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[Archives](#)
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[Forward New Orleans](#)
[Advocacy](#)
[NORD Reform](#)
[Archives](#)

Times-Picayune

Bill O'Reilly of Fox News responds to anger over New Orleans segment, makes no apologies

By [Andrew Vanacore, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune](#)

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Having drawn the [anger of local civic groups](#) with a segment last week on crime and corruption in New Orleans -- in which Geraldo Rivera referred to everything outside of the French Quarter as a "vast urban wasteland" -- Fox News host Bill O'Reilly invited local booster and political pundit [James Carville](#) for a follow-up discussion on the state of the city Tuesday evening.

The two men spoke over one another for just shy of two-and-a-half minutes, then broke off without resolving much.

O'Reilly insisted that he likes New Orleans, having spent four days in the city recently, but offered no apologies, pointing again to the intractable murder rate and teasing Carville for "scarfing down the free oysters" during the city's Super Bowl festivities this year.

Carville, echoing a letter that a group of civic leaders sent to O'Reilly and Rivera on Monday, pointed out the city's growing reputation for entrepreneurship, improvements in the public school system and the low unemployment rate.

"There are a lot of things that are going well here," said Carville, extending an invitation for O'Reilly to come back and tour the city. "We want you to come and see it."

O'Reilly declined the offer. "I'm not trying to badger the city," he said. "I like the city, but you're putting a happy face on stuff that isn't happening."

The [original conversation](#) between O'Reilly and Rivera -- containing a couple of prominent inaccuracies and the assertion that New Orleans has "been corrupt ever since Andrew Jackson defeated the British down there" -- aired last week after video clips emerged showing prisoners at the Orleans Parish jail complex drinking, using drugs and brandishing a gun.

The Fox News show drew an outraged [letter](#) signed by the Business Council of New Orleans and River Region, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, Common Good and Greater New Orleans, Inc., which called the segment a "disservice to New Orleans, America and the truth."

"Now let us be clear," the letter continues. "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."

The letter goes on to list post-Hurricane Katrina reforms and improvements in everything from economic development to flood protection and schools, attaching a recent Wall Street Journal editorial about how New Orleans is "coming back to life better than ever."

Of course, problems with the city's Police Department and jail complex remain deeply ingrained. The U.S. Justice Department has concluded that nothing short of court-supervised reforms will clean up either institution. In fact, it was a hearing on a proposed agreement between the feds and Sheriff Marlin Gusman, who runs the jail in question, that brought to light the alarming inmate videos in the first place.

What seemed to rankle the groups who wrote to Rivera and O'Reilly was the implication that trouble with the police or the sheriff could somehow mean that New Orleans as a whole should be written off without hope as -- in Rivera's words -- "The Big Sleazy."

"It is a corrupt city and always has been," O'Reilly said last week, sounding angry and incredulous. "Why can't it improve? Why doesn't it get better?"

Rivera waved off the question. "I can't answer that," he said, going on to compare New Orleans to New York City -- were New York nothing but the tourism hub of Times Square surrounded by a "vast urban wasteland."

"That's what the story of New Orleans is," Rivera concluded.

O'Reilly picked it back up from there, laying out a prescription for turning the place around. "There's an enormous amount of poverty in the city," he said. "But again, there's a service industry there that can support the population. All right, you've got bad guys in there. Clean 'em out."

Rivera then chalked the problem up to slack law enforcement. "Why don't they have stop-and-frisk?" he asked, though New Orleans has been through a heated controversy in the past few weeks over the NOPD's use of just such tactics. "Why don't they have aggressive policing?"

O'Reilly responded, "I guess the folks in Louisiana aren't demanding it."

The civic group members who wrote to the two Fox hosts rebutted the image they conjured of New Orleans with a two-page summary of recent reform efforts and accolades. They mention the city's establishment of an independent inspector general and police monitor, as well as first-place awards in categories including "improved city for business," "employment growth" and "technology job growth" from The Wall Street Journal, the Brookings Institution and Forbes magazine, respectively.

Taking aim at some of the statistics that Rivera used, they point out that New Orleans' murder rate is not 14 times that of New York -- actually, in 2012, it was, though in fairness, last year was an historic low for New York -- and that the local jail population is not 60,000, but about 2,000.

"Things are changing more dramatically in New Orleans than they have in any urban environment in recent American history," the letter states. "Because we are demanding it, and because we are doing it."

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