

One Storm, One Dilemma; Two Decisions, Two Consequences

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Ten years ago this month, thousands of displaced New Orleanians found themselves in the throes of a major life decision. Should they return and rebuild despite great uncertainty, or cast their lot elsewhere?

In the foreseeable future, residents of coastal Louisiana will grapple with a comparable choice, as planners increasingly speak of radically [reconfiguring the mouth of the Mississippi River](#) in the interest of forestalling further land loss. Should coastal communities remain in eroding marshes, or end their way of life and move inland so that aggressive restoration may commence?

Should we endeavor to save all communities, even if doing so puts everyone at greater risk? Or should we sacrifice some so that a greater number can have a greater good?

A hundred years ago this week, two unnamed individuals were confronted with a microcosm of this same essential dilemma. The circumstances involved one massive hurricane as it inundated two similar places on either side of the same lake, presenting the same excruciating choice. While their decisions shine faint light on our path ahead, together they testify that decent people and decent arguments can be found on either side of "save-all-risk-all" versus "sacrifice-some-save-many" dilemma.

The Great Storm of 1915

It was on September 22, 1915 that authorities began receiving reports of a tropical system in the West Indies. It gained power through the Caribbean, entered the Gulf of Mexico, and bore northwestwardly across fueling warm seas.

At the Weather Bureau office by Lafayette Square, meteorologist Isaac Cline realized the storm track positioned New Orleans for a direct hit. Word got out to city dwellers, who on Tuesday September 28 took shelter at home or in public buildings.

Residents of outlying marshes were delayed in receiving warning. Two particular regions were at maximum risk: St. John the Baptist Parish's Manchac isthmus to the west of Lake Pontchartrain, and Orleans Parish's narrow Rigolets land bridge to the lake's east. Both were home to fishing and hunting communities, with loggers predominating in Manchac and sportsmen's camps in the Rigolets, and both had railroads running through them.

At dawn on September 29, the hurricane made landfall at Grand Isle with at least Category-4 force. Tens of thousands of structures would be damaged by wind or water, yet ample coastal [wetlands absorbed much of the surge](#) in the city proper, and the population remained generally safe.

That was not the case in Manchac or the Rigolets, which had only open water to their east—and that's where the surge was coming from.

In Manchac, a fourteen-year-old girl by the name of Helen Schlosser Burg described what happened to her once-idyllic village of Wagram. "Water was all around...risen about 10 feet," she told local historian and author Wayne Norwood in a 1990 interview. "Waves were hitting against the house[:] all of us kids were crying and scared to death." Helen's parents realized the family was doomed if they stayed put, so they took flight in a pirogue for a nearby schoolhouse partly protected by the railroad tracks. But when the water "had risen to 20 feet, [it came] over the track [and] the building was starting to move." The reboarded the pirogue and paddled for the dubious refuge of the swamp.

Then they heard the whistle.

It was Train No. 99, making its way from Hammond to Harahan pulling cars full of evacuees from the nearby enclaves of Manchac, Ruddock, and Napton. With ever-rising seawater covering the rails and splashing against the hot boiler, time was of the essence.

One could only imagine the split-second decision confronting the engineer. Stopping the train would save Wagram neighbors. But the lost time would heighten the risk facing passengers already on board.

The Rigolets

Forty miles straight east, a similar drama played out in the Rigolets, home to hunting and fishing camps. The meteorologist Cline made a point of telephoning the Anglers' Club on the morning of the storm to urge a last-minute evacuation. Incredibly, the call went through, and Cline urged the club's caretaker, Manuel Marquez, to flag down the last inbound train. He later recorded the conversation:

"[T]he train [will] not stop for [us]," Marquez countered.

"[Then] put a cross tie on the track" and force them to stop, Cline replied.

"They will put me in jail," Marquez groused.

"You would be better off in jail than where you are now and for God's sake stop that train at all hazards and come to New Orleans[!]"

