

POWERLESS IN LOUISIANA

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\$15 BILLION for the Big Dig. And the Big Easy sinks for lack of a similar commitment of focused federal dollars.

Arizona Senator John McCain grumbled about it on the radio last week to Don Imus. In a follow-up telephone interview, he noted that the Big Dig was funded under somewhat false pretenses. Initial estimates put it "only at \$2 billion." "But there is also this political reality," said McCain. "Massachusetts has a lot of political clout." Back when the Big Dig was just a big idea, "Massachusetts obviously had Tip O'Neill," as its congressman and Speaker of the House.

That's the way Washington works. And that's the way the levee crumbles.

Even Hurricane Katrina may not change that, said McCain. "I have been very disappointed at the degree of partisanship that seems to exist. We should not be fighting right now."

Despite President Bush's statement on national TV "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees" many warned of dire consequences from hurricanes storming over the Mississippi delta and flooding the bowl that is New Orleans. Newspapers and scientific journals spelled out the dangers. They also presented an antidote: a large-scale engineering master plan called Coast 2050. It was devised in 1998 by a group of scientists, Army engineers, metropolitan planners, and Louisiana officials after Hurricane Georges scared them into attention.

Mark Fischetti, a contributing editor to Scientific American magazine, first wrote about Coast 2050 in 2001. On the op-ed page of The New York Times after Katrina struck, he wrote about how sick it made him feel to know about a plan that "might have helped save the city, but had gone unrealized."

Completing every recommended project for Coast 2050 would have cost an estimated \$14 billion, so Louisiana turned to Congress for help. But the plan was never financed: "Congress had other priorities, Louisiana politicians had other priorities, and the magic moment of consensus was lost," Fischetti wrote.

Washington did send federal money to Louisiana, but it was not used wisely. Over the last five years of the Bush administration, Louisiana received \$1.9 billion for Army Corps of Engineers civil works projects, according to The Washington Post. Some federal money was spent trying to keep the city dry. However, hundreds of millions were diverted to unrelated water projects, and some money was simply wasted, the Post reported.

Meanwhile, a complex, expensive, but feasible engineering solution existed, but it was never implemented. As the human and property toll rises in New Orleans, it makes a citizen wonder why government is so terribly reactive. It also makes a citizen wonder what makes the difference: Why can Boston get \$15 billion to rebuild a highway? Why can Florida get Congress to fund a \$7 billion engineering program to refresh the Everglades, while Louisiana can't get backing for a plan to save thousands of lives and millions of dollars in property?

"Somehow Florida knew the right people to get the language worked into the bill. The Big Dig worked the same way," said Fischetti in a telephone interview from his office in Lenox. When it came to supporting a master engineering plan for Louisiana, he said, "I don't think Congress cared. It's Louisiana, it's a poor state, it's not that important politically."

John DeVillars, former New England administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency during the Clinton years and former state secretary of environmental affairs, describes different "points of leverage" for major public works infrastructure projects. One obvious leverage point, he said, is the political clout of your congressional delegation.

The law can make the difference, too. Boston Harbor was cleaned up because private citizens sued and the federal EPA said Massachusetts was out of compliance with the Clean Water Act.

A third, perhaps most important leverage point is an administration's willingness to set national policy and fund it.

Engineering science is not Democratic or Republican, even if an engineering plan needs Democrats and Republicans to fund it.

According to Fischetti, Coast 2050 is as valid today as when it was first proposed. It calls for cutting channels, using seagates, and extending the levee system.

But today, \$14 billion is the tiniest of drops in the teeming bucket of disaster that consumed the city of New Orleans. Add to that the pork that McCain calls "irresistable." The pricetag grows, as the Big Dig shows.

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