

Who's Killing New Orleans?

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It's hard to worry about racism and poverty after you've been murdered.

President Bush's advisers insist that he's not abandoning conservatism in his commitment to rebuild the Gulf Coast. But a mark of conservative thinking is properly identifying problems before dedicating billions to solving them. The president hasn't done that in New Orleans. Instead, in his September 15 speech from Jackson Square, Bush vowed to combat "poverty"—a foe that cities and the feds have never conquered in their long war against urban decay.

In the language of Lyndon Johnson, Bush ascribed the violence and desperation Americans saw in New Orleans in the days after Hurricane Katrina to "deep, persistent poverty in this region. . . . That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America." The president then issued a call to the nation: "We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action. . . . Let us rise above the legacy of inequality."

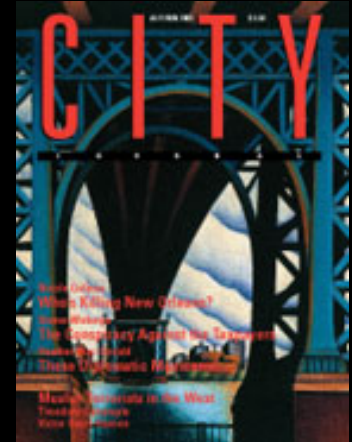
But amorphous talk about poverty, racism, and inequality won't help New Orleans rebuild. New Orleans has two more pressing—and much simpler—problems that need fixing right now.

The first is obvious: "Gulf Opportunity Zone" or no, businesses won't invest in New Orleans again, and workers won't live there again, unless the government protects the city with the best flood barriers that technology and money can provide. This job is hard—but civil engineering actually works, unlike the social engineering that Bush has invited with his lament about urban Southern poverty.

The second job is less obvious. New Orleans's immutable civic shame, before and after Katrina, is not racism, poverty, or inequality, but *murder*—a culture of murder so vicious and so pervasive that it terrorizes and numbs the whole city.

In 2003, New Orleans's murder rate was nearly eight times the national average—and since then, murder has increased. In 2002 and 2003, New Orleans had the highest per capita city homicide rate in the United States, with 59 people killed per year per 100,000 citizens—compared to New York City's seven. New Orleans is a New York with nearly 5,000 murders a year—an unlivable place. The city's economy has sputtered over the past generation partly because local and state officials have failed to do the most elementary job of government: to secure the personal safety of citizens.

The president wasn't alone in his misperception of what ails New Orleans. In the aftermath of the storm, hand-wringers wondered why they hadn't noticed before



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that so many American blacks live in Third World conditions—supposedly only because they're black. CNN's Wolf Blitzer voiced white America's knee-jerk best: "You simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals. . . . So many of these people, almost all of them that we see, are so poor, and they are so black," he mused on the air.

But Americans didn't notice this before because it's not true. Despite the president's rhetoric, and despite those indelible images from the Superdome and the Convention Center, New Orleans is just as much a black success story as a black failure story.

Yes, New Orleans has a 28 percent poverty rate, and yes, New Orleans is 67 percent black. But nearly two-thirds of New Orleans's blacks aren't poor.

Yes, it's true that nearly 25 percent of New Orleans's families live on less than \$15,000 a year, according to the 2000 Census. But 19 percent of New York's families live on less than \$15,000—and it's much more expensive for poor people to live in New York, making them poorer. The median monthly New York rent is \$705, and the median monthly mortgage is \$1,535—compared with monthly costs of \$488 and \$910 respectively in New Orleans.

Despite the images of collective helplessness broadcast after Katrina, New Orleans does not have a stratospherically high government-dependency rate. In 2002, it had 6,696 families on cash welfare, or 3.6 percent, compared with New York City's 98,000 families, or 3.2 percent. In 2000, 7.8 percent of New Orleans households received Supplemental Security Income, compared with 7.5 percent in New York.

Anyone familiar with New Orleans knows that the city is filled with hard-working people—most of them black. Welfare reform, in New Orleans as in the rest of the country, worked; between 1996 and 2002, Louisiana cut its welfare rolls by 66 percent. The only virtue of New Orleans's tourism-dependent economy is that those with few skills who want to work can work; the city's unemployment rate was 5.2 percent during 2004, lower than New York's 7.1 percent.

