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## A federal obligation

By **ROBERT R. M. VERCHICK**

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**NEW ORLEANS //** President Bush's State of the Union address might have been well received on the Republican side of the aisle in Congress, but in the less-rarified air of the bars and living rooms of New Orleans, people were left fuming.

New Orleans, the site of an environmental disaster of unprecedented scale, a city drained of its population by the largest involuntary migration since the Dust Bowl, a place that dominated broadcasts and coffee shop conversation for months, received all but a passing reference near the end of the speech. In what New Orleanians often call "the city that care forgot," in a reference to its carefree ways, there is talk of "the president who forgot to care."

To be sure, Americans elsewhere might not see it this way. Hasn't Mr. Bush already committed \$85 billion to states hit by last year's hurricanes? Aren't federal workers, as the president said in his speech, "removing debris," "providing ... housing assistance" and "building stronger levees"? The answer is yes, and New Orleanians are enormously grateful. But they correctly see that these traditional federal responses are not enough to resurrect their city.

To begin with, the extent of damage is huge and nearly impossible to appreciate without seeing firsthand. Floodwaters covered 80 percent of New Orleans, including more than 200,000 homes in the metropolitan area (half the housing stock).

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Drive through the area now and you see hundreds of blocks of vacant houses ringed by high-water marks and surrounded with trash.

Bringing people back and encouraging them to relocate onto safer, higher ground will require a government-sponsored buyout plan. Homeowners with insurance money or other assets will most likely relocate to safer parts of the city on their own. But the less fortunate - those without flood insurance or other assets - will have few alternatives but to rebuild exactly where they were. That will lead to hodgepodge neighborhoods, inefficient resource use and, of course, more flood hazards.

Rep. Richard H. Baker, a Louisiana Republican, has proposed a sensible buyout bill that was winning support in the House, until the White House nixed the idea.

Instead, Mr. Bush proposes that Louisiana use a previously awarded \$6 billion Katrina-relief block grant to buy out the roughly 20,000 homeowners who lacked flood insurance and who lived outside the floodplain. In addition to punishing uninsured homeowners for failing to anticipate rupturing levees, the Bush plan is simply too small to effect citywide change.

Another big problem the president ducked in his speech is the construction of levees to protect New Orleans from the next big storm. Mr. Bush deserves praise for his earlier commitment of \$3.1 billion for rebuilding levees to withstand Category 3 storms, a level of protection the government had promised to provide as far back as the 1960s but never did. The problem is that protection from Category 3 storms isn't enough.

Sen. Mary L. Landrieu, a Louisiana Democrat, has proposed a revenue-sharing plan in which the state could use a percentage of offshore oil and gas royalties to upgrade the levees and protective wetlands, but Mr. Bush has not committed.

New Orleans residents are more than willing to lift their share of the load. But they want federal accountability, too. On this point, we should be very clear: According to independent investigations requested by state and federal officials, the flooding of New Orleans was caused largely by flaws in the construction and design of the city's levees - mistakes supervised and approved by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Investigative reports conducted by the National Science Foundation, the American Society of Civil Engineers and others tell of steel walls anchored in porous soils, foundation pilings set many feet shallower than specified and canal dredging (again approved by the corps) that further weakened structural support. The way New Orleanians see it, Mother Nature didn't sink their city; an agency of the federal government did.

At the close of the State of the Union address, Mr. Bush encouraged us to face the hard issues and to renew "the defining moral commitments of this land." He suggested we measure our actions by asking, "Will we turn back, or finish well?"

Every day, we in New Orleans rise from our beds and ask ourselves that question, and every day, we choose to "finish well." What will Mr. Bush's choice be?

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