

Tumbling Down

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New Orleans had a false sense of security. A new report by an independent review panel found that flaws in the manmade levee system were largely responsible for the breaches that caused deadly flooding in and around New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

As John Schwartz reported in yesterday's Times, three dozen engineers and disaster experts studied the region's hurricane protection system and found that the storm system had not been up to the task of protecting the city.

Raymond Seed, an engineering professor at the University of California at Berkeley and the lead author of the report, put it about as succinctly as anyone has in the nine months since Katrina made landfall. "People didn't die because the storm was bigger than the system could handle," Mr. Seed told reporters, "and people didn't die because the levees were overtopped. People died because mistakes were made and because safety was exchanged for efficiency and reduced cost."

In Katrina's immediate aftermath, the suffering of the victims trapped in New Orleans received national attention and generated significant — and well-justified — outrage. The mishandled evacuation of residents and the government's failure to mount effective rescue and relief operations received the most opprobrium.

More quietly, a debate began over whether it was worth rebuilding a city that lay in the path of such unstoppable storms. The rationale against the city's rebirth hinged upon the notion that such damage could not have been prevented and would not be preventable in the future. We are trained by disaster films to see results like those as unavoidable, somehow preordained. What this report says clearly is that much of the death and destruction in New Orleans was a result of human failings, not nature's fury.

It also means that the government has a responsibility to help those whose homes stood behind the ill-designed and poorly built walls. We are barely a week away from the start of the next hurricane season, and another above-average storm season is predicted. While efforts to shore up the battered levee system continue, large parts of it are still vulnerable. We owe it to New Orleans to get it right because there will be a next time.

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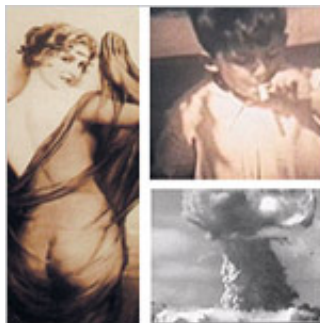




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