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## **Reckless Abandonment**

By Douglas Brinkley  
The Washington Post

Sunday 26 August 2007

Over the past two years since Hurricane Katrina, I've seen waves of hardworking volunteers from nonprofits, faith-based groups and college campuses descend on New Orleans, full of compassion and hope.

They arrive in the city's Ninth Ward to painstakingly gut houses one by one. Their jaws drop as they wander around afflicted zones, gazing at the towering mounds of debris and uprooted infrastructure.

After weeks of grueling labor, they realize that they are running in place, toiling in a surreal vacuum.

Two full years after the hurricane, the Big Easy is barely limping along, unable to make truly meaningful reconstruction progress. The most important issues concerning the city's long-term survival are still up in the air. Why is no Herculean clean-up effort underway? Why hasn't President Bush named a high-profile czar such as Colin Powell or James Baker to oversee the ongoing disaster? Where is the U.S. government's participation in the rebuilding?

And why are volunteers practically the only ones working to reconstruct homes in communities that may never again have sewage service, garbage collection or electricity?

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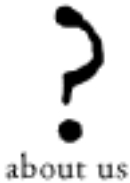
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Eventually, the volunteers' altruism turns to bewilderment and finally to outrage. They've been hoodwinked. The stalled recovery can't be blamed on bureaucratic inertia or red tape alone. Many volunteers come to understand what I've concluded is the heartless reality: The Bush administration actually wants these neighborhoods below sea level to die on the vine.



These days a stiff Caribbean breeze causes residents to jerk into a high-alert state of anxiety. Still unfinished is the overhaul of what some call the "Lego levees," the notoriously flawed 350-mile "flood protection system" that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers started building in 1965.

The Corps has been busy fixing the three principal holes that opened in August 2005. Its hard work has, in fact, paid a partial dividend. A decent defensive floodwall is now on the east side of the Industrial Canal, attempting to protect the Lower Ninth Ward.

Unfortunately, that is where the upbeat news nosedives. The federal government has refused to shut the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet canal that helped cause the Katrina "funnel effect" flooding two years ago. In addition, entire neglected neighborhoods still have no adequate flood control.

The answer to New Orleans's levee woes is painfully obvious: money and willpower. Common sense dictates that the endangered areas - if repopulated (and that is a big if) - demand levees that can sustain Category 5 storms. It's a national obligation. Entire blocks are moldering away while the federal government lifts only a cursory hand to reverse the desultory trend.

Unfortunately, one of the biggest misperceptions the American public harbors is that Katrina was a week-long catastrophe. In truth, it's better to view it as an era. Remember, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s lasted eight or nine years. We're still in the middle of the Katrina saga.

Bold action has been needed for two years now, yet all that the White House has offered is an inadequate trickle of billion-dollar Band-aids and placebo directives. Too often in the United States we forget that "inaction" can be a policy initiative. Every day the White House must decide what not to do.

The stubborn inaction appears to fall under the paternalistic guise of helping the storm victims. Bush's general attitude - a Catch-22 recipe if ever there was one - appears to be that only rank fools would return

when the first line of hurricane defense are the levees that this administration so far refuses to fix.

New Orleans appears to be largely abandoned by the Department of Homeland Security, except for its safeguarding of the Port Authority (port traffic is at 90 percent of pre-Katrina numbers) and tourist districts above sea level, such as the French Quarter and Uptown. These areas are kept alive largely by the wild success of Harrah's casino and a steady flow of undaunted conventioners.

The brutal Galveston Hurricane of 1900 may be a historical guide to the administration's thinking. Most survivors of that deadly Texas storm moved to higher land. Administration policies seem to tacitly encourage those who live below sea level in New Orleans to relocate permanently, to leave the dangerous water's edge for more prosperous inland cities such as Shreveport or Baton Rouge.

After the 1900 hurricane, in fact, Galveston, which had been a large, thriving port, was essentially abandoned for Houston, transforming that then-sleepy backwater into the financial center for the entire Gulf South. Galveston devolved into a smallish port-tourist center, one easy to evacuate when hurricanes rear their ugly heads.

To be fair, Bush's apparent post-Katrina inaction policy makes some cold, pragmatic sense. If the U.S. government is not going to rebuild the levees to survive a Category 5 storm - to be finished at the earliest in 2015 and at an estimated cost of \$40 billion, far eclipsing the extravagant bill for the entire Interstate Highway System - then options are limited.

But what makes the current inaction plan so infuriating is that it's deceptive, offering up this open-armed spin to storm victims: "Come back to New Orleans." Why can't Bush look his fellow citizens in the eye and tell them what seems to be the ugly truth? That as long as he's commander in chief, there won't be an entirely reconstructed levee system.