But not all black New Orleanians are consigned to working as busboys or hotel maids. The city long has had a substantial black middle class, and indeed a black affluent class.

After Katrina hit, Jarvis Deberry editorialized in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* about a black New Orleans doctor who had evacuated to Houston before the storm: "Like so many of New Orleans's black doctors, lawyers, accountants, dentists, politicians, professors and entrepreneurs, [Crittty Hymes] made her home in eastern New Orleans, an area hit especially hard by the floodwaters," Deberry wrote. "Despite its devastation, the area known as New Orleans East, the other part of the 9th Ward, hasn't gotten much attention. . . . Despite the wealth, fame or stature of many of its residents, for too many people now covering New Orleans, the area simply doesn't exist."

New Orleans's legacy of black achievement is part of the complicated race history of a complicated city, and dates back to before emancipation. "There has been a black middle class in New Orleans dating back to the antebellum period,"

says native New Orleanian Edward F. Haas, a professor at Wright State University in Ohio who specializes in the history of the modern South.

During slavery, New Orleans had the largest urban population of free blacks after Baltimore. As Haas relates, the children who were the product of “mixed sexual unions” were often sent to Europe for education by their white fathers—and often returned better educated than many of their white local counterparts. With the help of substantial inheritances, they formed a black elite that persists in New Orleans to this day.

Likewise, less wealthy New Orleans blacks, “with their commitment to education, industry and self-reliance, defied all stereotypes of black inferiority” and formed New Orleans’s vibrant black middle class, Deberry wrote in his *Times-Picayune* piece. “[O]ther southern cities would develop black middle classes that would dwarf New Orleans’s. But that doesn’t mean the one in New Orleans ever went away.” The city’s historically black colleges—Dillard University, Southern University at New Orleans, and Xavier University—have never stopped churning out educated, middle-class black graduates.

The fruits of this culture of black achievement are evident. New Orleans’s government has been predominantly black for three decades. Its corporations fill white-collar and clerical jobs alike with qualified black workers. Ray Nagin, New Orleans’s current black mayor, embodies both of these trends: he was an executive at New Orleans’s Cox Cable (now part of Cox Communications) before he took office three years ago.

New Orleans does have its predominantly black and predominantly white neighborhoods. But though no land of perfect color blindness, it is more integrated on a day-to-day level, both in neighborhoods and in the workplace, than New York and certainly than a city like Boston. Moreover, it’s simply not true that black New Orleanians disproportionately lost their homes after Katrina because the whites built long ago on the only high and dry land available. Lakeview, a rich white area of \$1 million homes (yes, because of the backyard views of Lake Pontchartrain), is devastated. St. Bernard, a parish of mostly working-class and middle-class white bedroom communities, was devastated too.

But what about the TV pictures of those black people in the Superdome and the Convention Center in the five days after Katrina, ragged, dirty, desperate, and screaming for help? Isn’t this a grave symbol of how unjustly “we” treat the black community?

It’s safe to assume that *these* were New Orleans’s poorest, all thrown together, with no way out of the city before the storm. Those who sought public shelter undoubtedly included many of New Orleans’s thousands of welfare families.

But even those images aren’t representative of New Orleans’s poorest. The people who took refuge in the Superdome and the Convention Center were photographed after days of stewing in filth and fear. The post-Katrina Superdome image was an emblem of a failure of local and state governments to evacuate vulnerable citizens before the storm, and an equal failure of the federal government to respond after the storm. It’s a symbol of the need for rational civic

planning and for a rational approach to federal homeland security—not for a new government war on poverty.

However, one other aspect of New Orleans's post-Katrina nightmare was representative: the murderous crime wave that seemed to grip the city just hours after the eye of the storm had passed. Unfortunately for New Orleans's future, the media now are dismissing the terrible crimes that took place as a figment of hurricane survivors', and of reporters', imaginations.

