

In wake of flood, plan regional exodus

Plenty of middle-finger pointing in Katrina's wake has been directed appropriately at George Bush, but the folks who have adroitly dodged the bird during this clammy calamity have been the French. Three hundred years ago they built their New World capital along a portage between the second-biggest salt lake in the country and the Earth's third-largest river. Now, as sad as it is, we must say "Adieu."

The Mississippi measures 200 feet deep and stretches a half mile across at New Orleans. As she swaggers through town, her trip resembles an elevated highway designed by an errant band of engineers drunk on bourbon and lust. Just to the north, covering 630 square miles and boasting the world's longest bridge, Lake Pontchartrain averages two fathoms deep. Most of her prime, lakefront bayou, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, drifts with Delphic certainty between "swamp" and "marsh." Meanwhile, with the insipid power of a professional bouncer, her "armored" shore looms heavily over the north side of the former party capital of the world.

Since flooding from multiple levees along the river and the lake caused most of Katrina's damage, one could argue that plans for the next Mardi Gras would still be under way - if only the Bush Administration had adequately funded the dikes. Fair enough, but there is another problem that trumps concerns about the next hurricane, even in all its globally-warmed glory.

Ironically, the problem is about having less water in the river, not more. As John McPhee describes in *The Control of Nature*, over 300 miles north of the Mississippi's mouth, the river is attempting to change its course by branching west into her largest distributary, the Atchafalaya. Augmented during the 1940s by an influx from the Red River, which for thousands of years had been a tributary to the Mississippi, the Atchafalaya was well on its way to leading the deltaic dance downstream. By 1950, everyone knew that the mighty Miss was scheduled to slow to a trickle. In response to the void, the Gulf would then engulf New Orleans and all of its associated industry upriver to Baton

Rouge. So, that year, Congress decreed that nature should be arrested and solitarily confined - forever. In 1963, with the completion of a ten-pier check dam at the new confluence of the Mississippi and the Atchafalaya, "there was a change of command," McPhee explains, "as the Army replaced nature."

It's an impressive structure, but there are few better examples of hubris in that face of natural law. In this fight, it is just a question of time before we lose. So, if we don't take our heads out of the sludge and begin to plan a mass exodus, we will someday be responsible for the death of the Gulf of Mexico. Must this be how the world ends, not with a bang, but a soaking?

The task of relocating so much industry is 20,000 leagues more profound than it would have been in 1950, but now, with a vacant New Orleans, the timing is convenient. As taxpayers, we ought seriously to question the intelligence of any plan to rebuild in a land better suited to frogs. Clearly a delta is an irresponsible place to build human communities, let alone those as toxic as the ones we



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create. Yes, there are other bad places to make camp (30 miles downwind from Los Alamos comes to mind), but instead of getting involved in yet another Bush quagmire, we should learn our lessons and let the Big Easy rest in peace.

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