

Why rebuild New Orleans? It's a moral imperative and an unrecognized opportunity

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The mistakes made by multiple levels of government after Hurricane Katrina are well documented, but perhaps the greatest oversight was the failure to have a constructive conversation regarding the future of New Orleans. Popular discourse branded as callous anybody who questioned the logic of rebuilding the city. While some of these statements certainly lacked tact, our political sensitivity did a disservice to the city. Almost three-and-a-half years after the storm, many continue to question why we are sinking hundreds of millions of dollars into rebuilding a seemingly doomed region. Only through fruitful discourse can we address these doubts and begin to develop a sustainable plan to renew America's most vibrant city.

There are economic, political, social, and environmental reasons not to rebuild New Orleans. Katrina caused over \$80 billion in damages and there is a legitimate concern about rebuilding if the next hurricane that floods the city will swamp the spent government aid. The city has struggled to generate revenue to justify rebuilding, as the mass exodus of the population has crippled business in the city. Additionally, a history of political corruption plagues New Orleans. The Louisiana and New Orleans governments must overcome this stigma to gain the support of skeptical outsiders that wonder if federal aid is really paying for public programs.

Even before the storm, New Orleans ranked as one of the most dangerous cities in the country. In 2004, they had the largest murder rate per capita of the country's large cities (25.5 murders per 10,000 people), 25 percent more than the runner-up on the list, Detroit. The education system is decrepit. Before the storm, one in four adults in New Orleans did not even have a high school diploma, and 23 percent of New Orleanians lived in poverty, well above the 12.7 percent national average, according to the Census Bureau.

Ultimately, however, New Orleans' greatest weakness is that it is in one of the most environmentally precarious positions of any major city in the United States, located ten feet below sea level and on a silt embankment of the violent Mississippi River. The barrier islands that for so long protected it from many major storms are disappearing at a staggering rate. Any rebuilding effort faces destruction from an increasingly dangerous hurricane season every May through November.

Clearly, there are many reasons not to rebuild the city, formulating a defensible policy decision. Yet those who argue this point fail to consider the costs associated with abandoning New Orleans' present location. The country would suffer economically with its abandonment: over 500 millions tons of cargo comes through the port of New Orleans each year, and 13 percent of our imported petroleum enters the U.S. through the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port. The state of Louisiana would lose the majority of its tax base without revenue from its largest city.

The city's intangibles, the social reasons to rebuild, make the project essential. Anyone who has visited or lived there has experienced New Orleans' culture of cuisine, jazz, Mardi Gras, art, nightlife, and market shopping. These traditions have been handed down to successive generations for centuries, and they define the city's assets better than any cost-benefit analysis. The locals maintain an ethos of friendliness,

humor, and a relaxed attitude that gives the Big Easy its name. If we abandon it, we lose one of the few American cities with a distinct culture and history.

Forsaking New Orleans would also be a humanitarian and logistical nightmare. Some residents stayed because their families had lived there for decades and their ancestors for generations. Others simply had nowhere else to go, both before and after the storm. The costs of relocating the over 1 million residents living in the greater New Orleans area could be even greater than rebuilding the city. The government would have to provide, among other subsidies, housing, transportation, job placement programs, and incentives for other localities to accept a population stigmatized by crime and poor education. Forcing residents who have neither the desire nor the means to relocate would transfer the social problems they have faced in New Orleans to a new city. Instead of prolonging failed urban policies in other cities, we must confront the city's problems head-on.

We can turn the city's devastation into an opportunity to start anew. Countless cities face similar problems to New Orleans: a struggling economy, unsustainable environmental practices, failing schools, and high crime rates. A leadership commitment from a White House that appears to care about urban policy can use New Orleans as a test tube for progressive policies. The city can serve as a template for urban centers around the U.S.

President Obama's stimulus plan calls for a large amount of government spending on infrastructure, modernizing our energy grid, education programs, and Medicare improvements. This subscription to Keynesian economics sets an example for how the federal government can both sustainably rebuild New Orleans and improve the country's economy. Should it receive this support, one of the first job-creating projects the city can undertake is addressing the environmental perils threatening the city.

The disappearing wetlands that border the Gulf Coast and the unnatural diversion of the Mississippi River north of the city are two challenges begging for attention. By reengineering the regeneration of the wetlands and redesigning the Mississippi's route to allow for seasonal flooding further upriver in undeveloped marshland, the likelihood of another Katrina decreases. These public works projects have the potential to create tens of thousands of jobs and bring investment to the area.

One long-term solution involves replicating a massive system of dikes and levees employed by the Dutch. The Netherlands, 60 percent of which is below sea level, utilizes a system called Delta Works that controls water flowing inland during high tides without causing destructive flooding. While Delta Works costs far more than the United States would be willing to spend on a water management system of similar complexity, it offers a road map that will enable the United States to begin to tailor a system applicable to the Gulf Coast.

Furthermore, environmentally sustainable homes can be subsidized for New Orleans' residents. This will return locals to their homes and provide a valuable lift to businesses in renewable energy, a valuable industry needing a boost to gain a foothold in the marketplace. If we are serious about tackling our environmental challenges, what better place to demonstrate the advantages of sustainable development than New Orleans?

Progressive social policies can be implemented in the city as well. With public schools essentially destroyed, new school systems and programs can be developed from scratch. These educational programs can focus on the specific needs of the population

by utilizing innovative methods instead of relying on traditional standardized procedures. At-risk youth can benefit from the implementation of pilot programs proven to reduce street violence in other cities. This country's maladroit war on drugs can be retooled within New Orleans, with a focus more on prevention than punishment. Innovative public transit systems can bring the city's residents to jobs they previously could not access. Of the 23 hospitals open in the greater New Orleans area prior to Katrina, only 13 are open as of December 2008, meaning there is a significant need for healthcare in an industry begging for new ideas and reform. Grassroots participation among community centers, businesses, churches, and local planners can tailor these policies to fit the city's unique needs while designing a template for how to engage historically disenfranchised citizens in our democratic process.

Of course, the process will not be easy. Fiscal conservatives will strongly oppose spending federal dollars on progressive policies in New Orleans. Perhaps with support from Republican Louisiana Senator David Vitter, President Obama can push a New Orleans stimulus plan past the 60-vote threshold in the Senate. Something must be done, lest we continue to disregard hundreds of thousands of American citizens, a deplorable human rights violation. If we focus our efforts towards sustainable redevelopment, we can ensure that a Katrina-like tragedy will never happen again. Additionally, one of America's greatest cities can be remade as an example to the rest of the country's cities on how to attack our most daunting urban challenges.

Suggested Further Reading:

- Associated Press. "Hurricane recovery confronts low literacy rate." MSNBC.com. Aug. 26, 2008. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26413788/>.
- El Nasser, Haya. "A New Orleans like the old one just won't do." USA Today. Sept. 18, 2005. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-09-18-new-orleans-rebuilding_x.htm
- Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. "The New Orleans Index." Fall 2008. <http://gnocdc.s3.amazonaws.com/NOLAIndex/NOLAIndexDataTables.pdf>
- Knaek, Ruth Eckdish. "In the Same Boat." *Planning*, Aug/Sept 2008, Vol. 74, Issue 8. p 40-43. Retrieved from Ebsco Host, February 8, 2009.