"The media's willingness to report thinly attributed rumors may . . . have contributed to a cultural wreckage that will not clean up easily. . . . Victims, officials and reporters all took one of the most horrific events in American history and made it worse than it actually was," *New York Times* media reporter David Carr lectured in mid-September. "Four weeks after the storm, few of the widely reported atrocities have been backed with evidence," the *Times-Picayune* concurred on September 26.

Even the Right now denies the violence that New Orleans suffered in the storm's aftermath: "We now know, thanks to valuable post-mortems by the *Los Angeles Times* and the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, that a great deal of the 'great reporting' was in fact great rumor mongering," *National Review's* Jonah Goldberg grumbled. "The stories of rape and murder in the Superdome were all unfounded. Six people died in there, tragically. But nobody was murdered. All of the major newspapers contributed to the hysterical environment."

It's true that one horrific rumor that Katrina spawned was indeed false—dozens of people weren't raped or killed at the Superdome or at the Convention Center. But the media have extrapolated from this hollow relief a new myth: that New Orleans *wasn't* a haven for mayhem after the flood. This is a comforting revision. But obscuring an already blurry truth won't help New Orleans rebuild. New Orleanians did prey on their fellow citizens in the aftermath of Katrina—and some of their victims were killed.

The *New York Times's* own Dan Barry, a longtime metro columnist with no history of lying, hallucinating, or repeating tall tales, witnessed the corpse of a murder victim that had been lying out for days smack in the middle of New Orleans's central business district. "A Louisiana state trooper around the corner knew all about it: murder victim, bludgeoned, one of several in that area," Barry wrote on September 8.

Of a separate incident, the *Times-Picayune* reported on August 31: "Neighbors in the area near Hickory and Short Streets Uptown said a body has been floating nearby in five feet of water since the unidentified man was shot five times on Monday. Neighbors said the shooting was reported, but police and other officials apparently have been unable to respond."

Further credible incidents of violence: the *Times-Picayune* reported August 30 that the day after the storm a New Orleans cop was "in surgery at West Jefferson Medical Center after being shot in the forehead . . . by a looter after he and another officer confronted a number of looters." The paper reported September 7 that one 21-year-old man was in custody for allegedly "shooting at a relief helicopter from an apartment window."

The *New York Times* has confirmed that one person was murdered at the Convention Center and one at the Superdome, and the *Times-Picayune* has confirmed that a National Guardsman was attacked by an assailant wielding a metal rod in the darkened Dome. The coroner's early report implies that the murder rate among those stranded in Katrina's aftermath was at least five times New Orleans's normal murder rate. This real, not imagined, violence prevented New Orleans from getting the level of volunteer and professional help it needed after Katrina.

Adding to the confusion, multiple reports implicate the police in the violence, though whether the cops were justified or not isn't clear. These reports haven't been debunked. For example, the Associated Press reported September 4 that "police shot eight people carrying guns on a New Orleans bridge Sunday, killing five or six of them, a deputy chief said." *The Weekly Standard's* Matt Labash offered evidence of another shooting by police during the week that New Orleans was in chaos: "On the street right in front of the Convention Center, I see a circle of chairs around a black tarp," Labash wrote. "A body lies underneath it. It's been there since the night before. I pull the tarp back and see a black man lying in a pool of blood. . . . Witnesses tell me what happened. Dwight Williams . . . says the night before, a New Orleans Police Department vehicle pulled up. 'For whatever reason, the gentleman made a move to the car,' he says. 'It took five seconds, the entire incident. The cop opened the door, shot him, and that was it.' "

The *Times-Picayune* reported a similar incident on September 1; it's unclear if this was the same one that Labash chronicled, as it occurred in a neighborhood "near" the Convention Center. "Near the former St. Thomas housing development, a squadron of police, some in tactical gear, were clustered in an intersection. . . . [A] man who appeared to be dead from a gunshot wound lay on the ground. It was unclear what had occurred. Police said there had been a shootout as they forced a reporter and a photographer out of a passing car at gunpoint They took away a reporter's notebook and tossed the photographer's camera on the ground before returning them and telling the pair to leave," the *Times-Picayune's* Gordon Russell reported.

