

Official Neglect Awaits Katrina II

By Peter H. Michael

New Orleans is only the nation's second-most flood-prone city. Now nearly a decade after Hurricane Katrina, it is striking that there has been virtually no reporting on the nation's *most* flood-prone city, Sacramento, California, and how it, too, lies in wait for preventable disaster which those who could avert it blithely ignore.

New Orleans and Sacramento share a number of similarities beginning with their sitting at the confluence of major rivers where great deltas begin. Both cities began on ground barely high enough and then expanded into lower lying areas prone to flooding. For over 150 years, both have protected themselves, or tried to, with levees which have seeped, eroded and sometimes been breached. Both cities have faced the conundrum that while their local governments recognize the high probability of an eventual catastrophic flood and would fund the very expensive levee protection if they could, the federal government, with the sole ability to pay for the fixes, has never been able to hold pork politics in abeyance long enough to get the fixes done. New Orleans is the nation's thirty-fifth largest city, Sacramento the thirty-eighth.

Sacramento sits at the confluence of two large beautiful rivers, the Sacramento and the American, which for several thousand years have brought down the rich silt of the Sacramento Valley and the slowly wearing granite of the Sierra to form the Sacramento Delta, an enchanted, sparsely populated area forgotten by time in the nation's most populous state. As the delta has built up, it has impeded drainage of these two rivers creating a flood plain and making the cities above the delta since the 1849 gold rush especially susceptible to backed-up runoff after heavy rains. Sacramento is located more or less in the most vulnerable spot in this flood plain.

On Valentine's Day, 1986, the rains began and Sacramento, which averages only eighteen inches of rain a year, received an inch a day for the next ten days. At one point during this, I stood on a levee in the midst of this city where I used to live looking at the American River three feet below me on one side and the campus of California State University about twenty feet below on the other side. All of the city's levees were similarly stressed to their limits, and Folsom Dam, designed to leaven flood flow of the American River, filled to overflowing for the first time but held. Hydrologists said later that just another inch of rain would have topped the city's levees and flooded Sacramento. The toll in lives and treasure would have been on a par with Katrina's devastation of New Orleans. Sacramento had dodged a bullet.

On New Year's Day, 1997, Sacramento dodged a second bullet when a strong Pacific storm dropped five inches of rain in a single day forty miles upstream on the Sacramento River, breaching levees and flooding a vast rural area including the farm towns of Olivehurst, Arboga and Wilton. The Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys, nestled close to the Sierra foothills, are the most productive agricultural area in the world and at prime flood risk not just from rainfall itself but from Sierra snow melt after a warm rain. The New Year's Day storm's tropical rain on the southern Sierra brought unmanageable runoff into the San Joaquin River and flooded parts of the cities of Manteca and Modesto whose levees were breached.

While it took a direct-hit, class-three hurricane to finally take down New Orleans, the clock that is ticking for Sacramentans is the simultaneity of five inches of rain in a day and a particularly wicked political neglect. Included in the area which would be flooded are 400,000 people, 160,000 homes and apartments, 5,000 businesses, 1,200 government buildings including the State Capitol, seven of the region's nine hospitals, a major university and 130 schools. Flood depths would range from five to twenty feet in a floodplain which stretches over 170 square miles. Sacramento's Curtis Park, the picture-book neighborhood where I used to live and the site of a lake until 1910, would see about twenty feet of flooding, making even two-story homes watery death

traps. The Army Corps of Engineers which is responsible for maintaining levees and other flood control facilities and tracking flood protection around Sacramento and other cities has determined that a major flood could leave the greater Sacramento metro area under water for as long as sixty days. Déjà vu New Orleans plus, in Sacramento's case, state government crashing to a halt.

Enter John Doolittle, former Member of the House of Representatives from California's fourth district, the sixth ranking Republican in the House, a senior member of the powerful House Appropriations Committee and co-chair of its Energy and Water Subcommittee which controls appropriations for the nation's flood control projects. The Congressional district which Doolittle used to represent (now represented by Doug Ose) includes Sacramento's eastern suburbs, just out of the flood plain, and the site of his proposed Auburn Dam which, over the objections of the Corps of Engineers and the Congress, Doolittle has championed since before he was first elected to the House in 1991.

If built, the Auburn Dam would be the largest concrete arched dam in the world and would cost three billion dollars if you believe government cost estimates. As the *Sacramento Bee* said in a 1990s opinion piece, "Over its forty-year history, [the dam] has been halted by an earthquake, enjoined from further construction by a federal court, starved of funds by Reagan-era fiscal conservatism, rejected by a 273-140 congressional vote and declared 'environmentally unacceptable' by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Yet it has eluded a stake to its heart."

While Doolittle purports that the dam would be Sacramento's best flood protection investment, in fact, it would hold back only one of three forks of the American River and about one-ninth of the water that arrives in Sacramento during a flood. In his position on the House Energy and Water Subcommittee, Doolittle has year after year blocked appropriations to strengthen the levees in Sacramento which keep back all of the water passing through the city during a flood, holding Sacramento as legislative hostage in the vain hope of getting his dam, a pork proposition so obese that even his congressional allies fail to support it.

On his official web site, Doolittle himself admitted that Sacramento's seventy-year-old levee system provides the city with the least flood protection of any major city in America, that levees along the American River have about a sixty percent chance of failing during a major flood, and that there is a one-in-three chance that a flood larger than the flood of 1986 will occur in the next thirty years.

While Doolittle managed to set a new standard of neglect, he was not alone in officially inducing heightened flood risk in the region. Especially since the 1980s, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors, the body of highest elected officials in the county, has routinely approved large new subdivisions on farm land where few homes were ever built because of virtually annual flooding before the days when the area's weak levees were mounded up. Just north of Sacramento lies the aptly named Natomas Basin which historically saw ten to twenty feet of water during the winter rainy season. The County Supervisors' consent to permit wide-scale development in such perilous places as the Natomas Basin came about the usual way: it was bought and paid for by developers through campaign contributions, that which the laws of the rest of the industrialized world define as bribes.

All who live and work in Sacramento understand the flood risk, Mr. Doolittle's obduracy, the easy winks of the County Supervisors and the risk of being in town when the rain is heavy. And Sacramento, a languid friendly place with more trees than any city but Paris, its Sierra views and its two beautiful but deadly rivers, sits and waits. After the federal government's bumbling response to Katrina, no one should count on avoiding a second enormous flooding catastrophe, this time in Sacramento even though the means of preventing it are well understood. Unlike New Orleans, blame for the huge death and destruction which await will be clear. What excuses will Mr. Doolittle, the County Supervisors and the developers offer?