Katrina: After the Flood

Gary Rivlin
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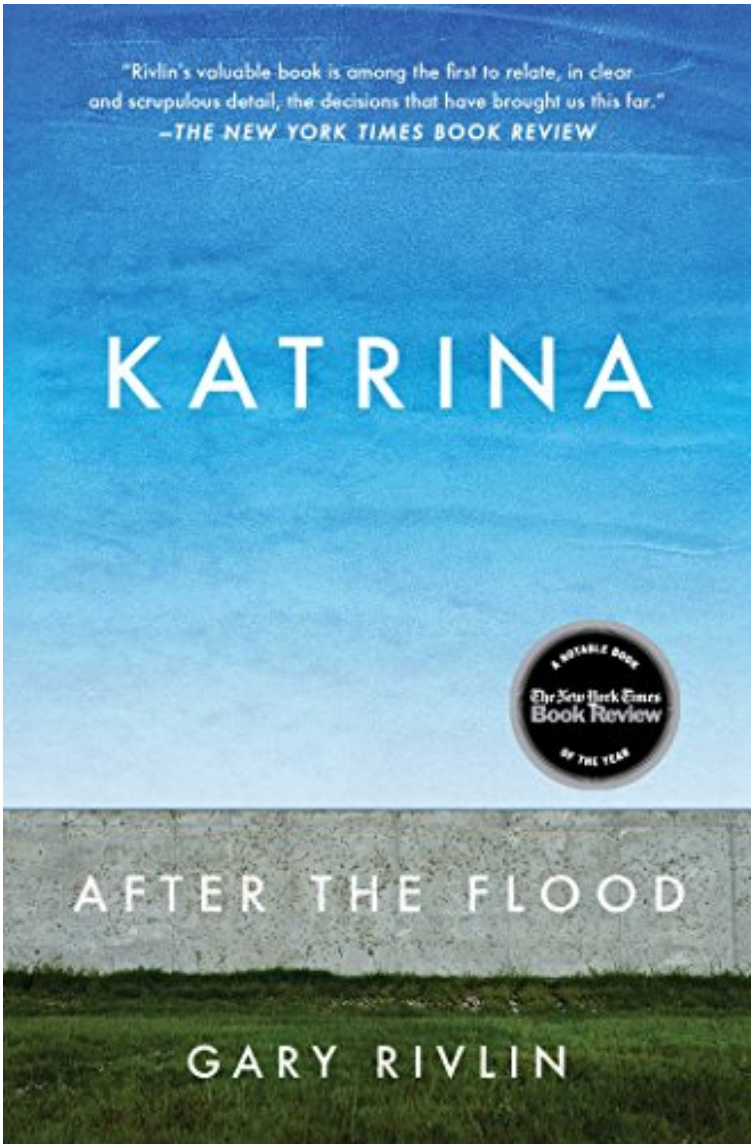

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Gary Rivlin : Katrina: After the Flood before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Katrina: After the Flood:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. I loved Katrina: After the FloodBy MHI loved Katrina: After the Flood. It's a terrific read that walks us through the horror of Katrina from the time when it hit through the rebuilding of New Orleans. The writer, a former colleague of mine at the NYTimes, brings us into vivid conversations and discussions between the New Orleans Mayor, the Louisiana Governor, President Bush and other key officials, as well

as the people who were appointed to plan and execute the reconstruction. He describes gripping and heartbreaking scenes during the ordeal, and introduces us to fascinating characters whose lives were upended by the flood. I don't think I understood the magnitude of the devastation, the challenges of rebuilding a ravaged city, or the racial and economic inequities that the hurricane exposed and sharpened until I read this great book. A must read.10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. A Really Engrossing ReadBy Michael J. KellyThis is a book about an important event in history that reads like a novel. Gary Rivlin has found some very interesting characters with different perspectives - from a friend of President Bush's leading the planning after the storm to a radical community organizer working on the ground - and he weaves their stories together to build a really compelling story about what has happened to New Orleans after the storm. Originally sent by the New York Times just after the storm hit, Rivlin apparently found the story hard to leave behind. He follows characters as they initially evacuate New Orleans or stay put to weather out the storm, and then try to navigate the maze of recovery efforts - some working to shape those, some just trying to figure out how to put their lives and neighborhoods back together. A really engrossing read.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. This is a wonderful, in-depth report of what happened in NOLA after ...By Stuart RosenThis is a wonderful, in-depth report of what happened in NOLA after the camera crews packed up shortly after Katrina. Along the way, we get to know key people and their impact on the attempted recovery, the efforts to leverage this "opportunity" into a means of reinventing NOLA, and not for the better. The reporting is thorough, the writing is crisp, evocative and empathetic. Anyone with even a slight interest in this recent American tragedy would do well to read Rivlin's book.