What about rape? Jake Staples, an official of the National D-Day Museum near New Orleans's central business district, stayed at the museum during and after Katrina. He told the *Times-Picayune* that he had watched, hidden, from the second floor as a gang rape occurred on the street below. "He could hear a young woman berating a group of five young men, alternatively cursing them and begging them not to abandon her," according to the *Times-Picayune's* report of Staples's first-person account. " 'Then one of the men stopped and backhanded her,' Staples said. Then he witnessed a gang rape. 'Afterwards, she got up, pulled her pants up and kept following them. They were her meal ticket, I guess. . . . This area was a jungle.' " Police made two arrests at the Superdome for attempted sexual assault.

And what about the general atmosphere of lawlessness after Katrina? There is simply no question that the city was an acutely dangerous place after the storm hit. For example, as Brenda Austin and five family members walked from their eastern New Orleans home to the Convention Center, "their journey wasn't without travail," the *Times-Picayune* reported on September 1, because,

according to Austin, "someone started shooting at them."

On September 7, the *Times-Picayune* chronicled the experience of one group that had braved the storm in Algiers (a New Orleans neighborhood on the west bank of the Mississippi). "The day after the hurricane, [Vinnie] Pervel was carjacked as he tried to check on his other properties in the neighborhood," the paper recounted. "Two guys clubbed him on the head with a sledgehammer, grabbed his keys and stole his van. . . . The next afternoon, as Pervel and his mother, [and neighbors Gregg] Harris and [Gareth] Stubbs[,] stood on their porch, a gunfight between armed neighbors and 'looters' erupted on the corner of Pelican and Valette streets. . . . The neighbors, whom Pervel would not identify, shot two of the men. . . . 'We just couldn't comprehend it, a gun battle in front of your house,' said Stubbs."

The next day, the paper reported the firsthand account of one prominent black New Orleans citizen, Antoinette K-Doe. "She'd heard the constant sound of gunfire and seen the marauders in her neighborhood," the paper noted.

The *New York Times* confirmed that there had been yet further credible allegations of lawlessness, in a September 29 article that tried to separate fact from myth. "Police officers said shots were fired for at least two nights at a police station on the edge of the French Quarter. The manager of a hotel on Bourbon Street said he saw people running through the streets with guns," the *Times* noted.

Just plain looting was rampant after Katrina—and most of it took place *before* floodwaters rose. (As of late September, police had arrested about 400 individuals in the aftermath, one official told me—more than half of them for alleged looting. In an emptied city with only a few thousand holdouts, that's a significant number.)

"Looters seemed to rage almost at will, clearing out boutique clothing shops and drugstores alike," the *Times-Picayune* reported on August 31. In a separate article: "Looting . . . was so widespread Wednesday that police were forced to prioritize their overwhelmed enforcement effort." In yet another article the paper reported: "[O]ne New Orleans cop . . . loaded a shopping cart with a compact computer and a 27-inch flat screen television. Inside the store, the scene alternated between celebration and frightening bedlam."

The *Times-Picayune* cataloged the extent of the looting nearly a month after the storm, on September 26: "Just as Katrina's receding waters revealed acres of ruined houses . . . the post-storm cleanup also raised the curtain on a trail of mass looting that left even the most jaded New Orleans cop awestruck. As search-and-rescue crews staged house-to-house searches for survivors . . . they repeatedly stumbled upon stacks of merchandise—from large appliances still in the box to knotted tangles of hastily pilfered jewelry. . . . A large percentage of the items are still tagged with bar codes from . . . Wal-Mart, a store that was all but cleaned out during six hours of utter pandemonium the day after Katrina hit. . . . 'The only things left on the shelves were the books and the educational materials,' [said one officer]. . . . 'Talk about a lot of effort for nothing,' [another officer said]. 'When that levee broke, they had to leave it all behind.' "

We may never know the extent of post-Katrina mayhem. As the *New York Times* noted on September 29: "A full chronicle of the week's crimes, actual and reported, may never be possible because so many basic functions of government ceased early in the week, including most public safety record-keeping."

