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LETTER FROM NEW ORLEANS

THE LOST YEAR

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Behind the failure to rebuild.

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The downriver side of New Orleans has always evoked strong emotions. The French avoided it, settling the high ground of a Mississippi River oxbow that would become the heart of the city. The Americans, who took over in 1803, reviled it as a pestilential swamp. “A land hung in mourning,” the novelist George Washington Cable later wrote. “Darkened by gigantic cypresses, submerged; a land of reptiles, silence, shadow, decay.” Free blacks and European immigrants too poor to crowd into the upriver districts felled the cypresses to build clever, elongated houses that ventilated well, and assembled a rural neighborhood that was pencilled onto city maps as the Ninth Ward. Without much in the way of schools, hospitals, or transportation, the people of the Ninth Ward depended on each other, organizing mutual-aid and benevolent societies to care for the sick and the indigent. At the turn of the century, when New Orleans’s civic leaders began developing plans for a so-called Industrial Canal, connecting Lake Pontchartrain with the river, they routed it through the Ninth, cutting off the area that came to be known as the Lower Ninth Ward. Three bridges eventually joined the Lower Nine, as it is called, to the city, but the district remained isolated.

Only fourteen thousand people lived in the Lower Ninth Ward at the time of Katrina—fewer than three per cent of the city’s population—but the neighborhood instantly assumed an importance out of all proportion to its size. Depending on who was talking, the two sodden square miles represented either the indolence, poverty, and crime that Katrina had given the city a chance to expunge or the irreplaceable taproot of African-American New Orleans. The Lower Ninth Ward became, in the aftermath of Katrina, a vortex of overwrought emotion and intemperate rhetoric, a stand-in for conflicting visions of the city’s future.

New Orleans had a tradition of intermarriage going back to the French period, and the blacks living upriver of the canal tended to be light-skinned. The Lower Nine came to be known simultaneously as the dark-skinned side of town and as an area that was exceptionally integrated. Cane cutters from surrounding sugar plantations poured into the

city after the First World War, in search of good dockside jobs, and the housing lots in the Lower Nine were cheap enough for them to buy yet big enough to keep gardens, chickens, even hogs. Schools, of course, were segregated, but Frank Minyard, who has been the Orleans Parish coroner for more than thirty years, grew up in the Lower Nine in a white family so loyal to the neighborhood that his mother forbade him to swim in the Audubon Park pool, in the city's tony Audubon Park section. "My mother used to say, 'They don't like us poor whites uptown,' " he told me. "I didn't get to swim in the pool until I was out of the Navy."

The neighborhood's racial weave began to unravel on November 14, 1960, after *Brown v. Board of Education*, when federal marshals escorted a six-year-old black child named Ruby Bridges through a jeering crowd and into the William Frantz Public School, on North Galvez Street. Leander Perez, the political boss of adjoining St. Bernard Parish, which was almost entirely white, urged white New Orleanians to resist. "Don't wait until the burr-heads are forced into your schools," he said. "Do something about it now!" Whites gradually fled New Orleans. By the time Hurricane Katrina struck, the city had lost about a quarter of its people, and more than sixty-five per cent of those who remained were black; in the Lower Nine, the figure was more than ninety-eight per cent. A quarter of New Orleanians were poor, double the national average; in the Lower Nine, most households were getting by on less than thirty thousand dollars a year (the national average is fifty-seven thousand), much of it from public assistance. For years, the city has been one of the most violent in America. Ruby Bridges's brother was killed in 1990 at the housing project where he lived; last July, her oldest son, Craig, was shot dead on a New Orleans street while on a brief break from his job on a cruise ship. The Lower Nine was particularly dangerous. By the eve of Katrina, it had become, in the words of a local criminologist, "the murder capital of the murder capital."

The Lower Ninth Ward does not lie particularly low. Large portions of New Orleans—including some wealthy areas near Lake Pontchartrain—sit four or more feet below sea level, while almost all the Lower Nine sits within a foot and a half of sea level, and parts of it are a couple of feet above. What doomed it during Katrina was its position near the junction of the Industrial Canal and another canal, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, or Mr. Go, which extends eastward from the city. The two waterways funnelled Katrina's surge into a wedge that burst the Industrial Canal's levee with a sound like cannon fire early on the morning of August 29th. The violence was tremendous. A huge wave scraped half a square mile of houses off their foundations and ground them to rubble. A red iron barge the size of an airplane hangar rode through the breach and landed on top of a school bus. Not a house in the Lower Nine was spared; most of those which didn't collapse or slide off their foundations flooded to their rooflines. Their residents—among the least able to evacuate, for want of cars and money—drowned in the oily brown floodwaters or hacked holes through attic ceilings and sat on scalding tar-paper roofs for days, waiting to be rescued.

The most famous, Fats Domino, was carried from the roof of his house—an incongruously grand white mansion in a particularly bleak part of the Lower Nine—by Coast Guard helicopter in the middle of the night.

Televised images of desperate people wading out of the Lower Nine shocked the American people—the obesity and missing teeth, the raggedness and strange English. Commentators of all persuasions were astonished and outraged that these citizens' plight had been ignored by the government and the national media for decades. "A Third World country had suddenly appeared on the Gulf Coast," a *Times* article said. Shepard Smith, on Fox News, declared that the country would be "forever scarred by Third World horrors unthinkable in this nation until now."

Even as the city remained underwater, prominent politicians and businessmen began speaking of Katrina as a quick fix for generations of mistakes and neglect, a *deus ex machina* that would finally eliminate poverty in New Orleans. Some of the best-publicized early rhetoric seemed to confuse eliminating poverty with eliminating the poor. Twelve days after the storm, the *Wall Street Journal's* Washington Wire column generated a furor when it reported that Richard Baker, a Republican congressman from Baton Rouge, had been overheard telling lobbyists, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did." (Baker claimed that he had been misquoted.) A former maker of shipboard electronics and a wealthy private investor named James Reiss told the *Journal* that, in rebuilding, he wanted to see the city transformed "demographically." A number of people I encountered—often barricaded in their homes and heavily armed—explained the distinction between the "good blacks" they'd welcome back and other blacks, or passed along a bit of back-fence etymology, saying that the root of the word "Katrina" is "cleansing."

From the earliest days of the crisis, the Lower Ninth Ward seemed to be in a special category. No other neighborhood, for example, was cordoned off by troops. When outside help arrived in force, six days after the storm, the National Guard roadblocked the bridges leading into the Lower Nine. Of all those people who were toughing it out in attics across the flooded city, only those of the Lower Nine were forbidden to return if they waded out for supplies. Though eighty per cent of New Orleans was inundated, the city's homeland-security director, Terry Ebbert, appeared to single out the Lower Nine when he told a reporter that "nothing out there can be saved at all," and Mayor Clarence Ray Nagin, Jr., said, inaccurately, "I don't think it can ever be what it was, because it's the lowest-lying area." Ebbert and Nagin were exhausted, stunned by the vastness of the destruction, and lacking solid information. But nobody seriously proposed ditching Lakeview, an upscale white neighborhood that had borne the force of another breach, that of the Seventeenth Street Canal, and lay under even deeper water. Some bluntly welcomed an opportunity to abandon the Lower Ninth Ward. "I don't want those people from the Lower Ninth Ward back," Robby Robinson, the owner of French Quarter Candles, said. "I don't think any

businessperson does. They didn't contribute anything to this city.”

