

The Real Issue in Dealing with Katrina

By Louis P. Solomon

Hurricane Katrina was a natural event. Its existence was predicted, years ago, and it was only a matter of time until it struck New Orleans and the surrounding area. It appears that approximately 250,000 people have had their lives uprooted and drastically changed. The cost for rebuilding New Orleans, which is still undergoing some detailed discussions in all levels of government, is roughly estimated at \$200 billion.



I have read and heard many different comments about why this catastrophic environmental event caused all the damage it did, and how various parts of the federal, state, and local governments all were partially to blame. The current catch phrase is that there is plenty of blame to go around. But, what did the several government organizations do wrong? If somehow this event could be rolled back in time, and the governments could change their behavior, do we, the public, have any reason to believe that they would do a better job? I am sorry to say that I believe that they would not, and what's more, I have a reason.

I am for political management and political leadership. When a new President, Governor, Mayor or any other leader is elected or appointed, they should form their own team. These leaders should place in positions of power the people who have supported them for years, helped them win elective office, and who have demonstrated not only their loyalty but also their similar political philosophies.

But, in the current era, and by that I mean since the beginning of the 1960s, there has been more and more emphasis on politics, and politically correct solutions. The concept of expertise has fallen into disrepute. And yet, it is only technical expertise that could have saved New Orleans from its current disastrous predicament.

I turn to the concept of the levees. It was well known that the levees could not handle a major hurricane. All the experts told us that. The politicians nodded gravely, but when they heard the price tag (for building the levees to withstand a level five hurricane, which was estimated to be \$14 billion), they said it was too expensive. In essence, they bet your life that a level five hurricane would not occur while they held power. And, in this, case they lost the bet and we all suffered.

Experts know the technical details of things. They spend their entire lives working with their passion. To have a director of FEMA who had no disaster management experience is simply laughable, but it was done, none-the-less. What experts can do, and should do, is to present to their political bosses the risk management calculations. They should, and do, present the consequences if there is a system or component failure. But, the politicians make the final decision, and should do so. There is never enough money and resources to solve all problems, so the decision on what to solve, and when, must be a political decision. The politicians are our representatives, and their decisions affect our lives. But, experts should be heard and considered.

To put this concept in simple terms, consider an airplane. Would you wish to ride in an airplane that had a pilot who was politically correct, or one who was certified as capable of flying the plane? Let me re-emphasize that the owner of the airplane who will travel with it, should make a decision about who to hire. But it seems that their own sense of survival would cause them to pick a certified pilot who had politically correct views, rather than some who only had politically correct posture but was not a certified pilot.

There are many parts of any system: federal, state, local, private, and the like, which do not need technical expertise. But there are some positions such as the head of FEMA, the pilot of an airplane, and the leader of the troops in combat, among others, where political correctness should be of secondary importance. If we

are to survive and handle the future environmental disasters, it is imperative that our future political leaders adopt positions where technical expertise is heeded. I doubt it will happen.

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