But the grisly truth is that awful violence in New Orleans is never an aberration—whether before or after Katrina. Just consider the following snippets from the *Times-Picayune*, all printed in the month *before* Katrina hit. They seem just as hysterical as some of Katrina's wildest tales.

"Violence tests the limits of mortician's art." "Some neighborhoods are being terrorized by thugs who have figured out that they have little to fear from the justice system." "Almost nightly images of violent crime bludgeon New Orleans." "Violent crime has emerged as . . . an ongoing source of national embarrassment." "Murders are so common we have become numbed to their sting." "Killers are killed, Orleans police say." "The city is becoming scarier." "Violence shows no signs of letup." "Three men killed in seven hours; all are shot to death on New Orleans streets." "After a short reprieve from murder and mayhem in New Orleans on Friday, six men lost their lives." "This is Iraq right here in New Orleans. By 2020 there might not be any black people left." "There's a different type of murder occurring now and a different type of criminal out there." "New Orleans area continues to log murder after murder." "Something must be done to curb the violence festering in New Orleans." "Now we're in a bloody war nobody's safe from."

Day in and day out, Katrina or no Katrina, New Orleans is America's most dangerous city. But the numbers don't tell the whole story. White and black residents, rich and poor, of good neighborhoods and bad, are afraid to go out at night beyond the clear boundaries of well-patrolled areas like the heart of the French Quarter—and night means 6:00 pm, not 2:00 am. Everyone in New Orleans knows someone who has been violently mugged—and everyone knows someone who knows someone who has been violently killed.

The violence is often random but never surprising: a young mother and her seven-year-old daughter shot to death in their home. A 90-year-old former school principal, the widow of the former chancellor of Southern University, and her adult daughter shot and stabbed to death in their home. A Vietnamese immigrant murdered in her grocery store. A middle-aged craftsman shot to death and burned in *his* home. A young, mentally impaired man shot as target practice in a housing project. A tourist bludgeoned to death near his business-district hotel.

And, of course, scores and scores of young black men get shot each year, so many that the deaths seem the same—the formulaic end of short lives marked with short, formulaic obituaries. Many of these murdered young men are in the drug trade, but many aren't. Gregory Williams, who was set to attend Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College this fall, was shot to death outside his home earlier this summer, because he was "in the wrong place at the wrong time," the *Times-Picayune* reported. "Williams's mother, Doris Williams, proudly fingered her son's college acceptance letter while recounting his final moments on earth."

Writes *Times-Picayune* crime-scene photographer Eliot Kamenitz of the work of documenting death in the Big Easy: “[E]ach Sunday after Easter . . . St. Louis Cathedral holds its Mass for victims of violent crimes. I work on Sundays and the yearly event is usually my assignment. Large placards line the outside gates of the church. On them are hundreds of photos of smiling faces of the deceased, many with their newspaper obituaries. It is years’ upon years’ worth of the slaughter in the streets of New Orleans. Before the service . . . I see the loved ones left behind. Sometimes I talk to them, and finally get to say I am sorry for their loss. . . . I’m sure I’ve met some of them before: they behind the yellow tape, I behind my camera.”

Most of New Orleans’s violence, like the killing of Gregory Williams, is black on black; working-class blacks in marginal neighborhoods suffer the most. New Orleans boasts (or boasted, before Katrina’s floodwaters) blocks and blocks of old, sturdy, abundantly cheap private housing stock. Many working-class blacks live on tree-lined streets just blocks away from the most affluent neighborhoods. But ceaseless open-air killing makes some of New Orleans’s predominantly black working-class neighborhoods, including much of the historic 9th Ward, terror zones.

Preachers put up hand-lettered billboards in ragged neighborhoods to remind residents, thou shalt not kill—but in vain. What then—police superintendent Eddie Compass said earlier this year of pre-Katrina violence became just as true of post-Katrina violence: it’s “a small group of nefarious individuals preying on the weak.” One 9th Ward holdout told the *Times-Picayune* a month after Katrina that he was enjoying his empty neighborhood after the storm, because there were “no more gunshots in the darkness.”

The shocking element of the bloody permanency of New Orleans’s pre-Katrina crime wave is this: the city already significantly cut crime once in the past decade, with help from some of America’s premier policing minds, including the late Jack Maple, onetime NYPD deputy commissioner of crime-control strategies.