Because of its history of black home-ownership, the Lower Ninth Ward is a neighborhood of deep roots. Many black New Orleanians either have lived there at some point or grew up visiting relatives there. Suggestions that it be forsaken sounded to many like a pretext for getting rid of the city's black majority. Three days after the levees ruptured, I met a man named Michael Johnson on an uptown street that was covered with smashed oak boughs. He and a friend, David Bell, and Bell's two small daughters had just escaped from the Lower Nine by lashing three refrigerators into a makeshift raft. “We put the babies in. David and I got in the water and pushed,” Johnson said. He is short and sturdy; in his muddy, tattered clothes, he looked like an escaped convict. (He is actually a dialysis technician.) He and I found some plastic buckets and took them to the banks of the Mississippi, a few blocks away, so the family could bathe. His voice cracked as he described their ordeal, which included a terrifying night on the hot tarmac of an Interstate 10 overpass with hundreds of restless and angry refugees. Johnson had food and drinking water for only a couple of days, and no means of leaving the city, but his mind was already leaping to the bigger picture. “I'm not saying they planned this as a way to empty New Orleans of poor black people,” he said as he dipped buckets of khaki-colored water from the river. “But it's sure going to work out that way.” Already, the city seemed to be cleaving along a black-white line.

When President Bush addressed the nation from Jackson Square on the evening of September 15th, the French Quarter was dark and silent. Crews from the White House had set up generators and lit the gleaming-white façade of St. Louis Cathedral as a backdrop. In his speech, which lasted twenty-six minutes, the President eloquently praised the victims' “core of strength that survives all hurt, a faith in God no storm can take away, and a powerful American determination to clear the ruins.” Then he vowed, “We will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives.” He announced that more than sixty billion dollars would be spent on “the first stages of the relief effort.” He also pointed out that, “in the work of rebuilding, as many jobs as possible should go to the men and women who live in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.”

Mayor Nagin initially believed that Bush's promise would amount to a hundred billion dollars, spread over ten years—enough not only to recover from Katrina but also to cure many of the old city's pathologies. Nagin spent his early childhood in Treme (“Tre-may”), the heart of Creole New Orleans. His father worked three menial jobs, and his mother tended a lunch counter in a K mart. He was the second in his family to go to college—a historically black college, the Tuskegee Institute, in Alabama—but his rise to prominence, unlike that of most Southern black politicians, was through the corporate world rather than

the pulpit. By the time he was forty-six, Nagin was earning four hundred thousand dollars a year managing Cox Communications' cable-television operation in New Orleans. His mayoral campaign in 2002 was predicated on "running the city like a business," and his victory is usually credited to white voters. His first three years in office were remarkably scandal-free for New Orleans, but his relationship with the black majority has always been strained; the preacher of the city's biggest black congregation has called him a "white man in black skin."

Bush's pledge was contingent on the city's having a recovery plan, so Nagin announced, on September 30th, that he was forming the Bring New Orleans Back Commission to develop one. As he explained to me later, what seemed most important at the time was maintaining good relations with the White House, and he appointed several people who, if necessary, could get President Bush on the phone. The co-chairs were Mel Lagarde, a white health-care executive, and Barbara Major, a black community activist and the director of St. Thomas Health Services, a clinic. In some circles, the group came to be known as the Canizaro Commission, because its most influential member was a real-estate developer named Joseph Canizaro, a friend of Bush's and one of his biggest fund-raisers. Although Nagin was careful to appoint eight blacks, eight whites, and one Hispanic, Barbara Major, the only figure on the commission who is from what poor blacks call "the community," told the *Times*, "Some people don't understand that an equal number of black and white isn't the same as equity."

By early October, most of the people gutting houses and clearing fallen trees from New Orleans's streets weren't locals but Hispanics from elsewhere. Some fifteen thousand Hispanics had lived in New Orleans before Katrina, but they'd never had a high profile—no Spanish radio station, identifiable Hispanic neighborhood, or fashionable cuisine. (The restaurant Nacho Mama's, in the Garden District, was owned by a man named Shane Finkelstein.) Eduardo Ramirez, a twenty-five-year-old construction worker from Mexico City who was standing in line one afternoon for a cup of stew at a Salvation Army wagon, told me that, before the storm, hanging Sheetrock paid twelve dollars an hour. "It pays twenty now," he said. "And the cops don't bother us anymore, asking for papers." Ramirez and several friends commuted two hours each way from Baton Rouge. Other Mexicans he knew were sleeping in tents. On October 4th, representatives from a number of organizations, including the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and the N.A.A.C.P., held a joint press conference to denounce the business owners who were hiring non-union workers from out of state, even when locals were available and ready to work. The electricians' union said that one contractor had dismissed its union employees "in favor of workers from Texas."

On October 6th, Mayor Nagin held a "Back to Business" meeting in the downtown Sheraton hotel, and in the opening words of a twenty-minute speech managed to alienate almost everybody. Several hundred ruffled, frightened, grief-stricken business owners had crowded into the Armstrong Ballroom to hear the Mayor and other officials talk about

reviving New Orleans's economy. Nagin, who walks with the stylish lope of a jazz singer, appeared confident as he took the microphone. "I know you want to know how do I make sure that New Orleans is not overrun by Mexican workers?" he said, without preamble, in his easygoing homeboy drawl. He was addressing television cameras at the back of the room, and, by extension, his increasingly resentful black constituents scattered around the South. But the business owners, far from being concerned about Mexicans, were grateful for the pliant and low-cost workforce digging them out of the muck. Judging by the response on a twenty-four-hour call-in radio show that was the only broadcast airing in New Orleans, blacks, too, found Nagin's baldly racial comments on their behalf insulting. The Mayor backpedalled for days.

Over breakfast one morning, the city's best-known pollster, Silas Lee—a large bald man of fifty-one with an air of perpetual amusement—analyzed Nagin's mistakes, starting with appointing the Canizaro Commission before reaching out to the people of New Orleans. The Mayor, Lee said, needed to "disperse teams right away, and organize discussion panels at places in the community." He should have advertised a 1-800 number in the *Houston Chronicle*, for instance, encouraging evacuees to call in. Taking measures like these would send the message that ordinary New Orleanians—and not just a small group of élites—were included in the planning. "In a volatile time, you have one chance to get your message out," Lee said. "You hit the bull's-eye or that's it." Lee makes a lot of his money coaching experts on how to testify in court—how to convey complicated information to jurors, frequently of limited education, without patronizing them. Nagin's commission would need that skill, he said. Painful decisions about what to keep and what to change would be based on such arcana as floodplains, actuarial tables, population density, and city budgets. The "jury"—the population of New Orleans, mostly black and poorly educated, affected by generations of poverty and discrimination, traumatized by the storm, and scattered all over the country—would be hard to win over. Discussions involving the Lower Nine would be especially sensitive. The area, Lee said, "represents African-Americans' cultural and historical significance, and their financial stability. They're not going to let anybody take that away."

