

Thursday, September 29th, 2005
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

REFLECTIONS ON KATRINA

For years to come, all of us will share our impressions, reactions, and personal experiences about the biggest storm to ever affect us in our lifetime. Can you imagine the books that will be written about what happened just a little over a month ago? Many observers, yours truly included, keep a diary or personal journal. I have for many years, and my jottings were of immense help when I wrote a book several years ago. What follows are thoughts that came to mind as the tragedy unfurled before the storm and after.

Friday, August 26th, 5:30 pm – on my way to reception downtown by the State Capitol Ed Buggs Radio Show (WIBR-1300), just interviewed a key official with the National Hurricane Center in Miami. “Katrina has turned in a much more northerly direction, with a beeline at New Orleans. We are saying a possible Hurricane 4, and you folks are going to have some big problems up there.”

Ed Buggs was stunned. “What? Are you serious? We’ve had no warning of this. You’re telling me it’s going to come right towards New Orleans?”

A few minutes later, I shared this information with several New Orleans legislators. Their reaction was similar to that of Ed Buggs. They had no idea. But this was Friday. Still almost three days before the storm was going to hit.

Two days later, I picked up the Sunday Times-Picayune. The headline was chilling: “KATRINA TAKES AIM.” By this time, the storm was less than a day away. Nothing was said about any mandatory evacuation. In fact, the front page was all about the coming storm. But then you had to go inside to page A-20 to see anything else about the storm preparation. There was no comment from state officials. The mayor of New Orleans was also quoted in Sunday’s paper, less than 24 hours before the storm hit. That quote, “He’s having his legal staff look into whether he can order a mandatory evacuation of the city.” The storm now was only hours away.

Contrast this to what happened pre-Hurricane Rita. Days before it hit, the President became General Patton, taking hands-on authority. FEMA officials were everywhere, days before the storm, and the Governor of Texas was giving constant updates. Apparently a good lesson learned. What a difference just a few weeks made.

Michael Brown who was in charge of FEMA when Katrina hit, was criticized and forced to resign, and with solid justification. The President was blistered for appointing Brown in the first place. But you know what we’ve never seen in the news? The appointment of Brown had to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. They have the opportunity to hold committee hearings, and debate at length his qualifications just like they are doing now for a new Chief Justice. So what happened? There was virtually no debate about Brown’s qualifications on the floor of the U.S. Senate, and his appointment was approved by a vote of 91 to 0. I guess our senators were so impressed that Brown had served as director of the Arabian Horse Association that there were really no other questions to ask.

And when it came time to appropriate \$56 billion dollars to our part of the country, the debate again lasted less than an hour, with not one member of the Senate questioning any checks and balances on these funds. Again, it was a unanimous vote. We were certainly glad to receive the money. But one would assume that a requirement for basic oversight would have been built in from the beginning. But, hey – we’re only talking about \$56 billion.

The new guy over FEMA (David Paulison) certainly has to be an improvement over “Brownie.” But you need to keep an eye on this guy. This is the same FEMA official who, 2½ years ago, suggested that Americans stock up on “duct tape” in order to protect us all against a biological or chemical terrorist attack.

In fairness, Paulison does have extensive background in dealing with disasters. So we’ve gotten rid of the Arabian horse breeder. Now we have in charge Duct Tape Man. The boss of both of these guys, Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff kind of summarizes it all as to how his operation viewed all that happened post-Katrina. I caught his news briefing the Saturday after the storm where he began by saying: “Louisiana is a city that is largely under water ...” Louisiana is a city? Maybe that’s our problem right there. You almost wonder whether this slip-of-the-tongue personified and defined how out of touch our leaders were towards the disaster that finally happened, and how they had been out of touch for so many years.

There should be no doubt that flood control is the obligation of the federal government. We don’t self-generate our own flooding problems here in Louisiana. Someone flushes a toilet in Bismarck, South Dakota, the water ends up in New Orleans. All the levees that you see going up through the northern center of the United States all channel vast amounts of water right through the center of Louisiana.

So has the Army Corps of Engineers shortchanged us on levee construction? Well, there seems to have been plenty of money. \$1.9 billion dollars over the last four years alone to the corps’ civil works projects, far more than any other state in the country. But instead of protecting the levees, it was often siphoned off to other questionable projects, primarily related to the barge industry and other commercial interests.

As the New York Times summed it up: “The Louisiana delegation, second to none in bringing home the bacon, is as much to blame for these skewed priorities as the corps is.” It should be obvious to all these folks involved it’s now time for both a lot of soul searching and a lot of discipline as to how the money is spent in the future.

Clarence Brown was 81 years old and fled his home in New Orleans like thousands of others. His health was poor, and he had lung cancer, heart disease and emphysema. After a tough trip as an evacuee to Texas, he died two weeks after the storm. You may not have heard of Clarence Brown but his nickname was “Gate Mouth.” He certainly was one of the most versatile musicians that ever came out of Louisiana. Cajun, country and blues all together made up a unique sound that he sang, fiddled, and played on his guitar.

I used to go hear him perform at the old Tipatina’s at its original location on Decatur Street. Nobody, even Hank Williams himself who wrote the song, could sing “Jambalaya” any better than Gate Mouth. His fans are all over the world. Eric Clapton often came to his concerts. If you missed hearing Gate Mouth Brown perform, you really missed something special.

INSURANCE UPDATE

Some recent news in the major insurance battle over whether property insurance companies will have to pay for the massive water damage that took place throughout the Greater New Orleans area. Both the New York Times and The Washington Post reported this week that major faults occurred in the levee system that were partially caused by both “design errors” and “construction faults” in building the levees initially. This same conclusion was reached by LSU hurricane experts. Apparently, no act of God here. Here’s what The Times Picayune reported this week.

Levee breaches that led to catastrophic flooding after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita will be

rebuilt to 10 feet by Dec. 1 and will be raised to pre-storm levels by the first day of the 2006 hurricane season, Army Corps of Engineers officials told the New Orleans City Council Tuesday.

No overflowing, but levee breaches. This new evidence will be a major arguing point of those who have filed the recent lawsuit requesting such an interpretation. What's at stake? Only about \$15 billion. The final decision will be a defining moment in history as to whether New Orleans will ever be substantially rebuilt.

"A man who has committed a mistake and doesn't correct it, is committing another mistake."

- Confucius

"Don't ever be afraid to admit you were wrong. It's like saying you're wiser today than you were yesterday."

- Robert Henry

And on a personal note, this will be my last column for a while. I'll be up north, a little time in Nova Scotia, and some other trips throughout the country to check on children, my granddaughter, and catch up on a number of interests that were put on hold by Katrina. I can be reached by mail and email. And note that I will continue to update my Blog each week as well as listing key national and international news articles about Louisiana, as well as posting my weekly poll. Full addresses are on my website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>. Give me a break for a while and perhaps we will visit again.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown