

365 Canal Street, #2300
New Orleans, LA 70130

April 8, 2013

Mr. Bill O'Reilly and Mr. Geraldo Rivera
The O'Reilly Factor
1211 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10036

Re: April 5, 2013 - "New Orleans prisoners gone wild"

Dear Mr. O'Reilly and Mr. Rivera:

Your April 5 "Fridays with Geraldo" segment, "New Orleans prisoners gone wild," was a disservice to New Orleans, America and the truth. Its broadly dismissive tone was all the more disconcerting because as recently as February 4 you had proclaimed, "New Orleans has come back big time from Katrina. It's once again a great American destination."

Now let us be clear: the truth is that the prison video is shocking. But it is also true that the video is four years old, and that the prison has been closed. There will be consequences. And we are confident that we will fix this problem, because as you will see below, the truth is that New Orleans has confronted and defeated an extraordinary range of other challenges over the past five years.

On this theme, *The Wall Street Journal* recently ran a much broader, more balanced and more accurate story – "The Real Super Bowl Winner: Why New Orleans Came Back from Katrina Better than Ever" (attached). In this piece, the *Journal* describes how New Orleans is now a national model for reform, suggesting "Other troubled cities and Washington, take note."

For the truth is, in the few years since the devastation of Katrina, the largest manmade disaster in the history of the United States, New Orleans has addressed long-standing challenges with a speed and efficacy unprecedented in the history of our great nation.

* * *

In your segment you asked two basic questions about New Orleans: "Why can't it improve?" and "Why doesn't it get better?" The truth is, it can and it does, dramatically.

There is a preponderance of evidence:

Education – Previously burdened with some of the worst schools in the country, New Orleans was recently named "[America's Best City for School Reform](#)," and the graduation rate has now passed the national average. Our universities are booming too,

with Tulane recently attracting more applications – 44,000 – than any other private school, of any size, in the country.

Civic Reform – With diverse civic and business groups working in partnership with political leadership, New Orleans has “enacted more major reforms simultaneously than any other modern city” (Brookings Institution).

These include:

- *Establishment of Office of Inspector General* - now a national model
- *Establishment of Independent Police Monitor* - also a national model
- *Consolidation and Reform of Levee Boards* - providing oversight to make post-Katrina Army Corps projects the most efficient and effective in modern history
- *Consolidation of Property Assessors* – breaking up century-old political dynasties
- *Implementation of Master Zoning Plan with Force of Law* – to guide planning for the next 20 years of New Orleans
- *Development of Public/Private Partnerships* – based on national best practice models for economic development and youth recreation
- *Implementation of State Ethics Reform* – taking Louisiana to #1 in the USA in ethics disclosure laws (Center for Public Integrity)

Economic Development – Buoyed by business-friendly leadership, New Orleans has been described as “the greatest turnaround of our lifetime” by Richard Karlgaard, the publisher of *Forbes*. Over the past two years we have been named #1 in the USA for:

- Improved City for Business (*Wall Street Journal*)
- Employment Growth (*Brookings*)
- Technology Job Growth (*Forbes*)

The fact that global companies like GE Capital are choosing New Orleans for expansion (300 new jobs announced in 2012) is hard evidence of this improvement.

Entrepreneurism – Post-Katrina New Orleans is also one of the most entrepreneurial places in America, and now leads the USA by 30% in number of start-ups per capita. Underscoring this, the Tax Foundation ranked Louisiana as the #2 state in the country to start a business.

Talent – After decades of out-migration, people are coming back in record numbers. New Orleans is the fastest growing city in the USA since the 2010 census, and was named “America’s Biggest Brain Magnet” by *Forbes* for attracting people under 25 with college degrees.

Flood Protection – From \$15 billion of new investment, to a consolidation of levee management, New Orleans now has the most advanced flood protection in the nation, and is in fact actively involved in the new task force to assist post-Sandy New York and New Jersey.

Tourism – Recently voted America’s Favorite by *Travel + Leisure*, a record number of tourists visited New Orleans in 2012, over nine million, and New Orleans led the USA in

RevPAR (room rate) growth, at a remarkable 33% year-on-year.