Nagin stumbled immediately when it came to the Lower Ninth Ward. He began allowing residents to "look and leave" on October 12th, so they could spend a few daylight hours plucking possessions from the wreckage. Some travelled great distances from their temporary shelters. To get into the neighborhood, they tried to cross one of the bridges over the Industrial Canal or to circle around to the east and enter through St. Bernard Parish, where the Lower Nine's border was fortified by a wall of flood-wrecked cars stacked three high. National Guard troops protected all the approaches, and, for reasons that varied from soldier to soldier, they refused to let many people in. The residents were furious, and their frustration nourished a whole new crop of conspiracy theories: the city wanted to turn the Lower Nine into an industrial park; developers wanted the Lower Nine,

with its riverfront and view of downtown, for condominiums; somebody's cousin's cousin saw Donald Trump drive through in a limousine. The rumors became so widespread that Nagin felt compelled, the following week, to issue a statement: "Read my lips: We will rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward."

Seven weeks after the storm, Richard Baker—the Louisiana congressman who had reportedly celebrated God's "cleanup" of public housing—introduced a bill to finance reconstruction throughout the state. In local mythology, the proposal quickly became known as an eighty-billion-dollar buyout, even though the bill stated that federal spending would be capped at less than half that amount. Under the bill, the government would buy, at sixty per cent of the pre-Katrina value, any flood-damaged house or small business in Louisiana that an owner wanted to sell. The government would consolidate the properties and sell them for planned development. Baker's proposal was big enough to save New Orleans. It would put money and options in the hands of homeowners. And it was tailored to appeal to Bush's sensibilities—government involvement would be temporary, and about half of the initial public outlay would be recovered when redeveloped properties were sold. The bill made New Orleans the greatest urban-revival opportunity in recent American history, and planners and architects from around the world gathered to help.

More than just New Orleans was at stake. A third of the world's population lives in coastal zones, many of them in delta cities that may flood as the climate changes and seas rise. The Netherlands' complex of levees, fortified after a hurricane killed hundreds in 1953, is a respected flood-control model; done right, planners said, New Orleans could serve as another example of how to rebuild, smarter and better, a city flooded on an unprecedented scale. "That is the silver lining in this whole disaster," a prominent local architect named Ray Manning told the *Times-Picayune*. "We have this incredible, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reengage and recalibrate this city in a way that, politically, you might never have been able to get to." Joseph Canizaro called the city a "clean sheet."

In their enthusiasm to create a new city, though, the planners were up against New Orleanians' uncommon fondness for the old one. A Gallup poll conducted a few weeks before Katrina found that more than half of the city's residents, regardless of age, race, or wealth, were "extremely satisfied" with their personal lives—a higher percentage than in any of the twenty-one major American cities in the survey. I had glimpsed that stubborn affection in October, when the first secondline since Katrina wound its way through the debris-strewn streets of Treme. The secondline is the quintessential traffic-disrupting New Orleans art form; in this case, the Black Men of Labor, a social aid and pleasure club, marched in matching yellow print shirts, with matching hat bands and parasols, while the Hot 8 Brass Band followed behind them, blasting music into the mostly vacant neighborhood. As the procession moved along St. Bernard and Dorgenois Streets, people

materialized from the shadows. They ran laughing down the steps of houses blessedly elevated, or emerged gloved and masked, carrying buckets, from the gloom of moldy interiors. More than a hundred people fell in with the band, shimmying their shoulders and twitching their hips—tentatively at first, as though remembering how to celebrate, and then bursting into full-on, high-stepping, arm-waving street jive. Fred Johnson, a non-profit housing consultant who was shading himself with a yellow-and-green parasol, nodded appreciatively and remarked, “You can’t plan this in, you can’t plan this out. You can’t legislate this in, you can’t legislate this out.”

Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco created a commission of her own. The Louisiana Recovery Authority was established with twenty-three members, who were to advise her on rebuilding and later to oversee the distribution of the federal dollars that were expected to begin flowing any day. The only person named to both Nagin’s commission and Blanco’s was Donald (Boysie) Bollinger, who personified the impatience for a “new” New Orleans which was the driving ethic of both the city and the state commissions. Bollinger is broad-chested and jowly, with a big mane of gray hair, bushy expressive eyebrows, and the carriage of a viceroy. A Cajun from Lockport, about thirty miles west of New Orleans, he owns seven shipyards in and around the city, where, before the storm, he employed about a thousand people. He has been a friend of George W. Bush for a quarter century. Bollinger invited me one day to follow his silver Mercedes to a shipyard on the other side of the Mississippi. As we crossed over the sweeping white Crescent City Connection bridge, the creepy stillness of New Orleans receded, and it was striking to see the bustling activity at Bollinger’s Destrehan Avenue shipyard. Every berth was occupied by a storm-damaged ferry or barge. Great geysers of welding sparks rained down upon the docks, and the racket was intense. All that was holding things up, Bollinger said, was a shortage of manpower. “Ever since the storm, I’ve been trying to get my workforce back,” he shouted over the din. “My H.R. people went to every shelter in Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi, offering jobs at twelve to eighteen dollars an hour. I didn’t get one worker.” Bollinger held the view that the Federal Emergency Management Agency was pampering evacuees, by handing families two thousand dollars in emergency help. “I said to the President, ‘You’re empowering people not to come back to work.’ The President said, ‘I don’t think two thousand dollars will do that.’ I said, ‘Mr. President, these people haven’t had two thousand dollars in their lives.’ ” Rather than wait, Bollinger was hiring as many Mexicans as he could find. “I’m hoping the people of New Orleans come back and take a different attitude toward employment,” he said, pulling open the door to a small office building. “But until they do . . .”

We entered what had once been a reception area but was now a “kitchen”—a row of brand-new microwave ovens and some folding tables and chairs. Down a hall, small panelled offices had been converted to dormitories; four double bunk beds filled each one, their

mattresses wrapped in plastic. Bollinger has devoted decades to improving New Orleans incrementally, as a chairman of the National World War II Museum and the president of the New Orleans Region of the Boy Scouts of America, and as a member of various committees to improve transportation, housing, and public schools—which he called “a failure.” Now he was a believer in Katrina-as-opportunity. “One storm, we have a whole new playing field,” he said as we examined a row of narrow fiberglass shower stalls.

Bollinger believed that Nagin’s commission should deal with the city’s blighted neighborhoods by engineering them off the map. “We do ourselves a disservice if we end with the concentrated poverty as it was,” he said. He supported a radical plan that the commissioners were discussing, which would sprinkle the poor throughout the middle class, in the hope that, among other things, they would absorb a work ethic. “If both my neighbors get up and go to work, *I’m* more likely to get up and go to work,” Bollinger said.

