

Guest editorial, September 10, 2005

# Make It an Island

By BRUCE BABBITT

AFTER the victims are interred and public officials held to account for the destruction of a great American city, Congress must determine what to rebuild and what to abandon to the encroaching waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

New Orleans will survive only as an island surrounded by miles of open water. It will take a national effort, led by our best scientists, engineers and city planners, to achieve even this reduced vision of an American Venice. We must take the time to redesign the city to function as an island, with an island infrastructure, including relocated streets, highways and utilities. The island will need higher, stronger seawalls and levees sufficient to withstand new threats, including the rising sea levels and bigger hurricanes spawned in warming Atlantic waters.

Sea levels are likely to rise two to three feet in this century. Coastal maps drawn from consensus estimates show that virtually all of the delta lands south of Baton Rouge and below Interstate 10 - some 5,000 square miles - will be submerged by the end of this century.

State and local officials are understandably in denial about the impending loss of so much Louisiana land and heritage. The depth of their paralysis is underlined by a recent program to collect discarded Christmas trees from New Orleans to stack on barrier islands against the tides.

In recent years state agencies assembled a \$14 billion project called Coastal 2050. One of its proposals was to cut gaps in the Mississippi River levees, which would provide outlets for the river to deposit some of its sediment onshore to help rebuild the delta. This idea may help in a few areas, but it will do little to offset the vastly larger forces of a rising sea.

Other proposals in the package include building coastal barriers, plugging delta channels dredged by oil companies and re-vegetating barrier islands. But overall the Coastal 2050 projects have as much chance of success as King Canute commanding the tides to recede.

Congress should resist the urge to appropriate huge sums for piecemeal reconstruction efforts. Restoration of the city and the delta will be a national effort, and it should be guided by a national plan. Congress should charge a commission of our best scientists, engineers and planners to assess the alternatives, draw up a regional land plan and recommend a realistic course of action.

*Bruce Babbitt, a former secretary of the interior, is the author of the forthcoming "Cities in the Wilderness."*

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Editorial

## What Florida Can Teach Us Bruce Babbitt

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Disasters such as the one that hit New Orleans are usually foreshadowed by similar events that can provide important lessons for the future. In 1928 one such precursor hurricane swept across Florida, taking dead aim at Lake Okeechobee. Storm waters smashed through the dikes, sweeping away the small agricultural communities south of the lake.

More than 2,000 residents perished, most of them African American. Many bodies were never recovered. Others were retrieved, separated by race, burned and buried in segregated mass graves.

In the aftermath, Florida called for help. Congress responded by dispatching the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct a dike, 45 feet high and 40 miles long, around the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee. The plantation economy of the region gradually returned to normal, and Lake Okeechobee has never since threatened to break loose.

But that is not the end of the lesson. In 1947 and 1948 two more big hurricanes hit South Florida. Bypassing Lake Okeechobee, the storms left 90 percent of South Florida underwater, prompting the president to declare an emergency and the governor to call out the National Guard to patrol the streets of coastal cities.

Once again Florida called Washington for help. By then the Corps of Engineers and the state of Florida were awakening to a larger reality. Just building another dike in the path of the last hurricane was not enough. That Maginot line mentality had to be abandoned in favor of a flexible battle plan to manage water across the entire landscape of South Florida -- at all times and under all conditions.

Managing the waters and the land on this scale would require new institutional arrangements, and Florida proved up to the task. In 1949 the state legislature created what is today known as the South Florida Water Management District, vested with powers to plan land use, manage storm waters across southern Florida and levy property taxes to pay the bill.

Congress responded by authorizing the Corps of Engineers to enter into a permanent partnership with Florida, including 50-50 cost sharing for approved plans. With continual revision and updating (including recent efforts to improve the ecological functioning of

the Everglades), the partnership endures to this day. The hurricanes still come, but the biblical-scale floods are a thing of the past.

Now back to Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The important lesson is: no piecemeal responses. Hurricanes strike randomly, and they must be countered with broad strategic plans. Begin at the state level by creating a regional water management agency modeled on the Florida experience, given powers and financing adequate to the task.

If Louisiana takes the lead and organizes to meet the challenge, it should expect the federal government to become an equal partner, just as it did in Florida. Then create a comprehensive plan, not just for New Orleans but also including Morgan City, Houma, Thibodeaux, the Atchafalaya River Basin -- the entire delta region.

The Louisiana delta is a more challenging case than South Florida. The Mississippi River, which spread its sediment load throughout the delta, is now imprisoned behind levees that sluice sediment out to sea. Global warming will cause sea levels to rise as much as two to three feet in this century.

Whatever steps are taken, large regions of the delta will inevitably be lost to the sea. And almost half of the nearly 5 million residents of Louisiana live on land lying less than three feet above sea level. Within the next generation many delta communities will have to be relocated to higher ground. All the more reason to begin now with a realistic national plan of action.

The writer was secretary of the interior from 1993 to 2001 and is the author of the forthcoming book "Cities in the Wilderness."