As commentators and public officials survey the morass of loss and desolation that once was a great American city called New Orleans, one of the words we hear and read over and over again is "unimaginable."

In fact, the tragedy that this week destroyed a vibrant metropolitan area that was home to 1.4 million people and the city proper that was a national cultural treasure was not simply imagined but foreseen with a prescience that now seems eerily precise.

These days, media criticism has become a kind of blood sport. One of its practitioners' most frequently repeated complaints is that mainstream news organizations have become increasingly — if not solely — reactive, retailing the sensation of the moment to an audience hooked on titillating irrelevancies.

Well, that didn't happen here.

Three years ago, New Orleans' leading local newspaper, the Times-Picayune, National Public Radio's signature nightly news program, "All Things Considered," and the New York Times each methodically and compellingly reported that the very existence of south Louisiana's leading city was at risk and hundreds of thousands of lives imperiled by exactly the sequence of events that occurred this week. All three news organizations also made clear that the danger was growing because of a series of public policy decisions and failure to allocate government funds to alleviate the danger.

The Times-Picayune, in fact, won numerous awards for John McQuaid and Mark Schleifstein's superbly conceived and executed five-part series — that's right, five-part — whose initial installment began with a headline reading: "It's only a matter of time before south Louisiana takes a direct hit from a major hurricane. Billions have been spent to protect us, but we grow more vulnerable every day." One of the separate stories in that first installment — each part consisted of multiple pieces supported by compelling graphics — began: "The risk is growing greater and no one can say how much greater."
The series' second part began: "It's a matter of when, not if. Eventually a major hurricane will hit New Orleans head on, instead of being just a close call. It's happened before and it'll happen again." In that installment, McQuaid and Schleifstein reported that "a major hurricane could decimate the region, but flooding from even a moderate storm could kill thousands. It's just a matter of time.... Evacuation is the most certain route to safety, but it may be a nightmare. And 100,000 without transportation will be left behind.... Hundreds of thousands would be left homeless, and it would take months to dry out the area and begin to make it livable. But there wouldn't be much for residents to come home to. The local economy would be in ruins....

"People left behind in an evacuation will be struggling to survive. Some will be housed at the Superdome, the designated shelter in New Orleans for people too sick or infirm to leave the city. Others will end up in last-minute emergency refuges that will offer minimal safety. But many will simply be on their own.... Thousands will drown while trapped in homes or cars by rising waters. Others will be washed away or crushed by debris. Survivors will end up trapped on roofs, in buildings or on high ground surrounded by water, with no means of escape and little food or fresh water, perhaps for several days."

Sound familiar?

Later, in August 2002, New York Times reporter Adam Cohen wrote that New Orleans "may be America's most architecturally distinctive and culturally rich city. But it is also a disaster waiting to happen.... If a bad hurricane hit, experts say, the city could fill up like a cereal bowl, killing tens of thousands and laying waste to the city's architectural heritage. If the Big One hit, New Orleans could disappear."

Cohen went on to report that, "So far, Washington has done little and New Orleans' response has been less than satisfying."

The reporter quoted Terry Tullier, head of the city's Office of Emergency Preparedness, as saying, "When I do presentations, I start by saying that 'when the Big One comes, many of you will die — let's get that out of the way.'"

Chilling then; worse now.

A little more than a month later, NPR's "All Things Considered" aired an extended two-part broadcast on New Orleans' peril that was, in its own way, every bit as compelling as the Times-Picayune's series. In its opening sequence, reporter Daniel Zwerdling accompanied scientist Joe Suhayda, a researcher from Louisiana State University, as he used an extending measuring rod to determine how high hurricane-driven flood waters might rise in the French Quarter if a levee gave way. Here's an excerpt from the transcript of what followed:

Suhayda: It's well above the second floor there and it's just about to the rooftop.

Zwerdling: Do you expect this kind of hurricane and this kind of flooding to hit New Orleans in our lifetime?

Suhayda: Well, I would say the probability is yes....

Zwerdling: So, basically, the part of New Orleans that most Americans and most people around the world think of as New Orleans would disappear underwater.

Suhayda: It would. That's right.

The NPR report went on to note that none of Suhayda's views were even remotely controversial in the scientific or engineering communities. This was not global warming — or even second-hand smoke. And, as Zwerdling went on to explain with great clarity, there was similar agreement that the steps taken by the federal and state government in earlier years to protect the city from smaller storms and to ensure that the Mississippi River would remain open to commerce had dramatically increased the danger from the inevitable larger storm. It was, in other words, the same conclusion the Times-Picayune's reporters reached.
Both organizations also agreed that a massive — and expensive — overhaul of the levee system was required, if the danger to life and property were to be alleviated.

So what happened in the three lost years between then and now?

Nothing.

And did the mainstream news media simply drop the issue, moving on to the next big thing, another victim of our real epidemic — national deficit disorder?

Not really. Since 2002, when all these reports ran, the Times-Picayune has published no fewer than nine stories reporting that the combination of tax cuts, the war in Iraq and the demands of homeland security had led President Bush's administration to repeatedly reject urgent requests from the Army Corps of Engineers and Louisiana's congressional delegation that it allocate the money to save New Orleans.

Today, while Bush personally surveys the consequences of his decisions, the staff of the Times-Picayune — driven from their offices by the flood waters — is busy putting out an electronic edition of a newspaper that, in this instance, has done just what a paper is supposed to do: serve the common good.

Politics may have failed the people of New Orleans. Politicians certainly failed them. They may have failed themselves by not demanding better. But their newspaper and other important segments of the American press did not fail them.

Nowadays, it often seems like every other third person with access to a mike or computer is a press critic, who thinks that their particular beef could be resolved by simply resorting to the good old-fashioned practice of shooting the messenger.

As it turns out, one of the truly unforeseen lessons of New Orleans is that whether you rhetorically gun down the media messengers — or simply ignore them — the result is a self-inflicted, sometimes fatal wound.

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