The chief promoter of mixed-income neighborhoods in New Orleans is Pres Kabacoff, whose company, HRI Associates, specializes in transforming disused industrial areas into trendy residential neighborhoods. Kabacoff, a handsome and soft-spoken man of sixty, has for years been pushing Operation Rebirth, a four-billion-dollar mega-plan that would, among other things, convert one of the city’s oldest housing projects, just outside the French Quarter, to a mixed-income development. Operation Rebirth would scramble the poor and the middle class in new housing throughout Treme and the lower Garden District, and provide the city with a light-rail system. Kabacoff described the project, which would be funded by the Baker bill, as New Orleans’s best shot at greatness. His office, on the thirty-first floor of a building in the Central Business District, has a vast window overlooking the area in question, and, as we unrolled an artist’s rendering of the project, he swept a hand across the view. “New Orleans could be an Afro-Caribbean Paris,” he said.

The era of social engineering by wrecking ball began in 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court allowed Washington, D.C., to raze and redevelop a section of the run-down Southwest neighborhood. Whatever good such urban-renewal projects as this may have done, they traumatized residents of the minority neighborhoods they obliterated. This was especially true when the projects incorporated interstate highways. After I-94 displaced hundreds of people in St. Paul, Minnesota, during the nineteen-sixties, one observer wrote, “Very few blacks lived in Minnesota, but the road builders found them.” Black New Orleans had suffered its share of urban renewal, which carried echoes of the 1923 splitting of the Ninth Ward by the Industrial Canal. In the nineteen-sixties, city-council members chose to run Interstate 10 through the center of Treme. The city cut down the large oaks shading Claiborne Avenue—a graceful boulevard where blacks celebrated a parallel-universe Mardi Gras—and overhung it with a gigantic concrete roadway. Planners also

razed eight square blocks of homes and businesses to build a cultural center and amusement park inspired by the Tivoli Gardens, in Copenhagen. The project never materialized, but urban renewal wiped out half of Treme. Likewise, though it wasn't called urban renewal anymore, the city got a federal grant in the nineteen-nineties to raze the St. Thomas housing project, which occupied a prime spot near the Mississippi River, and replace it with mixed-income housing and resident-owned shops. Pres Kabacoff eventually got the contract, and the result, River Garden, is a collection of simple, attractive attached houses that stood up well to Katrina. Somewhere along the way, though, the number of subsidized units fell by more than two thirds; the idea of resident management disappeared; and the small resident-owned stores became a two-hundred-thousand-square-foot Wal-Mart.

Even before Katrina, public-housing residents were fighting a city plan to replace more projects with mixed-income developments. Some argue that the projects, as grim as they are, are the wellspring of New Orleans's unique "bounce" style of hip-hop: the artists Juvenile, Master P, Turk, Baby Williams, and Soulja Slim all spent their childhoods in and around New Orleans public housing. In general, when New Orleanians describe what they love about the city, the first thing they mention is neither the food nor the music but the intimacy of the neighborhoods—knowing everybody on the block where you were born, and never leaving. "This is our neighborhood," Paula Taylor, a public-housing resident, told the *Gambit*, a local newspaper, in April. She added, "Do I want to see it better? Yes. Safe? Yes. Clean and decent? Yes. But this is home." It would be hard to imagine an idea less suited to New Orleans culture than breaking up the neighborhoods. When I asked Kabacoff about objections to his mixed-income plans, he waved them away. "You get it from both sides," he said. "I've also gotten e-mails saying, 'You're contributing to the niggerization of New Orleans.' "

For residents of the Lower Nine, the most frightening proposal before the Bring New Orleans Back Commission was to "shrink the footprint" of New Orleans. The idea, in many ways, made sense: the city's present size and scale were appropriate for the 1960 population of more than six hundred thousand. After the exodus following school integration, many buildings, and some whole blocks, were abandoned. Planners estimated that the post-Katrina population would reach only a quarter of a million—about half of what it was before the storm. Life among thousands of deserted buildings would be bleak, and a city shorn of much of its tax base would be hard-pressed to provide services to sparsely inhabited, far-flung settlements. In early January, the commission published a map of the proposed shrunken city. Huge areas indicated by round green blotches would be converted to parks and green space. All of the blotches covered areas instantaneously recognizable to New Orleanians as primarily black areas. Oliver Thomas, the lumbering, emotional president of the city council and a native of the Lower Nine, led the opposition to a geographically smaller city. "To say you're not going to fix this community or that

community—you're not honoring the dead!" he told a crowded council chamber on the evening of January 6th. The room erupted in applause. Before Katrina, sixty per cent of homes in the Lower Nine were owned by the people who lived in them—a higher percentage than in the city as a whole—and Thomas was eager to help his constituents protect the one thing of which they were sure: that property rights are sacred, and that they owned a city lot.

Those who wanted a smaller footprint waited all fall and winter for the federal government to relieve them of the burden of fighting for it. FEMA was set to release, for the first time since 1984, new guidelines for maps that would show what parts of the city the federal government would insure against floods. The maps were expected to rule out certain areas and thus cut through the racial politics. Proponents talked excitedly about the "discipline" they hoped the maps would impose—the city-planning equivalent of "Wait till your father gets home!"

Sean Reilly, a member of Governor Blanco's statewide recovery authority, told me that New Orleans's obsession with neighborhoods was dangerous in the context of the bigger hurricanes predicted by atmospheric scientists. "When you say 'neighborhood,' it's become politically and racially charged," he said, the day we met in the office of his family's national billboard-advertising company, in Baton Rouge. The White House had just approved \$6.2 billion for housing, and Reilly wanted the state to withhold it from any place that was too low-lying. "We should talk about blocks and elevations, not neighborhoods, so we can talk about people rebuilding out of harm's way." Reilly, a red-haired man in his forties who likes to call himself "Mr. Tough Love," showed me a poster-size satellite photograph of New Orleans at the height of the flood, color-coded according to water depth. He ran his hand over the darkest areas, which included a sliver of the Lower Nine. "We're not going to allow rebuilding where it's unsafe. We know what the FEMA maps are going to say. They will make some decisions. Certain places are obviously unsafe to build."

Neither Nagin's nor Blanco's commission had any real authority, except to make recommendations. But, in a city desperate for direction and leadership, the media reported every notion that the commissions discussed. Ideas poured forth in a dizzying torrent: scramble the neighborhoods; ban building in the hardest-hit areas; make the city smaller; impose a three-year moratorium on building; no, three months; no, one month; no, forget the moratorium and let neighborhoods organize themselves, but, if too few return after a year, pull the plug on services. The debates were hard to follow, especially for citizens evacuated to Houston or Atlanta. The process paralyzed those trying to make decisions about damaged homes, and exacerbated their sense of exclusion. "It's like someone coming to totally redecorate your home, and they don't talk to you. You feel raped, violated," the

pollster Silas Lee said. “First, nature violated them, then the bureaucracy and planning process. If the commissions had understood that you’re not just physically rebuilding but emotionally rebuilding, they’d be achieving something now instead of deadlocked.”

