

An Editorial: It's time for a nation to return the favor

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The federal government wrapped levees around greater New Orleans so that the rest of the country could share in our bounty.

Americans wanted the oil and gas that flow freely off our shores. They longed for the oysters and shrimp and flaky Gulf fish that live in abundance in our waters. They wanted to ship corn and soybeans and beets down the Mississippi and through our ports. They wanted coffee and steel to flow north through the mouth of the river and into the heartland.

They wanted more than that, though. They wanted to share in our spirit. They wanted to sample the joyous beauty of our jazz and our food. And we were happy to oblige them.

So the federal government built levees and convinced us that we were safe.

We weren't.

The levees, we were told, could stand up to a Category 3 hurricane.

They couldn't.

By the time Katrina surged into New Orleans, it had weakened to Category 3. Yet our levee system wasn't as strong as the Army Corps of Engineers said it was. Barely anchored in mushy soil, the floodwalls gave way.

Our homes and businesses were swamped. Hundreds of our neighbors died.

Now, this metro area is drying off and digging out. Life is going forward. Our heart is beating.

But we need the federal government -- we need our Congress -- to fulfill the promises made to us in the past. We need to be safe. We need to be able to go about our business feeding and fueling the rest of the nation. We need better protection next hurricane season than we had this year. Going forward, we need protection from the fiercest storms, the Category 5 storms that are out there waiting to strike.

Some voices in Washington are arguing against us. We were foolish, they say. We settled in a place that is lower than the sea. We should have expected to drown.

As if choosing to live in one of the nation's great cities amounted to a death wish. As if living in San Francisco or Miami or Boston is any more logical.

Great cities are made by their place and their people, their beauty and their risk. Water flows around and through most of them. And one of the greatest bodies of water in the land flows through this one: the Mississippi.

The federal government decided long ago to try to tame the river and the swampy land spreading out from it. The country needed this waterlogged land of ours to prosper, so that the nation could prosper even more.

Some people in Washington don't seem to remember that. They act as if we are a burden. They act as if we wore our skirts too short and invited trouble.

We can't put up with that. We have to stand up for ourselves. Whether you are back at home or still in exile waiting to return, let Congress know that this metro area must be made safe from future storms. Call and write the leaders who are deciding our fate. Get your family and friends in other states to do the same. Start with members of the Environment and Public Works and Appropriations committees in the Senate, and Transportation and Appropriations in the House. Flood them with mail the way we were flooded by Katrina.

Remind them that this is a singular American city and that this nation still needs what we can give it.