

OPINION

New Orleans Citizens Reform a Corrupt, Fallen City

New Orleans

The Big Easy's reputation for indulgence and permissiveness has historically created the perception that the city is a great getaway but not necessarily a great place to live or conduct business. That image was exacerbated by the July 9 sentencing of

former Mayor Ray Nagin to 10 years in federal prison for wire fraud, influence-peddling and money laundering. Yet that dispiriting news seemed to come from another era in New Orleans, perhaps the last gasp of the corruption, mismanagement and general ethical malaise that had afflicted the city for at least the last century.

CROSS COUNTRY
By Scott S. Cowen

Nagin's crimes were committed before and after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and they no doubt set back the city's recovery. Yet since he left office in 2010, New Orleans has embarked on a remarkable transformation, becoming a mecca for startups, a seedbed of social innovation, a model of school reform and a magnet for young people and families.

A fighting grass-roots spirit has sparked most of the positive changes in the nine years since Hurricane Katrina.

Forbes just ranked New Orleans the No. 1 Brainpower City in the U.S.; the metro area's number of college graduates increased by 20.3% between 2007 and 2012; and major companies including GE, Gameloft and Globalstar have established operations in the city. The public school system has also seen a remarkable improvement: Only 5.7% of New Orleans children now attend a failing school, down from 65% in 2005.

Credit for the sea change post-Katrina

blogging, vociferous, committee-forming citizens of New Orleans. The local Times-Picayune newspaper, in particular, rallied post-Katrina and its reporters cast a bright light on corruption in City Hall and the police department. Mayor Mitch Landrieu and Gov. Bobby Jindal assumed office with a mandate to reform how the city and state conducted business. But even more important has been citizen activism.

The first clear success in ethics reform was, appropriately enough, the restructuring of the levee boards in the parishes of greater New Orleans. In all the name-calling, fault-finding and mudslinging after the storm, one fact was clear: The flooding of Katrina was caused by the failure of the levees. Whatever the sins of the Army Corps of Engineers in the construction, maintenance and upgrading of those levees, the levee boards were seen as complicit because of their inefficiency and failure to adequately focus on flood protection.

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, a civic action group founded in 2006 by Ruthie Frierson, a private citizen, garnered 53,000 signatures to consolidate the existing multiple boards into two regional authorities with greater autonomy from the city and state. Citizens for 1 also succeeded in streamlining the antiquated property-tax-assessor system, rife with patronage and waste, by reducing the number of assessors to one from seven.

But winning a few battles isn't the same as winning a war. The success of Citizens for 1 is now at risk because of moves in the state legislature to put appointments to the levee boards back under the control of the governor. The move is (no surprise) political, prompted by legislators with ties to the oil and gas industries that are outraged by what they see as an overreach by the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East, which has brought a lawsuit against those industries for allegedly destroying coastal wetlands that protect New Orleans.

These maneuverings in Baton Rouge



Ruthie Frierson center, in 2006, when she started Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans.

ability that were enshrined in levee-board legislation after the storm. The fight is on, again, and the "ladies in red"—members of Citizens for 1 wear that signature color—are back on the barricades, as are other community groups.

It's that fighting grass-roots spirit that has sparked most of the positive changes in the nine years since Katrina. The New Orleans Police Department was for many decades often seen as corrupt and dysfunctional. Some people even held them responsible for crimes, including shooting unarmed African-American citizens in the immediate aftermath of Katrina. Yet the police department is now being rehabilitated not only through interventions by the federal Bureau of Justice Assistance, but with contributions from watchdog groups like the Metropolitan Crime Commission, Community United for Change, and Citizens for 1's Court Watch NOLA and Crime Coalition.

Similar reforms have changed the face of education, with a failing centrally administered system replaced by autonomous charter schools that are evaluated on performance* and must meet clear benchmarks to retain their charters. Watchdog groups like the

mental Research and the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University provide data and oversight.

Bottom line: The city is undergoing a transition from a political culture of influence-peddling and cronyism to one that relies on rational measures and

Journalists Ben Birnbaum and Amir Tibon writing in the July 20 New Republic about a meeting between Secretary of State John Kerry and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu:

The prime minister opened the meeting by playing Kerry a video on one of his favorite topics: Palestinian incitement. It showed Palestinian children in Gaza being taught to glorify martyrdom and seek Israel's destruction. "This is the true obstacle to peace," Netanyahu told Kerry.

"It's a major issue," Kerry replied. "And nothing justifies incitement. I hate it. I've read Abbas the riot act about it. You know I have. But it is worthwhile to try to understand what life looks like

rules of governance—systems that prevent people from behaving badly. Ethics reform didn't originate with technocrats and bureaucrats; it stemmed from the demands of citizens seeking social justice and the common good. Through the traumatic experience of Katrina, ordinary people found the political will to implement systemic change and create a better future.

A city, any city, can change its ethos if citizens mandate it. Poverty, crime, health disparities, family breakdown and institutional collapse—these urban woes constitute their own full-scale disaster. Only passionate civic engagement can change the game that Ray Nagin and so many others in public life play. No one criminal conviction, and no one political victory, can ensure more principled institutions and more principled conduct. But the fight is on.

Mr. Cowen is the president emeritus of Tulane University and the author (with Betsy Seifter) of "The Inevitable City: The Resurgence of New Orleans and The Future of Urban America" (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

Notable & Quotable

"This has nothing to do with the occupation and the settlements," Netanyahu said.

Kerry pressed on: "When I fought in Vietnam, I used to look at the faces of the local population and the looks they gave us. I'll never forget it. It gave me clarity that we saw the situation in completely different ways."

"This isn't Vietnam!" Netanyahu shouted. "No one understands Israel but Israel."

Kerry tried explaining himself again: "No one is saying it's Vietnam. But I've been coming here for thirty years, and I'm telling you, what's building up in the Palestinians has only gotten worse. I've seen it. It doesn't matter if it's right or wrong; it just is. It can't be solved if