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WASHINGTON ROLLED THE DICE AND CRAPPED ON NEW ORLEANS

By: **Jim Moore**

Yes, the New Orleans disaster revealed the ongoing disparity between rich and poor. Yes, it graphically suggested the nagging reality of how our citizens are still evaluated by skin color. And yes, it certainly spoke volumes of why it is sheer folly for human beings to attempt to share the same real estate with a mighty ocean.

But it is more than that. Much more.

Katrina, with her kiss of death, defined for us, in a few devastating hours, just what unspeakable harm a bloated, bumbling bureaucracy can do----by doing nothing at all.

Furthermore, Katrina, the uninvited teacher, calculated for us, once and for all, the ineptitude and irresponsibility of the current administration and our three-monkey Congress.

The lesson Katrina taught us should not only embarrass and humble us, but infuriate us as well. She taught us that when you roll the dice with Nature, be satisfied to walk away with a few chips. Because if you hang around and keep throwing the dice, sooner or later, and when you least expect it, you're going to roll craps. And it's usually when you happen to have the biggest bet on the table.

That is precisely what happened in New Orleans on Aug 31, 2005. For years, Times Writers Serrano and Gouette tell us, both the White House and Congress have been playing hurricane roulette with the levees and dikes, and pumps that must be kept operating night and day to keep Big Easy from floating away.

But that costs money, so the politicians have been rolling the dice, expecting the best, and not preparing for the worst. And that throw of the dice caught up with them, and with New Orleans.

Although the disaster is a product of political hubris and bureaucratic mismanagement there's plenty of blame to go around. Construction proposals were either never finished or under-funded. The Washington high rollers could never decide how much money to bet that a killer hurricane hitting New Orleans was a long shot.

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The government knew---how could they not know, since they had been warned dozens of times---that the New Orleans levees would fold with anything over a Category 3 hurricane. But they kept rolling the dice anyway.

Expert after expert, on the federal, state, and local levels kept asking for money for more and better protection projects. They wanted the dice-rolling to stop. But Washington must like the sound of “bones on the table” because they kept scaling down those requests, as if to tell the folks in the Big Easy: “Never fear, baby, we’re riding with you, even if our money isn’t.”

Think not? Since 2001, local flood prevention officials have asked Washington for \$500 million---considering the danger, it was desperately needed money. Bush approved only a fraction-- \$166 million. This year, local officials asked Washington for \$78 million, also desperately needed. Bush magnanimously covered the bet, but only with half as much--- \$30 million.

Serrano and Gaouette summed it up nicely: “These budget decisions reflect the reality in Washington: To act with an eye toward short-term political rewards instead of making long-term investments to deal with problems.”

Or, as even better expressed by Vincent Gawronski, assistant professor at Alabama's Birmingham Southern College: “Elected politicians are in office for a limited amount of time, with a limited amount of money, and they really don’t have a long-term vision for spending it. So you spend your pot of money where you feel you’re going to get the most political support so you can get reelected. If you invest in these levees, is that going to show an immediate return, or does it take away from anything else?”

Frankly, I can’t see a better “immediate return” on your money than investing in levees that would have kissed off Katrina, protected peoples’ lives, and saved a city.

During her visit to the tragic area, Condoleezza Rice missed that point completely when she uttered this non-sequitur: “Nobody, especially the president, would have left people unattended on the basis of race. There are some things the president can do, and there are some things the government can do.”

And democratic state representative Yvonne Kennedy’s aim also was off-target when she opined: “It’s so unfortunate that the time it takes to rescue them is too long. Had the rescue been more timely, I think we could have saved lives.”

That’s disingenuously putting the proverbial cart before the horse big time. If the administration “had been more timely” in allocating enough money to beef up the levees we might have saved not just some, but ALL the lives.

It’s an ugly, hard-hearted thought, but the irony of it all is that New Orleans had been one of the South’s favorite legendary, fun-living venues: a free-wheeling, game-playing mecca by the sea.

But not anymore--- thanks to a government that prefers rolling dice to rescuing the destitute.



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