Ten years in the making, Gary Rivlins Katrina is a gem of a bookwell-reported, deftly written, tightly focused.a starting point for anyone interested in how The City That Care Forgot develops in its second decade of recovery (St. Louis Post-Dispatch).On August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina made landfall in southeast Louisiana. A decade later, journalist Gary Rivlin traces the storms immediate damage, the city of New Orleanss efforts to rebuild itself, and the storms lasting effects not just on the areas geography and infrastructurebut on the psychic, racial, and social fabric of one of this nations great cities. Much of New Orleans still sat under water the first time Gary Rivlin glimpsed the city after Hurricane Katrina as a staff reporter for The New York Times. Four out of every five houses had been flooded. The deluge had drowned almost every power substation and rendered unusable most of the citys water and sewer system. Six weeks after the storm, the city laid off half its workforceprecisely when so many people were turning to its government for help. Meanwhile, cynics both in and out of the Beltway were questioning the use of taxpayer dollars to rebuild a city that sat mostly below sea level. How could the city possibly come back? Deeply engrossing, well-written, and packed with revealing stories.Rivlins exquisitely detailed narrative captures the anger, fatigue, and ambiguity of life during the recovery, the centrality of race at every step along the way, and the generosity of many from elsewhere in the country (Kirkus Reviews, starred review). Katrina tells the stories of New Orleanians of all stripes as they confront the aftermath of one of the great tragedies of our age. This is one of the must-reads of the season (The New Orleans Advocate).

"Gary Rivlins sharp eye for detail, grasp of the big picture and thorough reporting reveals the endless errors, egregious official conduct and exploitation that compounded the misery of Katrina victims long after the storm. It's a helluva a book that should arouse every American to demand reform before disasters strike their communities." (David Cay Johnston, Recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, author of Divided and Perfectly Legal)Gary Rivlin is one of our nation's most sharp-eyed cultural observers, and one of our most gifted social historians. Katrina is a provocative and beautifully-rendered book that reminds us that the subject of race is always percolating below the surface. The vividly-told and haunting Katrina is vital, not only for understanding New Orleans, and what happened there over the last ten years, but for understanding how divisions of race and class are perpetuated across America today. (Michael Eric Dyson, author of April 4, 1968)The once-great city of New Orleans wasn't destroyed just by a force of nature. Along with the hurricane came a category-5 tsunami of racism, operating at every level from armed encounters in the streets to serene indifference in the White House. Gary Rivlin, one of our finest journalists, chronicles it all in superb and riveting detail. This is something we have to know, discuss and absorbbefore the next storm comes along. (Barbara Ehrenreich, author of Nickle and Dimed)"Katrina is an important book. It's important not because it's brilliantly reported or well-written, not because it uncovers everything from political maneuvering in the White House to despicable acts of selfishness, and not because it also tells stories of courage and tenacity which give meaning to the word "inspirational." It's important as a case study of both how not to handle a disaster and how to survive one. There are real lessons here." (John M. Barry, author Rising Tide and The Great influenza)Deeply engrossing, well-written, and packed with revealing stories.a magnificently reported account of life in a broken, waterlogged city.Rivlins exquisitely detailed narrative captures the anger, fatigue, and ambiguity of life during the recovery, the centrality of race at every step along the way, and the generosity of many from elsewhere in the country. (Kirkus (starred))A sprawling, epic tale, filled with cold numbers and heartbreaking scenes of loss and devastation. Its also an insightful, accessible saga that follows a wide cast of participantsincluding politicians, businessmen, and everyday residentsover the course of many

years.[Rivlin] doesnt pull punches as he looks at the political, economic, and social aspects of New Orleanss struggle to recover, nor does he shy away from the complicated racial themes that have always been a part of the citys history.he skillfully balances out the human elements with concrete details of the devastation and the reconstruction that has followed. For those interested in how New Orleans came to the brink of destruction and slowly fought its way back to become a thriving, even improved, metropolis, this is certainly a work worth checking out. (Publishers Weekly)Rivlins valuable book is among the first to relate, in clear and scrupulous detail, the decisions that have brought us this far, and to identify those who made themRivlin is a sharp observer and a dogged reporter. He is unerringly compassionate toward his subjectsBut Rivlins most valuable journalistic skill is his acute sensitivity to absurdity. He is particularly piqued by