Shortly after Katrina hit, former House speaker J. Dennis Hastert declared that a lot of New Orleans could be "bulldozed." He was shot down by an outraged public and media, which deemed such remarks insensitive and callous. Two years have shown that Hastert may have articulated what appears to have become the White House's de facto policy. He may have retreated, but the inaction remains.

The White House keeps spinning Bush's abysmal poll numbers by

claiming that his legacy will rise decades from now the way Harry S. Truman's did. But Truman had a reputation for straight talk and bold vision. If Bush wants history to perceive him as Trumanesque, then he must act Trumanesque.

Bush's predecessors moved mountains. Theodore Roosevelt set aside 230 million acres for wildlife conservation (plus built the Panama Canal). Franklin D. Roosevelt began a kaleidoscope of New Deal programs to calm the Great Depression and Truman oversaw the Marshall Plan rebuilding of Western Europe after World War II. Bush could seize the initiative and announce a real plan to rebuild, a partnership between the government, Fortune 500 companies and faith-based groups.

Unfortunately, right now New Orleans is having a hard time lobbying on its own behalf. Minnesota's Twin Cities have about 20 Fortune 500 companies to draw in private-sector money to help rebuild the bridge that collapsed in Minneapolis. New Orleans has one, Entergy, which is verging on bankruptcy. So besides U.S. taxpayers and port fees, New Orleans must count on spiked-up tourist dollars to jumpstart the post-Katrina rebuild.

But this is where the bizarre paradox of living in a city of ruins comes into play. Out of one side of its mouth the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce says, "Come on down, folks! We're not underwater!" Yet these same civic boosters - viscerally aware that the Bush administration is treating the desperate plight of New Orleans in an out-of-sight, out-of-mind fashion - don't want to bite the hand that feeds them large chunks of reconstruction cash. New Orleans is both bragging about normalcy and poor-mouthing itself, confusing Americans about what the real state of the city is.

Recently Mayor C. Ray Nagin, born with the proverbial foot in his mouth, tried to explain why the homicide rate in New Orleans is so appallingly high. When a TV reporter asked, Nagin merely shrugged: "It's not good for us, but it also keeps the New Orleans brand out there." This absurd comment - and dozens like it - hurts New Orleans's recovery almost as much as Bush's policy of inaction.

Everywhere I travel in the United States, people ask, "Why did you guys reelect such a doofus?" There is a feeling that any community that reelected a "first responder" who stayed in a Hyatt Regency suite during Hurricane Katrina, never delivered a speech to the homeless at the Superdome or Convention Center in New Orleans, and played the "chocolate city" race card at a historic moment when black-white healing was needed probably deserves to get stiffed by the federal

government.

And Nagin isn't the only bad ambassador New Orleans has. It also has City Council member Oliver Thomas, Sen. David Vitter and Rep. William J. Jefferson - all currently in deep trouble for potentially breaking the law. Dismayed by such political buffoonery, Americans have simply turned a blind eye to New Orleans's reconstruction plight. There is a scolding sentiment around the country that Louisiana needs to get its own house in order before looking for fresh levee handouts.

Then there are egregious contractor crimes such as over-billing and price-gouging. The medical infrastructure has largely collapsed. Mercy and Charity hospitals remain closed. A severe crisis in mental health care has erupted and gang violence is on the rise. The Environmental Protection Agency refuses to clearly state that it's safe to live in the metro area. Young professionals, recognizing that there are greener pastures all over the nation, are fleeing in droves.

Even with our trillion-dollar debt and excessive military expenses in Iraq, the American people, if presented with a bold plan, might be ready to save the beleaguered city. Perhaps the people haven't lost their good Samaritan grit.

Let's, for once, put New Orleans on the front burner. After all, Katrina exposed all the ills of urban America - endemic poverty, institutionalized racism, failing public schools and much more. New Orleans is just a microcosm of Newark and Detroit and hundreds of other troubled urban locales.

How we deal with New Orleans's future will tell us a lot about our nation's future. In 2008 it should really be an up or down vote. Category 5 levees or not? An independent FEMA or a FEMA still ensconced in Homeland Security? Do we pour \$40 billion into grandiose Louisiana engineering projects or do we instead put up "no trespassing" signs in the areas below sea level? All are hard choices with various merits and pains.

The important thing, however, is for America to decide whether the current policy of inaction is really the way we want to deal with the worst natural disaster in our history.

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*Douglas Brinkley is a history professor at Rice University and the author of "The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast."*

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## **After Katrina, A Lonely Homecoming**

By Peter Whoriskey  
The Washington Post

Sunday 26 August 2007

***Two years later, just a few residents of a tightknit Louisiana community have returned to their ruined neighborhood.***

Arabi, Louisiana - Honie Bauer was the first to move back.

