

right now, either, if it ever did. In the ABC interview, he said, "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees." Even the most cursory review shows that there have been comprehensive and chilling warnings of a potential calamity on the Gulf Coast for years. The most telling, but hardly the only, example was a five-part series in 2002 by John McQuaid and Mark Schleifstein in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, a newspaper that heroically kept publishing on the Internet last week. After evaluating the city's structural deficiencies, the *Times-Picayune* reporters concluded that a catastrophe was "a matter of when, not if." The same paper said last year, "For the first time in 37 years, federal budget cuts have all but stopped major work on the New Orleans area's east bank hurricane levees, a complex network of concrete walls, metal gates and giant earthen berms that won't be finished for at least another decade." A Category 4 or 5 hurricane would be a catastrophe: "Soon the geographical 'bowl' of the Crescent City would fill up with the waters of the lake, leaving those unable to evacuate with little op-



tion but to cluster on rooftops—terrain they would have to share with hungry rats, fire ants, nutria, snakes, and perhaps alligators. The water itself would become a festering stew of sewage, gasoline, refinery chemicals, and debris." And that describes much of the Gulf Coast today.

—David Remnick

REPORT FROM CARROLLTON PORCH DUTY



From the front porch of his rather grand house on South Carrollton Avenue—which had suddenly become Pontchartrain lakefront, even if the lake here was a foot deep and toxic—the world looked pretty damned stupid to H. J. (Pepper) Bosworth, Jr., last Thursday. Not so much the lack of electricity in the ninety-degree torpor, or even the desultory procession of loot-laden shopping carts that passed, grim parodies of Mardi Gras parades. No, what seemed dumb, plain bad science, was all that talk that New Orleans needed to be evacuated because a storm surge could have put all of it, even the relatively elevated French Quarter, under twenty feet of water.

"That's just lies," Bosworth said, shifting a heavy Ruger pistol in his lap and sloshing the beer around in his cup. Bosworth, who is forty-seven, claims to know what he's talking about. He's the engineer who designed drainage for the new P.G.A. golf course near New Orleans. The way water moves over land is his specialty, so even when the levees burst last Monday he didn't budge, because he knew the waters of Lake Pontchartrain, six miles away, wouldn't rise any higher than his curbstones.

The other reason he didn't move is the looters, whom Bosworth followed with his eyes as they trudged along the raised street-car median to and from the burst Rite Aid drugstore three blocks away. Neither Bosworth, nor his girlfriend, nor the couple next door, had slept properly for days; somebody was always on one porch or the other, with either the twelve-gauge pump gun or the 8-mm. Mauser rifle, and either the Ruger or the Glock pistol. By this point, they could tell the looters from ordinary refugees. "New shirt," Barbara Ann Locklear, Bosworth's coppery, part-Indian girlfriend, said as one young man in a gleaming blue dress shirt struggled his bundle along. "Hey!" the man yelled, and Bosworth's hand moved toward his gun. "Hey! Y'all want some Crown Royal?" he held up a purple velvet bag. "No, thank you!" Lock-

lear yelled with the forced good cheer of a flight attendant on a crashing plane, but the man kept approaching across the median. "Just leave it right there!" Locklear shouted. "You don't want to step in that water!" The man looked down drunkenly, past his drenched pants and flip-flops, to the rusty water in the street. Then he looked up and smiled. "All right," he said softly, setting the bag on the grass. "All right." He moved along, well watched.

"As I was saying," Bosworth said. "Lake Pontchartrain is twelve feet deep; that's all. The levee that divides it from the city is on average eighteen feet high. Even a twenty-two-foot storm surge would have put four feet of water over the levee, which, given the size of the city, would have made people's feet wet." It was a scandal that the levees ruptured, Bosworth went on. But that doesn't change the fact that everybody who left was going to have to come home to storm damage and, of course, to the ravages of looters. "We decided to endure a relatively short period of discomfort, protect the house, rather than face a year of dealing with Lord knows what," Bosworth said.

Chris Wormuth, from next door, kept fidgeting with his riot gun. Wormuth, an emergency-room physician, had been idled by a lack of serviceable generators at Oschner Clinic. He'd just returned from a run to Lafayette, where he'd bought six small gasoline generators—enough to preserve the temperature of his hundred-thousand-dollar wine collection, but not enough for air-conditioning. After several fitful, steamy nights, Wormuth was developing the panda look of the grievously sleep-deprived. "The problem with New Orleans? Two blocks away from here there are people living hand to mouth," he said. "I don't know of another city where, if you're in a two-million-dollar house, you're not sure that everything around you for two miles is a two-million-dollar house." He pointed at the Dr. Ronald E. McNair Elementary School, two doors down. "That's now a hotel for looters," he said. "They're in there all night, partying."

Suddenly, the cavalry arrived, in the form of ten twinkling and whooping cars from the Sheriff's Office in Baton Rouge, eighty miles away. They were towing sleek bass boats on trailers, and were stuffed with heavily armed men in Kevlar helmets and bulletproof vests. Everybody

on the two porches stood and cheered as the cars swished past in great filthy roostertails of lake water. Alas, the Baton Rouge deputies had come not to protect South Carrollton Avenue but to look after their own. "People in Baton Rouge call to tell us their mother is alone at such-and-such an address and we promise to come get her," Colonel Greg Phares said as the deputies unlimbered the boats. "No other law-enforcement or government agency has any idea we're here. We're on our own. There is absolutely no command-and-control."