In the name of truth we should also clarify some false statements from the April 5 segment:

- Our government is no longer dysfunctional. It is so good, in fact, from the Governor down to the Mayor, that we were voted #1 Most Business Friendly Government in the USA in a recent national economic development survey (*Area Development*).
- Your assertion that 60,000 out of 320,000 New Orleanians are in jail is simply wrong. The truth is, the prison population is about 2,000 out of a population of 360,000. Your number is such a misstatement that it best belongs in Mr. O'Reilly's "Hall of Shame" for distributing "defamatory, false...information."
- Our murder rate is unacceptable. But it is not 14 times New York City. And your comparison to the remarkable turnaround of Times Square in NYC neglects the fact that that process began with Mayor Koch in the 70's and took over 30 years – and we have been at ours for about five.
- The notion that "everything outside of the French Quarter" is an urban wasteland is simply slanderous, and is utterly refuted by all of the preceding truths in this letter.
- Finally, perhaps the greatest inaccuracy in your entire story is the ending, when you say that nothing changes in New Orleans because "folks aren't demanding it." *Things are changing more dramatically in New Orleans than they have in any urban environment in recent American history* - because we are demanding it, and because we are doing it.

* * *

But don't take our word for it – please come back and see for yourselves. On behalf of the business and civic community of New Orleans, we invite you to come visit us in New Orleans, so you can witness firsthand the extraordinary people and organizations that are driving, in the words of Mayor Landrieu, "a story about the resurrection and redemption of a great American city."

This is the truth about New Orleans.

Yours truly,

Business Council of New Orleans and River Region
Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans
Common Good
Greater New Orleans, Inc.

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The Real Super Bowl Winner

Why New Orleans has come back better after Katrina.

The Super Bowl makes its tenth stop in New Orleans on Sunday, but only the first since Hurricane Katrina in 2005. For once the Big Easy has earned this excuse to party, coming back to life better than ever.

New Orleans has patented no magic sauce. Katrina created the opening for different policies to turn around what was one of the worst-run and most politically calcified places in America. Other troubled cities and Washington, take note.

When the levees broke and flood waters sent half the town fleeing, the Crescent City was a study in urban dysfunction. Obvious to everyone was the incompetence and rot at City Hall, in the police department, on the levee board and in the schools. There were doubts about the wisdom, much less the cost, of rebuilding.

[Entergy](#), the city's lone Fortune 500 firm, considered moving its headquarters to Little Rock. Many Katrina evacuees stayed away, and the city's population—somewhere above the 360,740 counted as of 2011—isn't back to its pre-storm level of 455,000.

Yet Katrina offered the people who wanted to save New Orleans something rare—a do-over. Consensus over the necessary fixes quickly gelled in a city long polarized by race and class.

The schools, a national embarrassment, were closed for six months and restarted from scratch. The system was turned over to charter operators, who got the leeway to hire new teachers and have been held accountable by strong schools commissioners. Before the storm, three in five students attended a failing school; now fewer than a fifth do.

This education experiment gave people the confidence to push an overhaul of policing, city procurement and other public services. The business community, which had holed up in the city's higher-ground residential areas or across Lake Pontchartrain, re-engaged in civic life.

Political change has followed. Mayor Ray Nagin—who blamed the feds for the city's catastrophic response to Katrina—was replaced three years ago by another Democrat, Mitch Landrieu. Mr. Nagin was indicted last month on 21 corruption counts. Mr. Landrieu enjoys approval ratings in the seventies. The budget was balanced. He upgraded the airport and opened a new street car line along Loyola Avenue in time for the Super Bowl.

Relatively low state and local taxes and cost of living are helping to make New Orleans a magnet for business start-ups and young college graduates—what Seattle or Austin were in other recent decades. Energy and hospitality are doing well. The jobless rate of 4.7% is lower even than in that other American boomtown, Washington, D.C., but for reasons other than a growing government.

Such progress is not guaranteed and problems remain. School test scores and graduation rates are improving but still aren't great. New Orleans remains the nation's murder capital, with three times Chicago's homicide rate, and the police have to earn public trust. The relative racial comity of the city's politics is recent and perhaps not enduring.

Yet—whether during Super Bowl week, Mardi Gras or any other party time—the city's energy and optimism are unmistakable. Americans are in a self-doubting mood these days, and not without cause. But the revival of New Orleans shows what self-government can accomplish when enough citizens choose to break up the corrupt status quo.

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