It was seven months after Hurricane Katrina, and she figured others would follow her return to the block of little brick houses they'd all abandoned during the flood. She plunked a FEMA trailer down in her front yard. She mucked out the house. She put up drywall. She laid tile.

The pull of her tightknit community in St. Bernard Parish, or at least her memory of it, was powerful.

"This is home, and I just had to be here," said Bauer, 35, a hospital office manager and a native of the area. "I was going to do whatever it takes."

But while Bauer was charging in, most of her neighbors on the city block bounded by Rowley Boulevard, Fawn Drive, Badger Drive and Fox Drive, were in the midst of a completely different maneuver: They were retreating.

Today, nearly two years after the storm, 11 of 14 properties on the block stand vacant, and in interviews, all but one of those who left indicated they have no intention of returning. Far from rising from the devastation of Katrina, this slice of St. Bernard Parish remains a desolate and depressing place.

It is a scene repeated in flood-ravaged neighborhoods elsewhere along the Gulf Coast, especially parts of the Lower Ninth Ward, Gentilly

and New Orleans East. In St. Bernard, most of the 67,000 residents have not returned. The massive desertions are evidence that Katrina's destructive effects are no longer acute but chronic and that, as evacuees set down roots elsewhere, many close-knit communities blasted apart by the storm may never return.

House after house in Bauer's neighborhood sits abandoned, most boarded up, their darkened facades still bearing the spray-painted symbols that rescuers scrawled on each house to record the dead. Other structures have been demolished down to the concrete slab. In some yards, the grass grows shoulder-high.

Dingy white pump trucks regularly rumble through, stopping at manholes, dropping tubes down and sucking the sewage out of the parish's broken underground system. And in a neighborhood that once enjoyed backyard cookouts for New Orleans Saints football games, those few children who have returned are now forbidden from going barefoot - there's too much broken glass out there - and they complain of having no friends to play with.

"It's like the apocalypse over here now," said Phyllis Puglia, a 52-year-old lawyer and former resident of Fawn Drive. "People are afraid."

Exactly who is to blame for the persistent abandonment is a matter of argument here.

Some point to the FEMA-led rebuilding bureaucracy, which has proved unequal at times to the challenge of rapidly rebuilding the vast wreckage. Others cite paperwork delays plaguing the state-run "Road Home" program, which - eventually - is supposed to distribute federal funds to homeowners.

But the faltering recovery is also tied to the almost primal fear of another inundation. While the Army Corps of Engineers is making massive improvements to the earthen mounds that keep the floodwaters out, many who suffered their failure in Katrina are reluctant to trust the engineers again.

But whatever reasons people have chosen to stay away, their absences are having a staggering effect on St. Bernard Parish.

Neither the Sears, nor the Wal-Mart, nor the Kmart in the parish has reopened. The only hospital and movie theater are closed. So are the two skating rinks and seven of the eight Catholic churches. The neighborhood still lacks phone lines and cable connections.

"The United States is not a Third World country," Anna Simpson, 55, a former neighbor, said in exasperation. "This shouldn't be happening here."

### **Connections Across Generations**

The origins of St. Bernard Parish lie in farming, fishing and shrimping, but by the 1950s, it had evolved into a more conventional suburb of New Orleans.

The population, which was predominantly white and Catholic, was not particularly affluent, but 75 percent of people owned their homes, many of them modest brick houses set close together.

Residents were remarkably clannish. Many people in St. Bernard could boast of having parents or a sibling living within a few houses, and many families had been there for generations.

Darren Dupont's house on Fox Drive was next door to his father's. Phyllis Puglia's on Fawn was a block away from the house she grew up in.

Honie Bauer's father, brother and two sisters had all lived within a few miles of one another, some within walking distance.

Now her brother and sister and their families are living in her three-bedroom house on Fox - nine people, four dogs, two cats and a ferret - as they rearrange their lives after the storm.

Tall and outgoing, Bauer speaks with the r-less regional accent particular to St. Bernard, which here is pronounced something like "Sayn Bin-odd." She seemed surprised that families elsewhere might be far-flung geographically. "We all get along," she explained.

"We don't know any other way - I just don't know any different," she said. "For me to not live near my family would be a struggle."

Those close connections across generations led many to believe that St. Bernard would be one of the first of the flood-ravaged areas to refill with people.

"I knew all along that I'd return," Bauer said.

But as most of her neighbors did, her father, fearing another catastrophe, has left St. Bernard permanently.

"My father thought I was crazy," she said.

### **Fear Drives Departures**

What's left of Darren Dupont's brick house is just the concrete slab it was built upon.

