubt read and listened to former Baton Rougean Chris Warner, who writes and updates yearly "A Tailgater's Guide to SEC Football." Chris also hosts a syndicated sports radio show from his home in Fairhope, Alabama, although his heart has always been with LSU.

He has just published his first novel, "The Tiger Among Us," and this fast paced action thriller is receiving raves from reviewers and readers alike. Chris takes us behind the scenes of an international Muslim terrorist movement, and the trail followed by US antiterrorist agents, with much of the action centered in Baton Rouge at LSU. There's colorful characters galore from the Central American jungles of El Salvador, and confrontations in Israel, Greece, and back to a Mediterranean restaurant in Baton Rouge.

Chris has written six other books and looks like he has found his measure with this action novel. You can find it at local bookstores or over the internet at sites like Amazon.com

It doth appear you are a worthy judge;
You know the law, your exposition
Hath been most sound.

- [William Shakespeare](#), *The Merchant of Venice* (Shylock at IV, i

It is the function of a judge not to make but to declare the law, according to the golden mete-wand of the law and not by the crooked cord of discretion.

- [Lord Edward Coke](#)

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown