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Times-Picayune

Fox News hosts draw ire of New Orleans civic groups after calling city a 'vast urban wasteland'

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

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A conversation between Fox News pundits Geraldo Rivera and Bill O'Reilly -- containing a couple of prominent inaccuracies and the assertion that everything outside the French Quarter in New Orleans is a "vast urban wasteland" -- drew an angry letter from a collection of local civic groups on Monday.

[The segment](#) aired last Friday after video clips emerged in court showing prisoners at the Orleans Parish jail complex drinking, using drugs and brandishing a gun while behind bars.

After running the clip, Rivera and O'Reilly discussed the city's problems in the same astonished tones that many locals have, but fired off sweeping generalizations about how New Orleans has been corrupt for "hundreds of years," and how problems plaguing the criminal justice system look solvable if enough residents would just demand some tougher police tactics.

"As you may know, that city has been corrupt ever since Andrew Jackson defeated the British down there in the Battle of New Orleans," O'Reilly said.

The segment "was a disservice to New Orleans, America and the truth," [reads the letter in response](#), signed by the Business Council of New Orleans and River Region, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, Common Good and Greater New Orleans, Inc.

"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 (House of Detention) 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."

They go 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."

O'Reilly appears to be planning some kind of response to the letter for his show on Tuesday. A spokeswoman for Fox News, who declined to be quoted by name, said the host will address the report, though she declined to discuss details.

Of course, problems with the city's police department and jail complex remain deeply ingrained by most accounts. 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 in 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," said O'Reilly, 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. Alright, 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 groups 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 1st 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 reads. "Because we are demanding it, and because we are doing it."

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