

MEMORANDUM

To: Dr. Genie Stowers
From: Nikole Pagan
Date: October 23, 2008
Re: Hurricane Katrina: A Man-Made Crisis?

In his essay "The Study of Administration," Woodrow Wilson (1886) argued for a science of administration where "service of the state is removed from political life." (p. 10) Wilson believed that by separating politics from administration, the actions of government would be shielded from the capricious moods of political leaders and the sovereign public. Additionally, Wilson argued that the study of administration would increase efficiency and accountability. What is notable about the Hurricane Katrina case is that politics impeded administration at almost every step: from the choice to build a major city in such a precarious environment to the pursuit of the levees-only policy in spite of numerous systemic failures; from the unsustainable development patterns to attract commerce to segregation policies that left African Americans disproportionately vulnerable; from the failure to heed expert warnings about the impact of a category 4 or 5 hurricane to the lack of preparedness of a federal government more concerned with planning for post-9/11 terrorist attacks; and finally, from the failure to act decisively to evacuate New Orleans quickly to the thoroughly mismanaged post disaster response.

This memorandum will discuss 3 key issues impacted by the failure to separate politics from administration which turned a natural disaster into a national tragedy; (1) unsustainable environmental policies and development patterns that left New Orleans particularly at risk; (2) the vulnerability of African Americans due to systematic patterns of economic and racial segregation; and (3) the failure of the inter-agency response due to ineffective collaboration and lack of clear authority. Additionally, the interests of important stakeholders will be discussed as they relate to these issues. Finally, recommendations for resolving each of the aforementioned issues will be made.

ISSUES OF UNSUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES & DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS

From its earliest settlement by the French in the 18th Century, New Orleans has experienced chronic flooding due to its location between lakes, rivers and sea. De La Tour, the city's first chief engineer understood the site was inappropriate, but its strategic placement provided access to the Mississippi River from the Gulf of Mexico and made the city politically desirable as a port location. In response to continual flooding, planners looked to levees and dams to tame the Mississippi, preventing renewal of wetlands which serve to absorb water. The levees-only policy proved time and again to be ineffective, yet planners did not alter their development schemes. Pumping flood water into Lake Pontchartrain sank the city further below sea level. With the industrialization of New Orleans came increased attention to infrastructure, but

population growth overpowered the city's drainage system, exacerbating flooding issues. Further, much of the later development occurred in areas at or below sea level, putting inhabitants directly into harms way.

Recommendation: Unfortunately, we cannot go back in time and start New Orleans' development over. What we can do, is take the lessons learned from the past and apply them to future development. Planners must take a holistic approach to planning, accounting for limitations of the environment while discontinuing development patterns that build on past mistakes. Wilson (1886) stated that "the object of administrative study is to rescue executive methods from the confusion and costliness of empirical experiment" (p. 7) New Orleans' planning has been a long series of costly empirical experiments that overwhelmingly failed. Accordingly city planners need to broaden the scope of re-development to include ecological restoration, working with both urban planners to re-build human settlements and environmental specialists to restore wetlands and barrier islands.

ISSUES OF SYSTEMATIC PATTERNS OF ECONOMIC & RACIAL SEGREGATION

New Orleans has a history of discrimination against African Americans, borne out in their property laws. An ordinance prohibiting African Americans from residing in white neighborhoods was passed in 1924. At the time, property deeds were only issued to African Americans for certain areas of the city – the areas most susceptible to flooding. The federal government exacerbated this problem with the passage of housing acts in 1937 and 1940 that further concentrated African Americans in areas vulnerable to flooding. Beginning in the 1970s, the New Orleans economy shifted toward a service economy, and higher educated Caucasians moved out of the city while many in the African American community remained. When Katrina struck, African Americans were fully 67% of the city's population, and 27% of New Orleans residents lived at or below poverty levels.

Recommendation: Wilson (1886) believed in the sanctity of public office as a public trust. Government policies throughout New Orleans' history failed the African American community. In order to establish trust within this community, the city of New Orleans reverse patterns of discriminatory development by disallowing rebuilding in low lying neighborhoods. Additionally, developers must be required to build mixed-income housing in stable areas of the city, providing market-rate as well as subsidized housing to returning residents. (Ceruso,1995)

ISSUES OF INEFFECTIVE COLLABORATION & LACK OF CLEAR AUTHORITY

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina the 11-person House select committee established by President Bush to investigate the Katrina response determined the response had been a failure at every level. Particularly notable were the

failure of government agencies to share critical information with each other and confusion over issues of responsibility and authority. Louisiana's governor, Kathleen Blanco directed the response of state agencies and the National Guard. New Orleans' Mayor Clarence Nagin, Jr. managed city workers. FEMA director Michael Brown was the front man for the Federal Government. None of these actors worked to coordinate efforts. Communications breakdowns between agencies lengthened response times: evacuation did not begin as soon as it should have; state and local agencies failed to impose law and order in a timely manner; authorizations for help from other states languished in the Pentagon before being sent.

The question of who had the authority to act decisively also contributed to the lengthened response time. In our federal system, the states are the first responders to disasters within their borders, and the Stafford Act prevents the President from declaring a natural disaster at the state level. By their nature, catastrophic events like Katrina defy a single state's ability to respond, and help from other states and the federal government is inevitable.

Recommendation: Wilson (1886) believed that federalism should combine independence between the levels of government with mutual helpfulness. (p.12). In other words, political maneuvering should be set aside, allowing an intergovernmental, inter-agency response. Following the example of the Virginia fire-fighters' response to the Pentagon on 9/11, local and state authorities must institute an Incident Command System (ICS) for future disasters. The ICS model allows emergency responders to create a temporary organization that provides a consolidated management structure for the emergency response coordinated by a single Incident Commander or a Unified Command Team. (Varley, 2003) By collaborating rather than arguing over who has proper authority when a disaster strikes, leaders are in a position to leverage resources to handle the rapid pace of events, while recognizing need for diverse skills in order to act more effectively. (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004)

CONCLUSION

New Orleans is located in an area prone to hurricanes and flooding. Another Katrina is not only possible, but likely. In order to prevent the man-made disaster Katrina became, local, state and government authorities must act to resolve the issues discussed in this memo: unsustainable environmental policies and development patterns; systematic patterns of economic and racial segregation; and ineffective collaboration and lack of clear authority in disaster response. By heeding Wilson's call to separate politics from administration and implementing the recommendations to marry urban planning with environmental sustainability, build mixed-income housing in safe areas, and implement an Incident Command System, the man-made portions of this catastrophe can be avoided.

Works Cited

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