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Lessons from Katrina: What a new study of Gulf Coast recovery effort teaches Iowa

Matthew Philips

How can a community rebuild following a devastating flood? That question has taken on increasing urgency in the Midwest, as rising waters continue to wreak havoc in a growing number of Mississippi River towns. A new study, commissioned in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, may provide some answers. Over the last two years, the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, the public-policy research arm of the State University of New York, has issued a series of reports examining the many facets of the planning and rebuilding efforts undertaken in both Mississippi and Louisiana. Past reports have focused on such issues as the role of nonprofits, the capacity of the states to fix themselves and the status of the public-school system. The sixth and final report, issued earlier this month, focuses on the specific role of community rebuilding plans. It also serves as a final, encompassing look at the recovery effort, nearly three years after it first began.

The report acknowledges progress in some areas, especially as money and rebuilding plans finally began to coalesce over the last six months. But its authors find much that still needs to be done in the Gulf Coast — a region that sadly, the report concludes, will take much longer to heal itself than was initially imagined. Despite a great deal of work, Army Corps of Engineers officials say it will take three or four more years to secure the levees around New Orleans. As the Army Corps works to address flooding now along the Mississippi River, officials say that Katrina offers only limited lessons about levee protection and flood relief. “The answer for New Orleans is not the answer for Iowa,” says one Army Corps of Engi-

neers official. Still, judging by the early response, the specter of Katrina appears to be fresh in the minds of emergency workers and FEMA officials, who have prioritized the large-scale delivery of essentials and organized manpower to the field over the last two weeks, including nearly 600 million liters of drinking water, 116 water pumps and 4 million sandbags.

NEWSWEEK’s Matthew Philips spoke to Richard Nathan, co-director of the Rockefeller Institute, about the study and its implications for those suffering in Iowa, Illinois and Missouri.

NEWSWEEK: Nearly two years after you issued your first report on the recovery effort in the Gulf Coast, what is the big conclusion you can draw now that you’ve completed your sixth and final report?

Richard Nathan: The story of the Gulf Coast recovery is one of missed opportunities, intergovernmental collisions and a lack of will. Almost three years after Katrina, we can step back and ask, “Did America have the will to dramatically build back up New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast?” The answer is irrefutably no, it did not.

Do you base that conclusion on the amount of funding that’s been generated?

Mostly, yes. There are people, lots of them, who have demonstrated extraordinary willpower and fortitude in this recovery process, and my heart goes out to them. I admire them tremendously. But they have to have perspective because the funding isn’t there. If, for example, you look at what some of the Persian Gulf countries are spending on reconstruction and safety projects and levee systems, it’s trillions of dollars. But when it comes to our gulf, the federal government hasn’t mustered a 20th of that.

And as a result, the markets have worked and people have left.

Can you spell out more on the missed opportunities you see?

Well, for starters, we missed the opportunities to protect the canal waterways. There was ample evidence and research for years leading up to this event that suggested more should have been done. In terms of the recovery process, it's a laundry list of missed opportunities. But ultimately it's about missing the opportunity to fund the sort of recovery effort in a timely manner that would have brought people back. The whole region has voted with its feet. They left and they haven't come back and aren't coming back. The population of New Orleans is a third of what it used to be. I think you'll see that steadily trickle up, but not by much. The people who went to cities like Houston and Atlanta, they've found jobs, they've found housing. They're not coming back. New Orleans will continue to be a destination city, a tourist attraction. But it will never be what it once was.

Considering the enormity of the destruction, what else could have been done to restore New Orleans?

It would have taken something akin to a Marshall Plan. It would have entailed some big public-works expenditures very early on just to lay the base for them to support economic development and affordable housing on a scale much, much larger than what was committed. The most interesting thing is, if you go back and watch [President Bush] on Sept. 15, 2005, addressing the city and talking about the commitment to rebuild, he sounded like Lyndon Johnson. It was the Great Society. I can't understand where it came from. But in order to enact that vision he laid out would have required a huge undertaking that we never came close to achieving.

There has been some redevelopment. Can you talk about what's worked?

Mississippi has done all right. Gov. Haley Barbour deserves some credit for getting agencies together on the same page and getting some federal money pretty quick. The single most important thing he did was move the casinos onshore. So you drive

around the Mississippi coast and you see casinos and rubble, isn't that America for you? But if it wasn't for that, there would be nothing in terms of economic development there."

What about some of the inland towns and counties that absorbed people? How are they faring?

They're struggling, these small communities a few miles inland have had to deal with major growth problems over the last couple years. They're overcrowded. Their services are strained.

The study argues that bureaucratic red tape impeded progress.

Governments couldn't connect on any level. Everyone had different ideas about what should be done. One wanted a new-urbanism approach to rebuilding, with new condos with a heavy emphasis on tourism, and another wanted an affordable-housing-centered plan that cared deeply about the low-income situation. You need workers to get any of this done, and with competing concepts and a total lack of structured debate, it was very hard to get an agreement. You then had to deal with the Feds and all their requirements. They weren't going to spend money on rebuilding unless there was the proper insurance available and structures were built to withstand future disasters. Not to mention, you had a political culture and history in New Orleans that is rough and tumble to say the least.

What lessons can be applied to the situation along the Mississippi River Valley?

The questions of intergovernmental collisions do provide lessons for Iowa in that you have all these interests at stake, the agriculture and farm interests, the developers and business interests, poor people and social programs. I can say that in Mississippi, they had a pretty strong structure to put people together and make decisions, which wasn't the case in Louisiana. People can talk forever about wanting to do things, but it all boils down to how can you get a structure in place that will have some closing capabilities. American government is pluralist. It's very change resistant. The sooner they realize that, the better.