



## When it comes to Katrina, La. unwilling to look at itself

NEW ORLEANS -- When was the last time the Senate Select Disaster Planning, Crisis Management, Recovery and Long-Term Revitalization Committee made headlines?

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The Louisiana Legislature's Hurricane Katrina committee with the Kafkaesque name that sticks to the tongue like Russian conjugations has so far amounted to Louisiana's attempt at creating a Truman Commission or a version of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Yet, it's fallen far short of being a vehicle to search the state's soul and put public officials on the hot seat \_ to drive at the truth about what happened before, during and after Katrina, a seminal event in Louisiana history.

No one \_ not even Baton Rouge's legislative wonks \_ can tell you much about the committee.

"There was a group, it met a few times," vaguely recalled Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, a nonpartisan government watchdog group.

As for the exact name of the committee, for the life of him he couldn't remember it. Katrina has been dissected, analyzed, filmed, photographed, debated and investigated unlike any event in Louisiana history. Congressmen, writers, movie makers, state lawmakers and parish councilmen and scholars and experts from nearly every field of human endeavor have digested the catastrophe.

Yet, Louisiana's public officials have shied away from using the mechanisms available to them \_ legislative hearings, the legislative auditor's office or the office of inspector general \_ to scrutinize the actions of decision-makers on the state level.

"The bulk of the real analysis \_ about what went right, what went wrong afterward \_ has been at the federal level," Brandt said.

But Congress' work has left many unsatisfied. In the fall of 2005, it formed a bipartisan committee that yielded some memorable moments \_ Michael Brown's e-mails and the picture of Mayor Ray Nagin and Gov. Kathleen Blanco making their cases in Congress.

In February 2006, the committee issued its report, "A Failure of Initiative." But it was hardly a best seller like the 9/11 Commission's report, or Kenneth Starr's salacious look at President Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

Democrats claimed the probe was too partisan, and they blasted the decision to not subpoena the White House. Then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi even called for a new panel to be created, an independent commission similar to the 9/11 Commission.

Pelosi has changed her tune since 2005. These days, she is noticeably quiet over renewed calls for a commission, which one citizens' group pushing the idea, Levees.org, is dubbing the 8/29 Commission, named for the date Katrina struck the Gulf Coast.

Interest in a truth-seeking commission exists, even after so much time has elapsed since Katrina. Recently, Lolis Elie, a Times-Picayune columnist, said, "That demand should be heeded."

Indeed, the chairman of the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus said he's mulling the idea over, and would push for it if Congress doesn't act.

"I think it would be difficult, uncomfortable for people, but it's necessary," state Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-New Orleans, said. "The one advantage we have on the state level is we know the questions to ask."

"I think the more information you reel in, the more closure you have for victims and family members," Brandt said. "Filling in the black holes that now exist would help in the healing process."

There still are plenty of holes to light up \_ and that's partly because the state agencies charged with investigating state and local government have left the fingerpointing to Congress, investigative reporters, trial lawyers and a skeptical public.

"I have not been asked to do anything as far as the response goes," said Sharon Robinson, the state inspector general. "The governor appoints me. If I went in and said nothing went wrong, who would believe me?"

Likewise, the legislative auditor's office hasn't gotten into the fray. An example: Has the legislative auditor looked into the decision by Jefferson Parish Aaron Broussard to remove pump operators before Katrina hit? No.

"No. 1, I haven't gotten any phone call to do that, and No. 2, I still need to manage my resources," said Steve Theriot, the legislative auditor. "The resources in my office are somewhat limited. We have primarily tried to stay on top of the flow of funds coming into the state."

As for the Legislature's disaster committee, its work has been limited too. For example, the panel's subcommittee to look at New Orleans has met only eight times since the storm.

Ann Brown, an analyst for the subcommittee, said the meetings have focused on the Road Home program, health care and education; Nagin and Blanco haven't appeared before it, yet.

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