Moments later, the Mobile Limited steamed through the turbid waves hauling cars loaded with anxious passengers. As Marquez frantically flagged it down, the engineer found himself in the same moral quandary as his counterpart in Manchac. Keep rolling, or brake?

He braked.

But he did so with pointed ambivalence, and while Marquez rushed off to gather the others, the engineer changed his mind. "The rising tide was jeopardizing the passengers on the train," Cline later explained, "which could not wait until the people could be collected from the houses."

Manchac

The train in Manchac, meanwhile, plowed through tempestuous surf near the wrecked Wagram schoolhouse. "Everyone started waving their arms and screaming," recalled Helen Schlosser, "hoping the engineer would see us." Like his counterpart in the Rigolets, the Manchac engineer also braked.

But in this case, he granted time for people to round up their kin. "We loaded onto the train and then headed south," said Helen, "stopping at each house and picking up people."

Each stop rescued additional victims. But it also expended precious time. The surge heightened. Water entered the cars.

Finally, time ran out. The track had washed away, stranding Train No. 99 with waves "about 15 feet high... 20 or 25 feet now... hitting against the train." The *Times-Picayune* reported a train "mysteriously dropped out of sight between Manchac and New Orleans."

Consequences

After the storm, rescuers surveyed the damage. What they saw was tragic.

In Manchac, Helen recounted 28 dead, including family members and neighbors stranded in or near the train.

In the Rigolets, Marquez's "lifeless body, with 23 others... were found strewn over the marshes," wrote Cline, among them the caretaker's wife, sister, nine children and grandchildren plus eleven club patrons.

As for the engineer who left the Rigolets people behind, “the last train in,” reported the *Times-Picayune*, “was the Mobile Limited, which reached the city at 11:50 o’clock a.m., [having gone] some distance...through water.” All on board survived. The Anglers’ Club, meanwhile, had been “literally splintered into kindling wood.”

The dual tragedies of the West Indian Hurricane of 1915—or what Cline called The Great Storm of 1915, “the most intense hurricane of which we have record”—are unique to their circumstances.

But the ethical dilemmas involved are timeless, and they have parallels to our situation today.

Should coastal inhabitants advocate for heightened levees? Or should they read the tea leaves of limited federal wherewithal and rising flood insurance rates and move “inside the wall?”

Should we focus on barrier island restoration rather than [freshwater diversions](#) so that fishing economies may be preserved? Or do we need all restoration strategies deployed maximally as soon as possible?

Should we try to sustain all communities? Or should we expropriate the riskiest so that larger numbers in less-risky areas may gain greater sustainability?

Put succinctly, is an exodus from paradise necessary for its redemption?

Two ethical philosophies are at play here. Those who find themselves sympathizing with the Manchac engineer’s decision hold a deontological stance. Deontology (literally, “binding duty”) argues that certain actions are intrinsically right or wrong, regardless of consequences. This was the philosophy held by those who argued ten years ago that all New Orleans neighborhoods had a right to return, or who feel today that the nation is morally obligated to save all vulnerable enclaves.

Those who find themselves resigned to the Rigolets engineer’s choice are “utilitarians” who sense the best decision is that which produces the greatest good for the greatest number. That is, while some actions might seem more righteous than others, in the end it’s their consequences that matter. This philosophy is known as consequentialism or utilitarianism.

The Manchac engineer might have been morally principled in stopping at each town, bound by duty to save everyone. But that deontological inclination ended up costing the lives of those on the train.

The Rigolets engineer might have seemed coldly utilitarian in his decision to abandon people. But that consequentialist philosophy ended up saving lives.

If you’re like me, your heart is with the Manchac engineer. But your intellect probably understands the Rigolets engineer. Likewise, in a world of limited resources and a Louisiana coast sinking amid rising seas—Wagram itself, notes local historian Wayne Norwood, “no longer exists, [its] farm land now in the lake because of erosion”—the intellect understands that some communities may have to be ceded so that coastal restoration may be fast-tracked to protect the many.

But the heart begs otherwise—especially if it’s beating within the body of a coastal resident.

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