If ever a city needed a voice of brotherhood, it was New Orleans after Katrina. No one could find the right words, including the city’s powerful clergymen. When I visited the First Baptist Church on Canal Boulevard, which has about a thousand congregants, mostly white, its blue-eyed and flinty pastor, the Reverend David Crosby, told me, “There is nothing left in the Lower Ninth Ward but dirt! A woman who has a house down there, what’s she got? A piece of dirt worth two or three thousand dollars.” During a Sunday service at Watson Memorial Teaching Ministries, on St. Charles Avenue, the Reverend Tom Watson, a scholarly-looking African-American who subsequently challenged Nagin in this year’s race for mayor, alternately scolded his congregants for their mistrust (“You have to ask yourself, am I involved in something that would be divisive in my community?”) and stoked it (“I believe there is a systematic conspiracy to keep people out so they can make this city the way they want it”).

The planning process so alienated the black majority that even ideas that showed promise were not acknowledged. Making the city smaller, for example, didn’t have to mean annihilating the Lower Nine. Janet Howard runs a nonprofit group called the Bureau of Government Research, which issues critiques of New Orleans’s waste and inefficiency. A former Wall Street lawyer with a vinegary, patrician disdain for pomposity, she often criticized the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, but she was a strong proponent of shrinking the footprint. In a borrowed downtown computer-company office that she’d been using since her own office flooded, she explained to me how the city could contract without destroying neighborhood integrity, through land swaps. She sketched it for me on a legal pad, showing how those in, say, the utterly destroyed parts of the Lower Nine who wanted to return could swap with people who owned lots in the less damaged part and didn’t want to return. The result: a smaller, but intact, Lower Nine neighborhood.

On Martin Luther King’s birthday, as Nagin’s reelection campaign geared up, the Mayor reached out to his black constituents. “It’s time for us to rebuild a New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans,” he said. A bit later, he added, “This city will be a majority African-American city. It’s the way God wants it to be. You can’t have it no other way.” Quoting from an old George Clinton song was a ham-fisted attempt at reassurance from a mayor whose diction, if not his sense of audience, was usually more precise. Jack Cafferty scolded him on CNN, and conservative bloggers were in high dudgeon—“Where is the liberal outrage?” a Web site called Rhymes with Right demanded. Nor did Nagin’s pandering do him much good with black constituents. “Everybody’s jaw is dropping right now,” the council president, Oliver Thomas, told the *Times-Picayune*. “Even if you believe

some of that crazy stuff, that is not the type of image we need to present to the nation.”

New Orleanians both at home and in exile seemed to take it for granted that once the President signed on to some version of the big buyout plan proposed by Representative Baker, the Bring New Orleans Back Commission would hand down solutions like beads from a Mardi Gras float. The expectation had induced a torpor. “People have been asking, ‘What’s going to happen to our property?’ instead of asking, ‘What can we do to save our property?’ ” Greta Gladney, a fourth-generation Lower Nine resident, told me in New Orleans. “Instead of coming back and getting to work, they’ve been asking, ‘When will we get permission to come back?’ ” Gladney, who is forty-two, short, and caramel-colored, had her first child when she was fourteen, and went on to earn bachelor’s degrees in chemistry and philosophy and a master’s in business administration from Baruch College, in New York. She’d long since started rebuilding her own two-story house, on Jourdan Street, tearing off sodden plaster to let the cypress lath dry. She was impatient for her neighbors to shake off their lethargy and set about rebuilding. “People will depend on the kindness of strangers,” she said, echoing Blanche Dubois. “That’s not good public policy, but that’s what there is in poor neighborhoods.”

On January 24th, New Orleans suffered what Congressman Baker called a “death blow.” Donald Powell, a former F.D.I.C. chief, who was overseeing Gulf Coast recovery for the White House, announced that President Bush would not support the Baker bill. The President didn’t want the government in the “real-estate business,” Powell said. Of the more than two hundred thousand Louisiana homes that Katrina had destroyed, the federal government would pay to rebuild only a tenth, he said: those which lacked flood insurance, were owner-occupied, and were outside established floodplains. Officials at all levels of state and local government appeared to be taken completely by surprise; on the streets of New Orleans, people were visibly stunned.

An official involved in the negotiations with the White House told me that responsibility for handling the bill within the Administration had shifted, from the coöperative Treasury Department to the office of Allan Hubbard, the President’s chief economic adviser. “Hubbard just looked at it as ‘We don’t want to set up another bureaucracy,’ ” the official said. “I’m a conservative ideologue myself, but I think it’s ideological.” Three weeks later, Bush announced that he would ask Congress for an additional \$4.2 billion for housing in New Orleans, bringing the total to a little more than ten billion dollars—far from the ten billion dollars a year over ten years that Nagin initially had expected.

The Bring New Orleans Back Commission continued meeting into March, but its grandiose plans for social engineering now seemed pointless. The failure of Bush to “do what it takes” to rebuild New Orleans was only part of it. Much of what could have been done to improve New Orleanians’ lives, such as land swaps to preserve a smaller Lower Nine, wouldn’t have required a lot of money. It would, however, have required trust and

coöperation. But, as the weather grew warm, the vision of a planned recovery slipped away, and an every-man-for-himself ethic replaced it. People began piling rotten wallboard on their front lawns and lining up on the eighth floor of City Hall for building permits.

Ronald W. Lewis's family left the Cedar Grove sugar plantation, in Thibodaux, Louisiana, in the nineteen-forties, and ended up at 1911 Deslonde Street, a block from the eastern bank of the Industrial Canal. After Katrina, Lewis went to stay with relatives in Thibodaux, and I met him on a warm late-January day in the parking lot of an Applebee's restaurant in Metairie, a mostly white suburb west of New Orleans. His 1986 Cadillac was leaking coolant onto the pavement as he arrived, and the driver's door was badly dented; he slid across the front seat to get out on the passenger side. "Isn't this just the most beautiful day!" he said exuberantly. Lewis is broad-shouldered and very dark, with one gold incisor, a white pencil-line mustache, and tiny diamond studs in each earlobe. He's fifty-four, but he seemed much older as he walked, hunched and stiff-legged, to my rental car. "Just wear and tear," he said, from a third of a century swinging sledgehammers and wrenching pry bars as a streetcar-track repairman.

Metairie, which was lightly damaged in the storm, was in a frenzy of rebuilding, like Reconstruction Atlanta in "Gone with the Wind." The streets were jammed with high-riding contractors' pickups and glaziers' trucks that reflected the sun crazily in every direction. The farther into the city we drove, the thinner the traffic became. Along Napoleon Avenue, the grassy median—"neutral ground," in New Orleans parlance—was covered with cars encrusted to their roofs with mud, parked there before the storm in the belief that five extra inches of elevation would keep them dry. By the time we reached Almonaster Boulevard, in the upper Ninth Ward, there was little sign of life. As we drove, Lewis told me about his childhood in the days when New Orleans was booming and his parents' two-bedroom house on Deslonde Street was often filled with friends and relatives from the countryside. In those days, the rural blacks of the Lower Nine didn't go in for what they considered the parading-in-the-street foolishness of the Creoles in Treme. "You worked and you went to church and you played music," Lewis said. "You didn't parade." Lewis helped change that in the nineteen-eighties, when he formed the Lower Nine's first social-aid and pleasure club, the Big Nine, which combined the mutual-aid functions of the old Ninth Ward neighborhood organizations with what he called "flash and dash: a two-hundred-dollar hat, nine-hundred-dollar shoes." We crossed the Claiborne Avenue Bridge, glancing to our left at the spot where the Deslonde Street home had stood before it vanished. Under a crust of dried flood slime, storefronts testified to generations of hard times: cinder-block liquor marts, tire-repair shops with hand-lettered signs, a Popeye's Chicken. The Lower Nine didn't have a supermarket or a bank branch. For produce or credit, residents crossed into St. Bernard Parish, where they shopped on Judge Perez Drive—originally named for the same Leander Perez who had called blacks "burr-heads."