In 1994, New Orleans’s murder rampage peaked at 424 killings (the equivalent of 7,100 in New York). As fear simmered to a boil, Richard Pennington, the police commissioner under former Mayor Marc Morial, overhauled the police department with input from Maple, federal officials, and others. Pennington and federal officials stripped the department of 300 corrupt and otherwise unfit officers (nearly one-fifth of the force, including two now-convicted murderers). Pennington also implemented New York’s Compstat, applying sophisticated statistical analysis and computer modeling to track crime trends. Murder fell steadily until 1999.

But it was way up again before Katrina—and the wholesale carnage of this past summer shocked even longtime observers of the city’s dangers. “If you aren’t fed up with the murder rate in New Orleans, you can only belong to one [group]: those people doing the killing,” the *Times-Picayune* editorialized on August 12. “The city is becoming scarier. New Orleans has logged more murders than it had at this time last year, and people weren’t feeling so safe then.”

But *why*?

New Orleans officials estimate that 70 percent of the city's everyday murders are drug-related. New Orleans is still in the grip of a full-scale crack epidemic; the *Times-Picayune* stories of present-day "open-air crack markets" recall an earlier, bleaker era in urban America. Drug dealers kill for turf. Addicts kill for money for their next fix—or they are killed because they steal from their dealers, or they're robbed for the money they bring into the projects. In 2003, the *Times-Picayune* reported, 40 percent of New Orleans's murder victims tested positive for drugs, mostly cocaine. And after Katrina, Nagin wasn't wrong when he said that "crazed drug addicts" and "violent gang members" were responsible for some of the post-flood violence.

Drug-turf wars in the violent underground economy have only worsened since the city closed one major housing project a couple of years back, as the project's drug distributors have had to fight for new turf. Resettlement after Katrina could exacerbate this tension.

The culture of death that pervades New Orleans's economy of pushers and addicts spills blood across the rest of society; the city's drug dealers have no compunction about killing child witnesses to drug crimes, and regular, wholesale street shootouts claim many innocent victims.

New Orleans's legions of weak, female-headed, underclass black families supply generation after generation of what George Will calls "lightly parented" young men to fuel the carnage. They also have a plentiful supply of weapons to do it with. One coroner notes that it takes twice as long to do an autopsy today than a decade ago, as the proliferation of AK-47s, and now of the SKS from China, means that bodies often are riddled with not just one or two bullet holes but a dozen.

Before Katrina, the New Orleans Police Department took much of the blame for the rising murder rate. The force is not up to professional standards of interrogating witnesses and suspects and of collecting evidence for prosecution. Worse, just a week before Katrina hit, one cop was arrested for alleged rape and kidnapping; ten others have been arrested on criminal charges over the past two years, "ranging from shoplifting to conspiracy to rob a bank," the *Times-Picayune* reports.

But federal officials and outside observers say that in fact the department, before Katrina, was a vastly improved force compared with the pre-Pennington era. Moreover, a dysfunctional prosecutor's office and a dysfunctional state judicial system, in which only one in four murder arrests ends in a conviction, undermine the force. Only 32 percent of felony drug distributors go to jail after conviction, compared with 66 percent nationwide. Some judges mysteriously and repeatedly release violent-crime suspects on bail. From improper collection of evidence to poor prosecution to lenient and inconsistent sentencing, New Orleans cannot keep its drug dealers and violent criminals behind bars. "The perception is that the state judicial system has failed," says James Bernazzani, the FBI's special agent in charge of New Orleans.

Because of these failures, witnesses are afraid to report crimes or violent suspects to the police, because they "know in two to three days, that individual will be back on the streets. They think: 'I'll become the next victim,'" says Bernazzani.

In addition, he reports, relatives and friends of those killed don't go to the police but engage in "street revenge, as killings beget killings."

Police booked one 20-year-old drug dealer for murder in three separate killings—but had to drop each set of charges because no one would testify against him. A year ago, he was killed on a street corner himself. Another suspect—charged, and released, on a first-degree murder charge in an unrelated case last summer—was found shot to death on the street this July.