Dupont, 42, a mechanical designer, was born and raised in the neighborhood. Just a year before the storm, he'd bought his first house because it was quiet and within walking distance to a park for his son, Justin, then 10. Less than a block away, too, was the church, St. Robert Bellarmine Catholic, where he had served as an altar boy.

Yet after fleeing Katrina, Dupont decided he would never return.

"My biggest reason for leaving is that I just don't feel it was safe for me and my son," said Dupont, who has moved to Hammond, La. "Never in my wildest imagination did I think something like Katrina would happen. I always knew I lived in a bowl. I just never knew I lived at the bottom of the bowl."

The fear is widespread: Of the 11 households now living elsewhere, nine cited the possibility of another inundation as the primary reason, or one of the primary reasons, for leaving.

As have other residents who were there for Hurricane Betsy in 1965, Darren's father, Erwin, 70, a genial retired air-conditioning technician, has been flooded twice.

"I just didn't want to fight it no more," Erwin Dupont said. "In my mind, Betsy was the benchmark - I didn't think it could get any worse. But then it did."

St. Bernard extends southeast from New Orleans, threatened by the three bodies of water at its edges: the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River and a shipping channel known as the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet - the "Mr. Go" in local parlance.

"They're in a hard area - they really are," said Karen Durham-Aguilera, a Corps official, pointing to a map in her office to illustrate the parish's proximity to the Gulf. "I don't blame them at all for being

worried."

The Corps is in the midst of a \$14.7 billion upgrade to the levees that protect St. Bernard and the New Orleans area. The fate of St. Bernard may lie in whether residents believe that this time they really will be safe.

"I think the Corps mean well," Dupont said. "I just don't think they can ever guarantee you absolute safety."

### **Sadness Turns to Anger**

Daniel Simpson, 58, is a system programmer at a New Orleans hospital; his wife, Anna, 55, is a nurse. Together they raised three children at their house on Fawn Drive, and they describe themselves as "a middle-class family, doing middle-class things."

Their kids attended the St. Robert Bellarmine School; they played at the nearby playground where Daniel coached baseball, basketball and track; his and her families lived nearby.

"It was wonderful to be there," Daniel said.

They have relocated to Lafayette, but Anna still tears up when they pass the old house on the way to visit friends. "Then I'm miserable the whole way back to Lafayette," she said. "We wanted to be there the rest of our lives."

Now, though, they're mad.

The Simpsons were among the early wave of applicants to "Road Home," a state-run program funded with at least \$8 billion in federal money that was supposed to be the linchpin in the rebuilding.

The program promised that homeowners who lacked adequate flood insurance could recoup as much as \$150,000 of their flood losses.

But distribution has proven torturously slow, even insulting at times to applicants, making it even less likely that they will return to their homes. Two years out from the devastation, 3,899 of the 16,195 applicants from St. Bernard Parish - fewer than one-fourth - have received checks.

To participate, each of the Simpsons had to be photographed and

fingerprinted. The extraordinary measures were required to reduce fraud, they were told, but it still rankled.

"We were treated like criminals," Anna said.

It got worse when the appraisers came back and said their \$130,000 house was worth \$92,000. They haggled and months later got the figure up to \$109,000. Then, at last, in April it came up to \$130,000. Deducting the flood insurance they had, the program would yield them about \$40,000.

More than four months later, they haven't seen a check. The paperwork is still being processed, they've been told.

"I'm furious at the process," Daniel said.

"I feel like I have aged 10 years," Anna said. "It's unbelievable how difficult this has been."

"We call it the Road to Nowhere," Daniel said.

### **"We Lost Everything All at Once"**

When Mark Benfatti, an affable restaurateur who has left St. Bernard, mulls over what has happened to his life, he often thinks of "Gilligan's Island."

"You know, when the hurricane was coming, I packed for three days," he said. "And, just like Gilligan, I never got home."

Benfatti and his wife, Donna, like thousands of people from St. Bernard, have moved to one of the communities on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain.

Many of those who fled for the north shore find it more affluent but more impersonal, too, and Benfatti sorely missed seeing familiar faces.

So, earlier this month, he and his wife hosted a \$25-a-head St. Bernard reunion party. After renting a hall and a band, they wondered if anyone would show up.

More than 750 people got tickets, filling the hall, and then the Benfattis closed the waiting list after it reached 50. The party was supposed to start at 8 p.m., but the parking lot began to fill at 7.

"If somebody dies, you miss that person. But you still got your job, you have your neighbors, you have your family," Benfatti said. "Here we lost everything all at once. We can never put back the community."

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*News assistant Jill F. Bartscht contributed to this report.*

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