

Katrina No Match For Gulf Coast Spirit and Strength

"Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?"

I can't get that blues melody out of my head lately. The weeks since hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast shores have been extraordinary, eerie, phenomenal, and unbelievable – pick your favorite adjective. Indescribable may be a popular choice. This kind of destruction and disruption of lives is unprecedented and unmatched.

The mainstream media, being the only thing they seem to know how to be, has focused on inaction and inadequacies mostly of the federal government, and made countless comparisons to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001. As usual, their primary focus is misdirected, and they seem to know very little about the history of this region and the spirit of the people who built it.

Katrina was, by far, the largest and most destructive natural disaster in the history of the United States. Even the huge storm that hit Galveston, Texas in 1900, killing 8000 people, pales in comparison to the size of Katrina. The tragic loss of life in Galveston was due to the fact that there was no warning, and structures back then were simply not built to sustain such a storm.

Because we now have modern radar and meteorological warning systems and complex evacuation plans, the loss of life in this enormous storm, which stretched all the way from Baton Rouge to Mobile, Alabama, was about one-tenth of that 1900 storm. Had the levees been stronger and had local and state governments done a better job of warning people sooner and getting those without personal transportation out, many of those lost might have been saved. That's a tough lesson to learn, but we must live with it, and learn from it.

When the 'Blame Game' is over, and its already getting very stale, we can say our prayers for the dead and the survivors, and then we can get busy with the important business of re-building this beautiful and vital re-

gion of our great country, and restoring the lives of its wonderful people. My optimistic, and I believe realistic prediction, is that a decade from now, this region will be back, and better than it was before.

I honestly don't think that is a 'Pollyannaish' outlook. Why? Because the vast majority of the people in this part of our country are hard working, and stubborn, and proud, and determined. This is the 'deep south', and these are people whose ancestors were ready and able to start their own country not too long ago. I said they are stubborn – I meant that as a compliment; and to clarify, they are stubbornly independent. They don't need or want a government telling them how to live their lives.

Obviously, they now need the government to assist them, but it's not charity or welfare. It's equity that has been built over centuries. These proud southern people, of all races and nationalities, have given this country a 'crown jewel' that must be preserved and cherished. Can you even imagine the United States of America without Southern Tradition and Southern Heritage? It just wouldn't be the same, and it wouldn't be as good and as rich as it is, and I don't mean rich I money, I mean rich in spirit and values, and a way of life. This 'steel magnolia' attitude has had a profound affect on the greatness of our land.

Those of you who have lived in this region, or have visited often, or have family there know exactly what I'm talking about. If you've stared in awe at the mighty Mississippi River, you know. If you've stood on the deck of the majestic USS Alabama and marveled at those incredible 16" guns and wondered about the brave sailors who served on her, you know. If you've visited the magnificent anti-bellum homes like Oak Alley and Rosedown and Nottoway and many others, you know. If you've ridden the streetcar down St. Charles Avenue in the Garden District, or walked down Bourbon Street, or sampled strong coffee and benigins at the Café DuMonde in the French Quarter, you know. If you've risked a few bucks at the Beau Rivage and looked out your hotel room window at the beautiful beach and historic

homes like Jefferson Davis' Beauvoir along I-90 in Biloxi and thought 'this is better than Vegas', you know.

I could go on and on, but the point is 'The South' is much more than just real estate, albeit a beautiful piece of land; it's a spirit, a way of life, an experience for the world to enjoy and savor – and if for no other reason, the lessons this region teaches the world are the best reasons why it must return. I heard some pathetic pundits say more than half of the people who fled the storm would probably never return. Hogwash! They will return, some as soon as allowed, some in a few months, some in a few years; some only in their hearts, but they will return and 'the south shall rise again', because its in their blood, and they have no desire or reason to change. They are comfortable in their own skin, and most wonder why the rest of the country doesn't seem to have as strong a connection with the land and the culture as they do.

Most of the publicity of this life-changing event has been focused on New Orleans, and that's understandable, as it is the largest and most vital city affected. New Orleans is a world-class city with its own language, its own music, its own food. Food is an art form there. It's as close as you can get to visiting a foreign country without leaving our shores.

As a seaport, New Orleans is essential to the economy of this nation. Not only is it important to the energy industry, it is the port of entry for virtually every product imported from Central and South America and the Caribbean. Products flow into New Orleans and travel up the economic highway we call the Mississippi, all the way to the Great Lakes and Canada and points east and west. Geographically, New Orleans is strategically located and cannot be replaced. It is the lifeline to North America.

When President Bush said this country will stay as long as it takes to rebuild this region, he's not playing politics. He simply understands that part of the American family has been badly injured, and it is our solemn duty to stand together until all is well again. As a proud American, that shouldn't be very hard to understand.