the absurdity of racial and economic injustice. The New York Times Book One of the must-reads of the seasonRivlin offers a good report of what happened during the storm, the bureaucratic snarls and blockages that followed and, most of all, the human cost to all New Orleanians.The New Orleans Advocate Deeply engrossing, well-written, and packed with revealing stories.a magnificently reported account of life in a broken, waterlogged city.Rivlins exquisitely detailed narrative captures the anger, fatigue, and ambiguity of life during the recovery, the centrality of race at every step along the way, and the generosity of many from elsewhere in the country.Kirkus (starred)[A] carefully researched, beautifully written book.San Francisco Bay View A sprawling, epic tale, filled with cold numbers and heartbreaking scenes of loss and devastation. Its also an insightful, accessible saga that follows a wide cast of participantsincluding politicians, businessmen, and everyday residentsover the course of many years.[Rivlin] doesnt pull punches as he looks at the political, economic, and social aspects of New Orleanss struggle to recover, nor does he shy away from the complicated racial themes that have always been a part of the citys history.he skillfully balances out the human elements with concrete details of the devastation and the reconstruction that has followed. 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Its a book that will appeal to the urban planner and the Mardi Gras revelerKatrina is a genuine success, and is a starting point for anyone interested in how The City That Care Forgot develops in its second decade of recovery.St. Louis Post-DispatchPainstakingly researchedRivlins reporting allows him to paint deep portraits of his characters and explain relationshipsRivlin does an admirable job keeping the political personal and helping readers understand how deeply and devastatingly Katrina affected everyone in the cityThe book is timed to come out a couple of weeks before the 10th anniversary of Katrina, but the timing this summer is equally important as part of the conversation America is currently having on the subject of race relations.Miami HeraldA riveting, wide-ranging but detailed account of Katrina's immediate impact and its aftermath.Tampa Bay TribuneIt is in large part because race lately imposes itself upon our national consciousness with even greater force than usual that Gary Rivlins vital, comprehensive account of Hurricane Katrinas long-term impact on the city of New Orleans comes across less as a 10-year-anniversary marker of an indelible calamity and more as an up-to-the-minute microcosm of our larger societymanages to pack into a lean, taut narrative the heartbreaking setbacks, thwarted dreams and the confounding, repeated inability of anybody in power to either get things done or transcend festering social divisionsAs with the finest works of journalism, Rivlins book deploys the tools of his trade to illuminate the segment of history he examines and make us wonder about the things we all have in common with those in New Orleans.USA Today[Rivlin] constructs his narrative to give readers unfamiliar with the terrain a cohesive back story and illustrates the aftermath through a cross-section of people. Chicago Tribune"Gary Rivlins sharp eye for detail, grasp of the big picture and thorough reporting reveals the endless errors, egregious official conduct and exploitation that compounded the misery of Katrina victims long after the storm. It's a helluva a book that should arouse every American to demand reform before disasters strike their communities."David Cay Johnston, Recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, author of Divided and Perfectly LegalGary Rivlin is one of our nation's most sharp-eyed cultural observers, and one of our most gifted social historians. Katrina is a provocative and beautifully-rendered book that reminds us that the subject of race is always percolating below the surface. The vividly-told and haunting Katrina is vital, not only for understanding New Orleans, and what happened there over the last ten years, but for understanding how divisions of race and class are perpetuated across America today.Michael Eric Dyson, author of April 4, 1968The once-great city of New Orleans wasn't destroyed just by a force of nature. Along with the hurricane came a category-5 tsunami of racism, operating at every level from armed encounters in the streets to serene indifference in the White House. Gary Rivlin, one of our finest journalists, chronicles it all in superb and riveting detail. This is something we have to know, discuss and absorbbefore the next storm comes along.Barbara Ehrenreich, author of Nickle and Dimed"Katrina is an important book. 