Lewis's effusive cheer waned as we ventured deeper into the neighborhood. By the time we passed Fats Domino's vast white house, on Caffin Avenue, he'd grown quiet. But when we turned onto Tupelo Street, where in several yards small mountains of stained Sheetrock, lumber, and sodden mattresses rose, his face lit up. "That's progress!" he said, clapping his big hands and laughing. "That means people are coming back!"

We stopped at No. 1317, a small tan bungalow that Lewis had bought in 1978, the year after he helped organize the city's streetcar-track repairmen into the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. An orange "X" and "9/16" had been spray-painted on the door, meaning that rescuers hadn't reached the house until more than two weeks after the flood. He stood on the dead grass, pointing to house after silent house: "Miss Catherine there, she's in Atlanta. They found Christine's body in that one two weeks ago. Her son walked in and there she was. Those people there are in McComb, Mississippi." We peered through the back door of Lewis's house; the interior had been stripped to the studs by a team of University of Montana students. "Isn't that something?" Lewis said. "Came down here on their Christmas break just to help." Until Katrina, a small, freestanding garage in Lewis's back yard had contained the House of Dance and Feathers, a homemade museum dedicated to the Mardi Gras Indians and the social-aid and pleasure clubs of the Lower Nine. The museum, a ten-by-twelve room, had been officially recognized with tax-exempt status shortly before Katrina. All that remained was a muddy strip of Indian beadwork, drying on a kitchen stool. Lewis's voice took on a dreamy quality as he spoke of neighborhood crayfish boils and fish fries, of bringing meals to Miss Catherine, and of the kinship ties among neighbors who looked out for each other's children—life in the Lower Nine as painted by Norman Rockwell. When I suggested that perhaps grief was buffing his memories, Lewis insisted that the Lower Nine was never as bad as the crime and the poverty statistics suggested. "People weren't as poor as all that. At least, it didn't feel like that," he said. "People got by. Everybody knew everybody. The criming wasn't everywhere; it was, like, this corner was bad, or that parking lot." He winked. "We're able to hold more than one thought in our heads."

As planning for a new New Orleans stalled, growing numbers of students and professors arrived to see what might be salvaged of the old one. One February morning, Jeffrey Chusid was taking a break and eating a praline at Loretta's Too, a coffee shop in a run-down, arty part of the city near Elysian Fields Avenue. Chusid, a heavy-lidded man with a gray-and-white beard, teaches historic preservation at Cornell. Three graduate students sat at the table with him, studying an inventory they had made of public assets in the Ninth Ward—businesses, public buildings, parks. They were particularly excited about the Meat People, a gaudily painted market at Derbigny and Mazant, which had the look of an important neighborhood fixture. Chusid said, "The need is for everybody to be planning, so the people can say, 'This building is important; we remember the people who lived

here.’ Or ‘You know what we liked about this street? The curbs were the right height, and the kids would sit here.’ ” He finished his praline, and we piled into a white minivan to continue the inventory, moving slowly along Urquhart Street. A blue van coming the other way rolled down the windows and stopped, and the occupants, another group of students, exchanged intelligence about some oak trees on Poland Street; the students were making a list of every viable tree in New Orleans, and their best estimate was that forty thousand had been lost in the storm and flood.

While Chusid cruised the neighborhoods, Kenneth Reardon, the chairman of the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell, was helping to coordinate data on the condition of New Orleans which had been gathered by teams from seventeen universities. “It’s absolutely criminal—people looking out a downtown hotel window, making statements about neighborhoods they never visited much to begin with, saying nothing can be done and nobody wants to come back,” Reardon said, when I reached him by phone at Cornell later that month. He couldn’t imagine making plans for a city whose precise physical condition was unknown. “The first rule is: Survey before plan. The whole process should be driven by data, and people’s preferences, and the reality.”

Elizabeth English studies the effects of hurricanes on buildings, at the Hurricane Center of Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge. “You need to think about how architecture helps shape culture,” she said, when I met her at a back-yard dinner party in Baton Rouge. English, who is fifty-two and slight, has the intensity of someone whose career has met its most significant challenge. She is trying to save an architectural feature that is as emblematic of New Orleans as crayfish étouffée: the shotgun house. The shotgun—sometimes four to six times as long as it is wide—catches stray breezes and allows them to pass through every room. The house is too narrow to have a hall, so the rooms are lined up one behind the other. The original plantations in the Mississippi River oxbow that later cradled New Orleans were long, thin strips, starting at the river and running north, toward the lake. “People grow accustomed to the geometry in which they live,” English said. When it came to laying out lots in New Orleans, they naturally laid them out long and narrow. That led to the long and narrow shotguns.” The shotguns, in turn, helped develop the close-knit neighborhoods that New Orleanians love. A shotgun’s salient feature is its lack of privacy. Getting from the front room to the kitchen, which is usually in the back, means walking through everybody else’s room or around the outside. On the narrow lots, shotguns sit close together, so neighbors are also on top of each other. “That communal culture everybody talks about in New Orleans, that warmth, all that life on the street, you could say that originates with the need for every plantation to have a little piece of riverfront,” English said. The shotguns are built of old-growth swamp cypress that resists mold, termites, and rot. “And they were built to flood.” The homes were designed to drain water and dry quickly. From English’s informal survey of the Lower Nine, it looked as though at least half of the houses on many blocks were shotguns. Most were in good

structural shape, even those which had floated away. They needed new Sheetrock and wiring but little else, and it wouldn't cost much, she said, to jack them up in anticipation of future floods. "You just put more cinder blocks under them." A do-it-yourself owner could restore a shotgun for not much more than the amount—twenty-six thousand dollars—in reconstruction assistance that FEMA was promising to homeowners who lacked insurance. "There was this message coming out of the commission that you'd be foolish to invest in your flooded home," English said. "But that's just not true."

When I visited Mayor Nagin in his office, in February, he was awkwardly straddling the issue of the Lower Ninth Ward. His Department of Safety and Permits was handing out as many as five hundred building permits a week, regardless of location in the city. Those who could cajole city inspectors into believing that their houses were less than fifty per cent damaged got a permit to accomplish repairs. Nearly ninety per cent of applicants were able to make that case. Even as his administration was authorizing the permits in the Lower Ninth Ward, Nagin said that he thought building there was a bad idea. "I wouldn't put money in the Lower Nine," he told me. "Nowhere." Maps were the post-Katrina currency of communication, and Nagin, sitting beneath a vast abstract canvas, unfolded one of his own. He traced a finger along the path of the storm surge. The Lower Nine would remain vulnerable even if the Army Corps of Engineers closed Mr. Go, he said. "I'm comfortable with rebuilding everywhere but the Lower Nine. Yes, the Lower Nine carries that emotional charge. I have relatives who live in the Lower Nine. But I'd rather be honest and tell them exactly what the danger is."

