

Katrina recovery in major need of national summit

by Marc H. Morial

This year's State of the Union address by President George W. Bush offered little hope for the thousands of New Orleanians who fled the city in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and never returned and those who did return home. Not a single reference to the tragedy that halved the population and left the region in ruins was made.

What a difference over 1 1/2 years make after the president vowed to restore New Orleans to its former and greater glory in a poignant speech in historic Jackson Square with much of the city under water and the National Guard patrolling.

But Capitol Hill Democrats are hardly great saviors of New Orleans. They also failed to reference Katrina in their response to the president's State of the Union. They put nothing in their first 100 hours agenda that addressed the rebuilding.

Not until the press and activists noted the glaring absence of Katrina in the two parties' recent addresses did they begin to do anything. But better late than never, I guess. Still. How interesting that Senate Democrats would hold a field hearing on the rebuilding efforts in New Orleans not too long after the hubbub, and that a presidential candidate would be present. CNN even suggested that the road to the White House in 2008 may very well go through my hometown.

I can only hope and pray that's not true. And that lawmakers are casting attention to the debacle that is the Katrina recovery because they want to do something about it - and not just reacting for fear it'll hurt their political prospects. They should be there because it's the right thing to do. The victims of Katrina cannot be forgotten and should never be used as some kind of political football being tossed about to win elections.

By most accounts, the rebuilding of New Orleans has been a slow and torturous process marked by insufficient coordination, unnecessary political infighting, and a great deal of both human and institutional suffering that continues to this day.

President Bush appointed a rebuilding czar in Donald Powell but he failed to give him any power. Powell is merely a diplomat assigned to ensuring that the local, state and federal governments play nice with each other. There is little coordination between the various federal, state and local agencies charged with cleaning up the city.

Mississippi is entitled to as much federal aid as Louisiana even though it wasn't hit as hard because Congress decided to cap the aid a single state could get. How illogical is that? And state and local officials - Gov.

Kathleen Blanco and Mayor Ray Nagin - have hardly risen to the occasion and taken the reins of the recovery. Any wonder why New Orleans is still a wreck and its current and former residents are still suffering? Does anyone really care about losing one of our nation's greatest cities?

In a New York Times column from January, Bob Herbert summed up the situation perfectly. "If you talk to public officials, you will hear about billions of dollars in aid being funneled through this program or that. The maze of bureaucratic initiatives is dizzying. But when you talk to the people most in need of help - the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the children - you will find in most cases that the help is not reaching them. There is no massive effort, no master plan, to bring back the people who were driven from the city and left destitute by Katrina," he wrote.

Back in July, during the National Urban League's 2006 annual conference, I suggested that our nation's leaders convene a national summit on rebuilding the Gulf Coast. I stand by that suggestion and reiterated it in a recent letter to our nation's leaders.

It's time to assemble America's greatest minds with its most powerful leaders and resolve to get the job done. I'm asking for the development of a 12- to 24-month action plan to reinvigorate recovery and rebuilding as well as ensure greater coordination and collaboration going forward than there has been in the past. I must say that I am encouraged that the Congressional Black Caucus called upon U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to create a select House committee on Katrina. Maybe this will light a fire in Washington under efforts to bring New Orleans back to life.

I am making a call for the collective leadership on the federal, state and local levels to ensure the survival of one of our nation's greatest cities. Instead of finding fault and pointing fingers, I'd rather get our collective wits around the table to address this debacle before it becomes our nation's greatest shame. As Sen. Joseph Lieberman, who chaired the recent Katrina hearing, said, the days of playing "gotcha" over the Katrina recovery are over.

The wealthiest nation in the world can spend unprecedented amounts of money to rebuild Iraq but cannot save one of its greatest and most colorful cities? That's downright pathetic. In a recent editorial, The New York Times observed that the current state of New Orleans is a "sad monument to impotence" of the world's last surviving superpower. We've got plenty of resources for a war in Iraq but when it comes to helping our own people. They're off the radar screen. What does that say about our nation's priorities? We must act now or risk allowing New Orleans to become an ugly footnote in history.

I shudder to think that a decade from now when assessing the Katrina tragedy we realize, that as the Times notes in its recent editorial, "our grand plans were never laid, our brightest minds were never assembled, our nation's muscle and ingenuity were never brought to bear in any concerted way to overcome the crisis of the Gulf."

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