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"inspirational." It's important as a case study of both how not to handle a disaster and how to survive one. There are real lessons here."John M. Barry, author Rising Tide and The Great influenzaAs harrowing as it is rivetinga balanced and comprehensive chronicle.New York Daily News"Gary Rivlins Katrina: After the Flood is as raw as the title.... Katrina carries you from the days before the disaster through an aftermath so tumultuous and chaotic you can scarcely fathom it happening in a developed country. Rivlins careful storytelling wont let us escape, however, as he confronts us with testimonials from streets that remain uninhabited 10 years later.Sierra Magazine"In the last decade, few tales equal that of Hurricane Katrina in proportion or the amount of media devoted to it, yet non-fiction writer Gary Rivlin has woven a narrative so fresh in perspective and focus, his new book reminds us of how many personal accounts of this monumental event still beg to be told.New Orleans Living"A deeply-reported, character-driven procedural, not unlike the classics of its kind, such as And the Band Played On or The Warmth of Other Suns.Virginia QuarterlyAbout the AuthorGary Rivlin, an investigative reporting fellow at The Nation Institute, is a former New York Times reporter and the author of five books, including Katrina: After the Flood and Broke, USA: From Pawnshops to Poverty, Inc.How the Working Poor Became Big Business. His work has appeared in The New York Times Magazine, Mother Jones, GQ, and Wired, among other publications.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Katrina 1 THE BANKER The plan was to evacuate vertically. Thats what the Uptown blue bloods did when a hurricane took aim at New Orleans, and so, too, would Alden J. McDonald Jr., president of the citys largest black-owned bank. With Katrina bearing down on the region, McDonald had his assistant book a block of rooms at the Hyatt in the citys central business district. Thats where the mayor would ride out the hurricane and where Entergy, the local electric and gas utility, was setting up its emergency center. The Hyatt, a thirty-two-story fortress made from steel and cement, was wrapped in fortified glass. Rising high above its next-door neighbor, the Superdome, just off Poydras Street, the hotel had its own generator and would be stocked with extra provisions. Theoretically, it promised its guests a safe berth above the chaos. McDonald woke up early in his home on that last Sunday in August 2005. He had slept maybe three or four hours. The National Hurricane Center categorizes every storm based mainly on the strength of its winds. When McDonald and his wife, Rhesa, had gone to bed on Saturday night, the center had rated Katrina a powerful Category3. By early the next morning, the storm had been upgraded to Category5. There is no Category6. The sixty-one-year-old bank president drank his coffee and readied himself for his day while a radio blared dire warnings. A lifelong New Orleanian, McDonald knew hurricanes could be fickle brutes. They shift in direction without warning. Their winds pick up speed or deflate in strength depending on the warmth of the waters over which they pass, among other factors. But as of Sunday morning, the radio was reporting that Katrina was a Category 5 storm expected to hit the New Orleans region within the next twelve to twenty-four hours. Scientists warned its winds could top 175 miles per hour. The storm surgea giant tidal wave, essentiallymight reach twenty-five feet. This storm looked like the Big One that experts had been warning about for years. Home for McDonald was out in the Eastmore formally, New Orleans East, swampland that had decades earlier been drained and converted into a series of subdivisions housing a large portion of the citys African-American middle class, along with a large share of its black elites. McDonald was the son of a waiter whose annual wages had never topped $15,000. McDonald now lived on a quarter acre in Lake Forest Estates, one of the pricier enclaves in this sprawling appendage to New Orleans whose ninety-six-thousand-plus residents represented around one-fifth of New Orleanss population. His bank, Liberty Bank and Trust, had financed a sizable share of the homes and businesses in the East. Its headquarters were located in New Orleans East, as was its computer center and storage facility. The majority of the banks employees lived in the East as well. At a little past 8:00 a.m., McDonald slipped behind the wheel of his red BMW convertible. Only later would McDonald understand this drive around New Orleans East as a kind of farewell to his home of more than thirty years. These are my people, McDonald would say of the residents of New Orleans East after Mayor Ray Nagin, a month after Katrina, appointed him to a blue-ribbon commission charged with determining which portions of drowned-out New Orleans should be rebuilt and which parts might more wisely be returned to marshland in a city certain to lose residents. These were my neighbors. McDonald had been twenty-nine years old and a college dropout when, in 1972, Liberty opened in a trailer in a sketchy part of town. Thirty-three years later, with a massive storm gathering over the Gulf of Mexico, McDonald was readying for yet another storm. At that point, Liberty ranked sixth on a list of the countrys largest black-owned banks. The air already felt oppressive, heavy with humidity. The car radio blared ominous warnings about the potential for calamitous flooding that could damage half the citys homes and leave New Orleans without power for weeks. McDonalds first stop was Libertys headquarters, a rectangular-shaped, six-story glass box gleaming in the morning sun, with LIBERTY spelled out in large white letters across its top. This building, only a few minutes from McDonalds house, was so new that not every department had yet moved over from the old headquarters on the opposite side of the I-10, the freeway that bisected the East. A few days earlier, the bank had taken delivery on a new mainframe computer that had cost around $500,000. Brand-new desktop computers matched the new furnishings. He parked his car and walked around the building, giving each door a tug to make sure it was locked. Inside was a man the bank had hired to ride out the storm. Accompanied by a pair of dogs and outfitted with several days of food and water, he would serve as a last line of defense against looters. The percussive sound of nails pounding through plywood accompanied McDonalds pre-storm tour. Everywhere he looked, people were boarding up windows and

