

SIX MONTHS AFTER KATRINA



AFRO NEWSPAPERS PHOTO

Damage to homes and businesses in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama ran into billions of dollars.

Many believe New Orleans was intentionally exposed

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blew that levee. I believe the Canal Street levee broke but they blew that one by the Ninth Ward. Then they talking about a barge hit the levee... These people are full of s---t."

There is no question that the 9th Ward was an unsightly scene.

Black bodies floated in the poisonous stew of gasoline and sewage; Black men, women and children were marooned on roofs and ignored by passing helicopters, black people were crammed into a putrid Superdome by the thousands going for days without food or water and Black homes sustained the worst of the damage.

Set up to fail

Many believe it was planned.

The rumor that officials purposefully breached the levees to sluice water away from majority White, rich areas like the French Quarter has flooded the blogosphere.

Andrea Garland, a former resident now living in Texas, wrote in her blog at Getyouraction.com: "Also heard that part of the reason our house flooded is they dynamited part of the levee after the first section broke—they did this to prevent Uptown (the rich part of town) from being flooded. Apparently, they used too much dynamite, thus flooding part of the Bywater. So now I know who is responsible for flooding my house—not Katrina, but our government."

And the rumors have spread on a tide of discontent and anger to Capitol Hill.

In a Dec. 6 hearing conducted by the House Select Committee on Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans resident Dyan French testified that she actually heard the explosion.

"I was on my front porch. I have witnessed that they bombed the walls of the levee, boom, boom!" Dyan said, gesticulating with her hands. "I'll never forget it."

Mayor Ray Nagin in a Sept. 11 ABC News report rejected the rumors as untrue.

"That storm was so powerful and it pushed so much water, there's no way anyone could have calculated, would dynamite the levee to have the kind of impact to save the French Quarter."

The current levee system, a 16-foot high wall that covers about 350 miles, was built after Hurricane Betsy in 1965 to counter, maximally, a Category 3 storm. Katrina, at 125 miles per hour on landfall, was a Category 4.

"I don't think anybody anticipated the break of the levees," President Bush said soon after the storm. However, that's not true.

Warning signs

Scientists predicted in publications that the deterioration of natural barriers, a sinking delta and rising sea levels would eventually prove too much for the levees. So did a 2002 Times-Picayune prophetic series that warned that "major flooding was just a matter of time."

Engineers, scientists and state and city attorneys are now investigating whether malfeasance in design, construction or maintenance caused the flooding.

"It became obvious to us pretty quickly that the flood walls along the 17th Street Canal had not failed through overtopping, they failed through some other mechanism," said G. Paul Kemp, associate professor of Louisiana State University's School of the Coast and the Environment and a member of a state sponsored forensics team investigating the flooding. "The preliminary report does show some questionable decisions about the depth that they drove the sheet pile that support the wall."

Another preliminary report by a team of engineers from the University of California at Berkeley and the American Society of Civil Engineers concluded: "Several major and costly breaches appear to have been the result of stability failures of the foundation soils and/or the earthen levee embankments themselves. In addition, it appears that many of the levees and floodwalls that failed due to overtopping might have performed better if relatively inexpensive details had been added and/or altered during their original design and construction."

Still, locals hold on to the theory that the wall was deliberately blown, goaded on by memories of government complicity in the Tuskegee experiment and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's COINTELPRO program to undermine civil rights groups.

The Tuskegee experiment was a government-sanctioned program that began in 1932 and involved the use of 399 black men as guinea pigs to discover the effects of syphilis. Though told they would receive free "special treatment" for their "bad blood," the men were left untreated and attempts to obtain treatment elsewhere were stopped. The story did not reach the public until

1972. Even then, neither the men nor their families received an apology. President Bill Clinton finally offered an apology in 1997 — 25 years later.

COINTELPRO, an acronym for Counterintelligence Program, was a covert operation initiated by the FBI in 1956 under the directorship of J. Edgar Hoover to "neutralize" domestic political groups like the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers' Party but was almost immediately extended to so-called dissident organizations including, the Nation of Islam, the Black Panthers and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Through surveillance, wiretaps, blackmail and other unsavory means, the FBI attempted to discredit and disrupt Black civil rights organizations. In one scheme, the FBI sent tape-recordings of Dr. King's extramarital sexual activity to King and urged him to commit suicide or risk being publicly exposed as immoral.

The covert program did not end until the early '70s when its details were exposed during a Congressional investigation.

Despite the backdrop of that history, Katrina theories have been mocked by conservative media pundits.

Please see HURRICANE/7A

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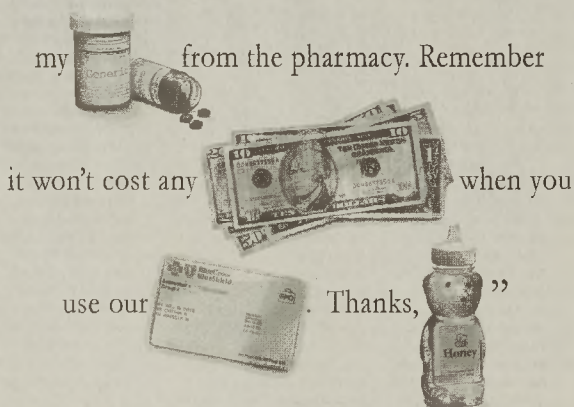
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