I asked Nagin if, given the black community's hostility toward the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, he now thought that including James Reiss—who'd spoken of changing the city "demographically"—on the commission had been a mistake.

"I've known Jimmy Reiss for a long time," Nagin said. "I'm not one to throw people off because they're controversial. You need some edginess, especially in this town." Black resentment, he said, was part of "the nature of New Orleans, the negativity and self-pity." He folded his hands and bowed his head for a moment, sighing loudly. "Look," he said. "What you see in the Lower Nine—the hurt, the resentment—has been there for years. Anytime you talk about revitalization, urban planning, you're going to have people who say it's a racial thing."

As Nagin walked me to the door and shook hands, I asked him how he saw his prospects for reelection. A few dozen candidates had entered the race, and a couple of especially formidable ones were about to declare. Polling a city blown apart was nearly impossible, but, given the bungled rescue, the failed Baker bill, and the woebegone state of the city six months after the storm, things did not look good for Nagin.

“Twenty-four candidates—most of them white?” he said. “You’ve got to be kidding. Of course I’m going to win!”

Mardi Gras fell on a sunny, cool, and dry day this year. Nagin, dressed in the desert-tan camouflage of a four-star Army general, rode a big horse at the head of the parade. Zulu, the oldest of the black Mardi Gras krewes still parading, had brought twenty-four Zulu warriors from South Africa, who danced down Jackson Street in the crisp morning sun. The Muses handed out their signature hand-strung glass beads from floats that depicted Nagin playing the “race card” in a Cajun variant of poker called *bourré*, and FEMA as a barrel of monkeys.

Governor Blanco, a Democrat, offered me a ride in her black S.U.V. from her downtown hotel to the main reviewing stand, a quarter of a mile away. She had lost the haggard look she’d worn during the crisis, when she was feuding with President Bush over control of the rescue, and was fresh and relaxed in a red silk jacket. “My surprise is how slow things are at every level,” she said. As of that morning, not a penny of either the original six billion dollars or Bush’s additional four billion had arrived in the state. (It didn’t begin arriving until May.) I asked her if she thought that Louisiana’s reputation for corruption was preventing Congress from acting. For months, the state treasurer, John Neely Kennedy, had been pushing Blanco to remove any whiff of impropriety by banning state officials and their families from securing reconstruction contracts. Blanco told me that she didn’t like the idea. “The legislature is not a full-time job,” she said. “These people have to make a living, too.” I asked whether a Republican Congress and White House might be deliberately slowing the release of funds for a city that is essentially a big blue dot on an otherwise red state map. She closed her eyes. “I can’t let myself go there,” she said.

Interstate 10 casts a deep gray shadow over Claiborne Avenue, but that has never stopped black New Orleans from celebrating Mardi Gras along its noisy, smoggy, gritty length. Music thumped and blared from dozens of overamplified car radios and boom boxes, sirens wailed, and horns honked. In exchange for a twenty-dollar bill, a fat woman handed me a plastic plate holding a turkey neck, a crab, a sausage, and a pig’s foot, all fished out of a waist-high pot of spicy broth. A big man approached, dressed in a black shirt and pants with white skeleton bones painted on them. His face shone with a white skull that had been daubed on. His arms were thrown wide. “I’m a bones man!” he yelled, engulfing me in a hug. It was Ronald Lewis, the streetcar-track repairman whose Mardi Gras museum had been destroyed in the flood. Masking skull-and-bones, a traditional Mardi Gras reminder of mortality, seemed appropriate, as bodies were still being discovered in ruined houses. (One was found in a house in the center of the city on May 27th, nine months after the storm. The Louisiana death toll so far is fourteen hundred and sixty-four; about eighty per cent of the victims have been found in New Orleans.)

Lewis was deliriously happy that Mardi Gras day was a sparkling one, and that so many people were back for it. Now that the Baker bill was dead, the era of waiting for that illusionary eighty billion dollars was over, and the rebuilding could finally begin. “All that waiting around hurt us.” Sweat beaded on his face. “They dangle resources, and everybody waits to get them instead of just starting in.” Nobody else from his block had yet returned, but Lewis was going ahead with his remodelling. “I don’t care if I’m the only person on my block,” he said. “I’m going to live in my house.” Only in the bizarre world of the first post-Katrina Mardi Gras could the withholding of federal aid be considered good news and the prospect of living in an abandoned neighborhood victory.

In late February, about a hundred homeowners from the Lower Ninth Ward met in a church building, many of them wearing red T-shirts that said “I’m from Dat Nine and You Ain’t Takin’ Mine!” Along the walls, boxes of diapers, sanitary napkins, hand sanitizer, and plastic cutlery stood open for the taking. Ceiling fans barely stirred the stifling air. The crowd was angry; six months after Katrina, the Lower Nine was the only neighborhood without electricity. A man from the Small Business Administration offered loans, and a middle-aged FEMA employee stretched her smile to the breaking point as she explained the intricacies of something called “excess flood coverage.” Joe Ringo, a sturdy man in his fifties with a big fuzzy beard, stood in overalls and rubber boots, leveling a finger at the FEMA official’s face. “I don’t know why you’re down here talking to us about flood insurance,” he said. “This wasn’t a flood. A flood is an act of God. This was the government—the government!—doing a bad job of building levees and destroying our homes.” The crowd murmured; several people yelled, “That’s right!” Ringo swivelled and pointed at the S.B.A. official. “And don’t you be talking about no S.B.A. loans,” he said. “I don’t need no loan. The government’s the one needs that loan, because the government’s going to pay for my house!” People cheered for this vain hope; though levees built by the Army Corps of Engineers failed, the government has never accepted liability for all the damage that ensued.

The decision to rebuild was now in the hands of residents, who, for the time being, wanted only to put things back the way they were. A few weeks after Nagin told me that he was uncomfortable rebuilding in the neighborhood, he attended a similar homeowners’ meeting and announced, “We’re going to rebuild all sections of New Orleans, including the Lower Ninth Ward!”

The last hope for a planned recovery ended a little more than a month later, on April 12th, when FEMA released its long-awaited floodplain guidelines. Instead of ruling out redevelopment in low-lying areas, the agency had essentially left floodplain elevations unchanged. The only new rule was that some builders would have to raise new houses three feet off the ground. Sean Reilly, of the state planning authority—who had hoped that the FEMA guidelines would make rebuilding decisions a matter of safety rather than of racial politics—was incredulous. The three-foot requirement seemed both arbitrary and

pointless in an area where water had run over rooftops. He told me that the agency had “simply abdicated” its responsibility. “They took away our moral authority to tell people what to do,” he said. “We staked our authority to move people to higher ground on the maps.” Instead, authority had devolved to homeowners. The latest plan from Blanco’s commission was to give homeowners the pre-Katrina value of their homes—up to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars—minus any insurance settlements or FEMA assistance they’d already received. The pre-Katrina value of many New Orleans homes, particularly in the Lower Ninth Ward, was far less than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars—too little to buy a house elsewhere in the city. So, instead of encouraging people to move to higher ground, Blanco’s commission ended up doing the opposite: encouraging people, especially those in the lowest-lying and poorest neighborhoods, to stay put and fix up their houses. The state expects to start handing out checks this month. “There isn’t much to be done now,” Reilly said, morosely.