"Our biggest challenge is that we continue to have to put the same violent criminals in jail over and over again. We honestly believe that our murder rate would be cut by 60 percent if the violent offenders stayed in jail and did their time," then—deputy police superintendent (and now acting police superintendent) Warren Riley said in 2004.

Months before Katrina hit, New Orleans knew that it was in acute crisis. The city already had hired Louis Anemone, former NYPD chief of department, to devise a plan to combat the murder resurgence and to show commanders and officers how to carry it out. "It was a challenge," Anemone told me, "but I was sanguine about our chances to improve the safety and security of the residents and visitors." The city's nonprofit Metropolitan Crime Commission also had devised some suggestions for judicial reform; above all, the commissioners concluded, "Criminal Court Judges should substantially increase the number of drug dealers sent to jail."

But New Orleans's long history of street carnage is not a topic for polite discussion in Katrina's aftermath. Pols and pundits have a million solutions for the city, from building more affordable housing to ensuring better schools to creating an incubator for the nation's "creative class" to offering tax credits for resettlement. But none addresses the city's most obvious, and intractable, problem, the one that has kept New Orleans from thriving for years.

Hiding the truth doesn't help New Orleans. The Big Easy's evacuated citizens already know how violent their city is. And one reason that they might not come back is that their latent disgust with crime has now been overlaid by those images of rampant post-storm crime. Evacuees—and businesses—know that even Cat-5 levees can't protect them from the day-to-day mortal fear of living in New Orleans. As Bernazzani told me: "What you saw after Katrina wasn't done by outsiders."

Nagin's 17-member rebuilding commission, announced in late September, doesn't boast one person with the expertise even to address the city's festering crime—without which Nagin will never win the confidence needed for the city's rebuilding. Likewise, every dime that the federal government spends on "community development"—and Senator Mary Landrieu has requested \$50 billion—will be wasted unless the feds, in conjunction with state and local officials, tackle first things first: making the city safe enough to encourage the middle-class and working-class tax base, black and white, to return. Rebuilders who think that the criminal underclass will stay away while other residents repopulate the city will prove fatally mistaken.

Even before Katrina, Nagin was begging for a new mandate, and even a new dedicated property tax, to beef up the NOPD, which had one-third fewer officers per capita than Gotham. But the lack of departmental leadership after Katrina, and the alleged misdeeds of some cops, mean that the NOPD now must overcome an acute crisis of confidence. Police Superintendent Compass abruptly resigned four weeks after the storm, and nearly 250 cops are AWOL or still can't get to work.

Counselors who debriefed rank-and-file cops after Katrina said that those who tried to protect their city after the floodwalls burst were angrier at their own commanders than at the storm itself or at any other level of government, "charging that their [department] let them down . . . and left individual groups of officers to care for desperate people on their own," the *Times-Picayune* reported September 17. "Sad to admit it," one counselor told the paper, "but the predominant dynamic here is anger and disillusionment."

Moreover, since TV showed several cops looting consumer goods during the flood's aftermath, and since it showed two cops allegedly beating an unarmed pedestrian in the French Quarter in early October, the department's years of work to overcome its long-standing public image of entrenched corruption and malfeasance have gone down the drain. One hotel proprietor, with some film corroboration, told CNN that eight armed cops commandeered a floor of his hotel as a way station to bus valuable looted goods out of the city.

So what can the feds do with some of the billions they're so bent on spending? If Bush wants to rebuild New Orleans, his administration must take the lead in creating a permanent safety zone in the city. He can start by beefing up New Orleans's police force, committing funds to double its size over the next five years, as the key element of the city's civic infrastructure. But the feds should do this only if they tie the money to a real policing plan like the one Anemone was working on—and tie it to real results as well. Bush has ample precedent for such a plan, in the Clinton administration's 1990s grants to cities for community policing, and in his own No Child Left Behind Act, which ties federal money to local accountability.

Nothing will work, of course, unless the Louisiana government first creates a functional prosecutor's office and state judicial system.