Lots of people from the neighborhood—a white-haired lady on a Sting-Ray bicycle, an elderly couple dressed for a cotillion, and many young black men clutching bundles of Rite Aid booty—gathered to watch. As a finale, the Baton Rouge deputies raided the school—blasting open the door with a bomb, shooting off internal locks with their M-4s, lighting up the windows with flash-boom concussion grenades. For twenty minutes, the street echoed with shots, blasts, and sledgehammer blows. The deputies didn't find any looters, but they did recover a pair of what appeared to be stolen pants and evidence that the school had served, if not as a looters' hotel, at least as a looters' latrine.

When it was all over, a tall, thin man came loping along the median, his biceps gleaming against his sleeveless white T-shirt. He was carrying an empty trash basket toward the Rite Aid. "That's the leader," Locklear whispered. A few minutes later, he was back. "I got bread!" he called to the people on the porch. "Y'all need bread? I got bread!"

—Dan Baum

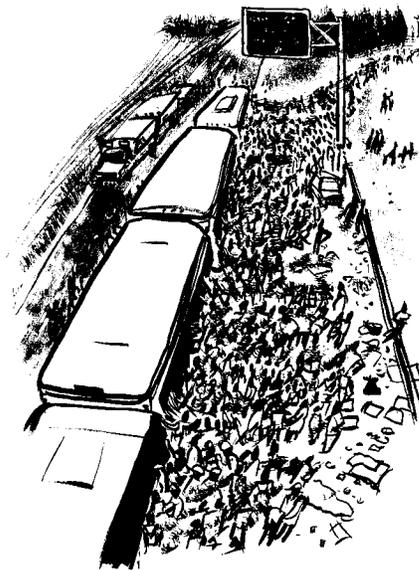
ARCHIVES THE SUNKEN CITY



(From "The Control of Nature: Atchafalaya," which ran in the issue of February 23, 1987. The complete article is available at www.newyorker.com.)

New Orleans, surrounded by levees, is emplaced between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi like a broad

shallow bowl. Nowhere is New Orleans higher than the river's natural bank. Underprivileged people live in the lower elevations, and always have. The rich—by the river—occupy the highest ground. In New Orleans, income and elevation can be correlated on a literally sliding scale: the Garden District on the highest level, Stanley Kowalski in the swamp. The



Garden District and its environs are locally known as uptown.

Torrential rains fall on New Orleans—enough to cause flash floods inside the municipal walls. The water has nowhere to go. Left on its own, it would form a lake, rising inexorably from one level of the economy to the next. So it has to be pumped out. Every drop of rain that falls on New Orleans evaporates or is pumped out. Its removal lowers the water table and accelerates the city's subsidence. Where marshes have been drained to create tracts for new housing, ground will shrink, too. People buy landfill to keep up with the Joneses. In the words of Bob Fairless, of the New Orleans District engineers, "It's almost an annual spring ritual to get a load of dirt and fill in the low spots on your lawn." A child jumping up and down on such a lawn can cause the earth to move under another child, on the far side of the lawn.

Many houses are built on slabs that firmly rest on pilings. As the turf around a house gradually subsides, the slab seems to rise. Where the driveway was once flush with the floor of the carport, a bump appears. The front walk sags like a hammock. The sidewalk sags. The bump up to the carport, growing, becomes high

enough to knock the front wheels out of alignment. Sakrete appears, like putty beside a windowpane, to ease the bump. The property sinks another foot. The house stays where it is, on its slab and pilings. A ramp is built to get the car into the carport. The ramp rises three feet. But the yard, before long, has subsided four. The carport becomes a porch, with hanging plants and steep wooden steps. A carport that is not firmly anchored may dangle from the side of a house like a third of a drop-leaf table. Under the house, daylight appears. You can see under the slab and out the other side. More landfill or more concrete is packed around the edges to hide the ugly scene. A gas main, broken by the settling earth, leaks below the slab. The sealed cavity fills with gas. The house blows sky high.

"The people cannot have wells, and so they take rain-water," Mark Twain observed in the eighteen-eighties. "Neither can they conveniently have cellars or graves, the town being built upon 'made' ground; so they do without both, and few of the living complain, and none of the others." The others may not complain, but they sometimes leave. New Orleans is not a place for interment. In all its major cemeteries, the clients lie aboveground. In the intramural flash floods, coffins go out of their crypts and take off down the street.

The water in New Orleans' natural aquifer is modest in amount and even less appealing than the water in the river. The city consumes the effluent of nearly half of America, and, more immediately, of the American Ruhr. None of these matters withstanding, in 1984 New Orleans took first place in the annual Drinking Water Taste Test Challenge of the American Water Works Association.

The river goes through New Orleans like an elevated highway. Jackson Square, in the French Quarter, is on high ground with respect to the rest of New Orleans, but even from the benches of Jackson Square one looks up across the levee at the hulls of passing ships. Their keels are higher than the AstroTurf in the Superdome, and if somehow the ships could turn and move at river level into the city and into the stadium they would hover above the playing field like blimps.

In the early nineteen-eighties, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a new large district headquarters in New Or-