loading cars. Despite the dour newscast, his spirits were lifted by the sight of so many of his neighbors taking warnings about the storm so seriously. He crossed to the opposite side of the I-10, parked in front of one of his bank branches, and again jumped out of his car. Standing just under six feet tall, McDonald is a courtly, light-skinned black man with a doughy face, wavy white hair, and matching mustache. Peering through the glass, he saw that his branch managers had placed Saturdays deposits on top of the filing cabinetsexactly as he had asked them to do. Next McDonald visited the low-slung bunker next door, the old headquarters his people were vacating. The building housed the mainframe they were using to run the bank until the new machine could be brought online. Most of the banks paper records were stored there as well. McDonald was frugal and sometimes questioned the wisdom of writing a $5,000 check each month to a Philadelphia-area disaster-relief company that promised to keep his bank online if ever his central computers went down. Now the decision seemed wise. As he had done in advance of past storms, he had his people make four backup tapes of the banks computer files so they had up-to-date depositor records. One he sent to a Liberty branch in Baton Rouge, another he sent to a Jackson branch. The other two were with a pair of bank employees who had evacuated the area. Let people make fun, but a cautious streak had him creating backup plans for his backup plans. Without those tapes, he said, Im dead in the water. MCDONALDS WIFE, RHESA, WAS also out of the house early that Sunday morning. She had wanted to leave town rather than ride out the storm at the Hyatt, but her husband and their twenty-four-year-old son, Todd, who worked for the bank as a loan officer, outvoted her. Her job was to pick up her parents on Park Islanda small, genteel community of good-size houses on the Bayou St. John closer to the center of town. Her father was eighty-two years old and her mother only a few years younger. Rhesa was an only child. Her parents would go wherever she was. Rhesa McDonalds husband was a big deal in New Orleans. He had had his picture taken with every president stretching back to Ronald Reagan and had met a pope. He was one of the few African Americans who had ever been honored with what the citys once-daily newspaper, the Times-Picayune, called its Loving Cupa person-of-the-year award given to someone in honor of his or her public service. But Rhesas father, Revius Ortique Jr., represented black royalty in New Orleans. Ortique, a civil rights attorney, had been the first African-American justice to serve on the Louisiana Supreme Court. Whereas Alden McDonald had shaken hands with presidents, Ortique had been named to five presidential commissions, including the Commission on Campus Unrest that Richard Nixon had created after protesters were gunned down at Kent State and Jackson State Universities. As president of the National Bar Association, an organization of African-American lawyers, he had sat with Lyndon Johnson in the Oval Office, where he pressed the president to name more black attorneys to the federal bench. Several months later, Johnson appointed Thurgood Marshall to the US Supreme Court. Rhesa crossed the short bridge that brought visitors to Park Island and pulled into the driveway of the home her parents owned directly across the street from Ray Nagins. Thirty minutes later, she was at the Hyatt. The time was 9:00 a.m. At the front desk, Rhesa picked up the keys to four rooms to accommodate not only themselves but Todd and their thirty-year-old daughter, Heidi. Rhesa helped set up her parents in their room on the twenty-third floor before entering the room she reserved for herself and her husband. Thirty minutes later, she was knocking on the door of her parents room. Were leaving, she announced. She knew they would put up an argument, but on TV they were warning of mass blackouts. The image of her parents walking down twenty-three flights of stairs made her stand her ground. You cant check out, you just checked in! the clerk said when Rhesa reappeared at the front desk. Oh, yes, I can, she responded. She phoned her husband. Im picking you up wherever you are. Youre getting in the car and were leaving town. After thirty-one years of marriage, her husband knew better than to argue. Besides, the car radio continued to impress on him the might of Katrina. The line that stuck with him was one the broadcasters kept repeating: Only three Category 5 hurricanes have hit the continental United States in recorded history. Talk of flooding caused the McDonalds