Governor Kathleen Blanco has called for two special sessions of the state legislature to enact a menu of tax credits and other rebuilding initiatives, but her proposals don't begin to address the systemic pre-Katrina failures that will hobble post-Katrina recovery. It's at least as important for her to call a special legislative session to enact Rockefeller-style drug laws to take this generation's violent criminals off the streets permanently. The legislature should mandate automatic prison sentences for those convicted of possession of drugs with intent to distribute, and for those convicted of possession of illegal firearms. The state also must stop releasing on bail suspects charged with violent crimes. Only with the support of a working judicial system—from prosecutors to judges to prisons—can New Orleans implement the policing strategies that have worked so well in New York.

Only when New Orleans can assure safety can it begin to make up some of the

losses it has sustained over a generation of mismanagement. Only then can it build a real private economy and robust public institutions that will attract a thriving middle-class population.

New Orleans has lost more than a fifth of its population since the 1960s. According to a 2001 study, those who left between 1990 and 2000 were mostly young and educated. City officials blame these losses on oil-industry consolidation over the past generation, which took New Orleans jobs to Texas.

But that's not the whole story. New Orleans has lost middle-class jobs partly because investors are fed up with the city's entrenched public corruption. "Outside companies don't invest because they are sick and tired of the kickbacks," Bernazzani says. "New Orleans is deprived of a tax windfall." (Just this summer, the feds indicted four cronies of previous mayor Morial, including Morial's uncle, for alleged public-contract abuses—and before Katrina, the FBI was investigating alleged widespread corruption at the city's school board, which isn't under mayoral control.) A corrupt government cannot police itself or its city, nor can it provide adequate public services of any kind. As taxpayers and businesses decamp in disgust, the city thus has fewer fiscal resources with each generation.

Those who remain, if they are not part of the problem, try to insulate themselves with private security guards or a sense of fatalistic resignation. Nagin made an impassioned speech about the lack of civic outrage over the skyrocketing murder rate just two days before Katrina hit: "I think this is kind of a put-up-or-shut-up moment," he said. "How concerned are you, city of New Orleans, about fixing this problem? . . . Are we going to be entertained by the violent nature of these murders, or are we really going to try to fix it? . . . I just don't see . . . the outrage. I see people sad, I see them kind of bewildered, I see them kind of looking out in space. But I don't see enough, 'Goddammit, I've had enough of this.'" But many of those who were outraged had already voted with their feet.

Unfortunately, too, the city's attempts to encourage investment have only made things worse. In the two decades since much of New Orleans's oil industry left for good, city leaders have concentrated on one business to replace it: tourism.

Tourists in New Orleans pay high hotel and sales taxes, and demand few government services (and most don't know enough about New Orleans's high crime rate to be afraid of visiting). But tourism doesn't create good jobs that form the basis for a strong middle class. Even so, during the horrid early 1990s, when crime skyrocketed and thousands left, New Orleans and Louisiana spent nearly a decade's worth of political capital cajoling Harrah's to complete construction of its once-abandoned Canal Street casino. And one of Nagin's first instincts in Katrina's wake was to propose a special "casino zone" to lure tourists back to town.

The cumulative tragedy of New Orleans is the slow but violent wasting away of a strategic port city with a legacy of priceless physical assets. Those who care about New Orleans often fret that the city's underclass youth grow up in isolated neighborhoods and attend execrable schools in an insular city that offers no opportunity. They're right. But New Orleans offers no opportunity partly because it has no real private economy to speak of besides the drudgery of tourism and the violence of drugs. That's why two early post-Katrina local moves are

promising. The elected school board voted one month after Katrina to convert all 13 schools on the city's smaller west bank to charter schools to get them up and running again quickly, while the mayor has asked the governor to help him create a citywide charter system, to be run in partnership with foundations, universities, and businesses. In addition, Nagin has proposed that the federal and state governments slash income and business taxes in New Orleans and in surrounding areas across the board, so that the private sector can pump new investment into the city.

The federal government can build floodwalls that hold up during storms—and the feds can commit to assuring personal safety while New Orleans rebuilds its city and its tax base.

But only New Orleans, and Louisiana, can build a city that holds up day after day.

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