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EDITORIAL

Death of an American City

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We are about to lose New Orleans. Whether it is a conscious plan to let the city rot until no one is willing to move back or honest paralysis over difficult questions, the moment is upon us when a major American city will die, leaving nothing but a few shells for tourists to visit like a museum.

We said this wouldn't happen. President Bush said it wouldn't happen. He stood in Jackson Square and said, "There is no way to imagine America without New Orleans." But it has been over three months since Hurricane Katrina struck and the city is in complete shambles.

There are many unanswered questions that will take years to work out, but one is make-or-break and needs to be dealt with immediately. It all boils down to the levee system. People will clear garbage, live in tents, work their fingers to the bone to reclaim homes and lives, but not if they don't believe they will be protected by more than patches to the same old system that failed during the deadly storm. Homeowners, businesses and insurance companies all need a commitment before they will stake their futures on the city.

At this moment the reconstruction is a rudderless ship. There is no effective leadership that we can identify. How many people could even name the president's liaison for the reconstruction effort, Donald Powell? Lawmakers need to understand that for New Orleans the words "pending in Congress" are a death warrant requiring no signature.

The rumbling from Washington that the proposed cost of better levees is too much has grown louder. Pretending we are going to do the necessary work eventually, while stalling until the next hurricane season is upon us, is dishonest and cowardly. Unless some clear, quick commitments are made, the displaced will have no choice but to sink roots in the alien communities where they landed.

The price tag for protection against a Category 5 hurricane, which would involve not just stronger and higher levees but also new drainage canals and environmental restoration, would very likely run to well over \$32 billion. That is a lot of money. But that starting point represents just 1.2 percent of this year's estimated \$2.6 trillion in federal spending, which actually overstates the case, since the cost would be spread over many years. And it is barely one-third the cost of the \$95 billion in tax cuts passed just last week by the House of Representatives.

Total allocations for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the war on terror have topped \$300 billion. All that money has been appropriated as the cost of protecting the nation from terrorist attacks. But what was the worst possible case we fought to prevent?

Losing a major American city.

"We'll not just rebuild, we'll build higher and better," President Bush said that night in September. Our feeling, strongly, is that he was right and should keep to his word. We in New York remember well what it was like for the country to rally around our city in a desperate hour. New York survived and has flourished. New Orleans can too.

Of course, New Orleans's local and state officials must do their part as well, and demonstrate the political and practical will to rebuild the city efficiently and responsibly. They must, as quickly as possible, produce a comprehensive plan for putting New Orleans back together. Which schools will be rebuilt and which will be absorbed? Which neighborhoods will be shored up? Where will the roads go? What about electricity and water lines? So far, local and state officials have been derelict at producing anything that comes close to a coherent plan. That is

unacceptable.

The city must rise to the occasion. But it will not have that opportunity without the levees, and only the office of the president is strong enough to goad Congress to take swift action. Only his voice is loud enough to call people home and convince them that commitments will be met.

Maybe America does not want to rebuild New Orleans. Maybe we have decided that the deficits are too large and the money too scarce, and that it is better just to look the other way until the city withers and disappears. If that is truly the case, then it is incumbent on President Bush and Congress to admit it, and organize a real plan to help the dislocated residents resettle into new homes. The communities that opened their hearts to the Katrina refugees need to know that their short-term act of charity has turned into a permanent commitment.

If the rest of the nation has decided it is too expensive to give the people of New Orleans a chance at renewal, we have to tell them so. We must tell them we spent our rainy-day fund on a costly stalemate in Iraq, that we gave it away in tax cuts for wealthy families and shareholders. We must tell them America is too broke and too weak to rebuild one of its great cities.

Our nation would then look like a feeble giant indeed. But whether we admit it or not, this is our choice to make. We decide whether New Orleans lives or dies.

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