The mayoral primary election, on April 22nd, whittled the vast field of candidates down to two, Nagin and the state’s mild-mannered lieutenant governor, Mitch Landrieu, but the contest gained little substance. Landrieu, whose family—his father, Moon, was the city’s last white mayor, and his sister, Mary, is a United States senator—has long been notable for its efforts to reach across the color line, banked on a clash of styles: a staid hard worker against a charismatic loose cannon. As Ron Forman, who came in third, put it when he endorsed Landrieu, “It’s not the plan now; it’s the man.” On Election Night, May 20th, the man, of course, turned out to be Nagin, by fifty-two percentage points to forty-eight. The blacker and more flooded a precinct was, the more likely its majority had voted for Nagin. But the results showed a lot of crossover, too. New Orleans is full of conservatives who would never vote for a Landrieu, and of blacks furious that Nagin left them sitting on their roofs, or sweltering in the Superdome.

At his victory celebration at the Marriott, Nagin breezed up to the microphone and lavished thanks upon President Bush for what will, if it ever arrives, amount to between ten and twenty per cent of what the city originally believed would be coming. “You and I have been the most vilified politicians in this country,” he said to Bush, directing his comments over the heads of his cheering supporters and toward the TV cameras. “But I want to thank you for moving that promise you made in Jackson Square forward.”

The morning after the election, before a small group of reporters in the community room of a Treme church, Nagin did not address the question of whether some parts of the city might have to be abandoned. “People are starting to say, ‘Well, maybe there are parts of town that can’t come back,’ ” he said. But he wasn’t going to force it. Invoking eminent domain would be political suicide. Withholding services would be certain to prompt civil-rights lawsuits. “We’re not going to choke people out of city services,” Nagin said. “Everything that’s getting city services now will continue to get them.” He didn’t specify how the devastated city would extend schools, garbage pickup, buses, and other services to

homes widely dispersed amid acres of wreckage. Three new committees, which included a couple of Republicans who had run against him, would take up those details. This was a day to celebrate, he said; President Bush had just called and was “pretty excited” about the election results. “I think the opportunity has presented itself for me to kind of go down in history as the mayor that guided the city of New Orleans through an incredible rebuild cycle, and really eliminated a lot of the pre-Katrina problems that we had with blight, with crime, with the public-school system.”

That evening, I drove east from the French Quarter, downriver, along St. Claude Avenue and into the Ninth Ward. St. Claude was busy, but when I turned north onto Alvar Street, into the area that flooded, I found myself in a ghost town. As I crossed the Claiborne Avenue Bridge into the Lower Nine. I could see, from the peak of the bridge, the freshly repaired breach in the Industrial Canal. The Army Corps of Engineers had mounded the levee there higher than before, and built along its top a white concrete floodwall that from above looked as thin as paper. Three recent studies of New Orleans’s flood-protection system make grim reading. A University of California at Berkeley study found that the Army Corps of Engineers—pressed by the contrary demands of “better, faster, and cheaper”—had over the years done such a bad job of building and managing New Orleans’s levees and floodwalls that, even with post-Katrina repairs, the city remained in as much peril as before. The corps itself, in a report of more than six thousand pages, acknowledged that it had built a hurricane-protection system “in name only,” and that it had done almost everything wrong, from assessing risk to choosing technologies. An article in the journal *Nature* found that the city and its levees are sinking into the Mississippi Delta mud much faster than anyone thought. In some places, the authors wrote, New Orleans is sinking by an inch a year, and some parts of the levee system are now three feet lower than their builders intended. In the following months, there was more bad news. Street violence grew so alarming—five teen-agers were shot dead in a single incident one night—that Mayor Nagin had to call in the National Guard to help patrol the streets. As much as two billion dollars in federal disaster relief was discovered to have been wasted or stolen, and last week a survey found that little more than a third of the pre-Katrina population had returned. The fate of the Lower Ninth Ward and the rest of the city remains anyone’s guess. New Orleanians tend to talk about the prospects of another devastating flood in the fatalistic way that people in the fifties talked about nuclear war. They know that they are living under the ever-present threat of annihilation. They want the people in power to do all they can to prevent it. But, in the meantime, there’s nothing to do but soldier on. A few days ago, Ronald Lewis left a cheerful message on my answering machine: “Dan, we have rededicated the House of Dance and Feathers!”

On my last night in New Orleans, I crisscrossed eastward, away from the breach. Most of the wrecked houses that had blocked the street had been removed; on only a few blocks did

I have to back up to detour around a bungalow listing across the pavement. Debris crunched under my tires. Street lights were on, but no lights shone from windows. Doors stood open to dark interiors. On Lizardi Street, a half dozen young black men sat in the gloom on the front steps of a ruined house. They wore brilliant-white T-shirts as big as muumuus and heavy jewelry that sparkled in the dim light. Two doors down, on an unlit porch, a seventy-three-year-old homeowner named Ernest Penns sat slumped in an old kitchen chair. He wore glasses and had a full head of spiky gray hair, and the gold in his crooked brown teeth looked as if it had been applied with a garden trowel. He said that he didn't need anything, and patted a heavy leather-bound Bible in his lap. "I got everything I need right here." He led me inside. The single-story bungalow was lit by a battery-powered camping lantern. It smelled heavily of mildew and chlorine. "I washed the walls down with bleach," he said, gesturing at the panelling.

I asked if he worried about the mold that was blooming inside the walls.

"This is not the worst thing that's ever happened to me," he said. He pulled up his T-shirt to reveal a boiling purple scar. "In 1972, I was stabbed with a screwdriver. Drove myself to the hospital." The incident had made him stop drinking and become a Christian, he said. Twelve years later, he had saved enough to buy this house, for thirty-six thousand dollars. Now, with many more years of payments on it, he was getting by on Social Security. He had water service but no electricity or gas, so he drove across the Industrial Canal a couple of times a day to get something to eat at a Wendy's or a Subway.

We walked back onto the porch, and he kicked aside a can of TAT Roach & Ant Killer so that I could sit down. The street light on the corner flickered. A gold Lexus with complicated free-moving hubcaps, its subwoofers booming like a giant heart, screeched to a halt at the house two doors up. Penns and I listened to the young men laughing and shouting to each other. "They're plying their trade," he said. "They're not what we need around here, but they're part of this community, and it's something we can't control." A police car rolled by once in a while, he said. I asked him how often. "About every five days." I felt my way down the steps and said goodbye. Penns raised a hand and waved, barely visible in the gloom. †