to take several extra precautions before leaving town. McDonald drove one of their cars, a gold-colored Lexus sedan, to Libertys headquarters, where the bank had a two-story parking structure. McDonald parked the car on the second floor, where the Lexus would at least be above the flood line if the streets filled with water. He locked the sports car he had been driving in the garage of his house. That at least would protect it from falling debris and hide it from potential looters. At 10:00 a.m. on Sunday, as the McDonalds were preparing to take off, Mayor Ray Nagin declared a mandatory evacuationthe first in New Orleans history. McDonald got behind the wheel of Rhesas dark blue Lexus and pointed the car east. Heidi and her dog pulled in behind them, followed by Todd and a friend. The McDonalds had just said good-bye to houseguests, a couple visiting from Atlanta, who had cut their trip short because of the storm. Come stay with us, the couple had suggested. They were both physicians in Atlanta with a home large enough to accommodate a crowd. So with Revius and Miriam Ortique in the backseat, Alden and Rhesa McDonald headed to Atlanta, followed by two of their three children. NORMALLY THE DRIVE FROM New Orleans to Atlanta takes around six hours. That Sunday, the McDonalds were on the road for twice that longand they might be counted among the luckier ones. Ward Mack McClendon made the same trip from the Lower Ninth Ward several hours after the McDonalds. McClendon, who would eventually sacrifice everything in his fight to save the Lower Ninth, was already playing hero, rounding up a couple of his neighbors he knew had no other way out of town. McClendon was hoping to make the Atlanta home of his eldest daughter, but gave up past midnight, when they were still in east-central Alabama. There in the town of Opelika, in a cheap motel whose name none of them can remember, McClendon and the others would

learn about the fate of New Orleans while watching a small television someone had set up in the corner of the lobby. Safe in Atlanta, McDonald flopped on his friends couch, watching the increasingly bleak storm coverage on a big flat-screen TV. The first burst of news out of New Orleans on Monday morning had left him breathing easier. As advertised, Katrina was on par with a Camille or a Betsya hurricane people would be talking about for decades to come. But the storm had jogged in the middle of the night. The destruction in towns such as Biloxi, Gulfport, and Bay St. Louis, along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, dominated the news that Monday, not New Orleans. A twenty-eight-foot tidal wave had destroyed properties along one hundred miles stretching from western Alabama to the southeastern corner of lower Louisiana. Where once thriving communities had dotted the coast, the TV cameras found little beyond empty foundations, broken-off pipes, and brick stairs leading to nowhere. I can only imagine that this is what Hiroshima looked like sixty years ago, Mississippi governor Haley Barbour said after taking an aerial tour of the devastation. By the time the storm reached New Orleans, Katrinas winds were blowing at 125 mph, making it a Category3 storm. To the extent newscasters talked about New Orleans on Monday, they all seemed to repeat the same clich: New Orleans seemed to have dodged a bullet. For years to come, people would speak about the collapse of the New Orleans levee system as if it happened twenty-four hours after Katrina made landfall in Louisiana. Thats how the president and his top aides saw it even weeks after Katrina; its a mistake people still make today. But the citys 911 operators knew better. Early on Monday morning, the citys emergency switchboard was deluged with calls from frantic residents. At first almost all the requests for help were from the Lower Ninth Ward, but soon dispatchers were hearing from other parts of the city. Later, the LSU Hurricane Center figured out that the first few levee breaches occurred at around 5:00 a.m. on Monday. It just took time for the wider world to catch up to what was happening in New Orleans. The citys flood-protection system had been devastated. One major breach was along the Industrial Canal, a man-made waterway that separates the Lower Ninth Ward (and also New Orleans East) from the rest of New Orleans.I The storm surge spilled over the top of the floodwall protecting the Lower Ninth, creating a trench so deep that by 7:30a.m., two segments of the wall had collapsed. The propulsive force of the water pushed homes off foundations and devastated the northwestern edge of the Lower Ninth closest to the breach. Other sections of the city flooded not because of breaches in the outer flood-protection system but due to failures in the drainage canals the city used to collect water after a heavy rain. Giant electric motors in two dozen pumping stations around New Orleans sop up excess rain and dump it into Lake Pontchartrain via one of three major canals that the Corps of Engineers had rebuilt in the 1970s. There were major breaches in two of these three canals, the Seventeenth Street and London Avenue Canals, and more flooding because a section of a levee along the third, the Orleans Avenue Canal, had never been completed. The brackish waters of Lake Pontchartrain, the countrys second-largest saltwater lake, flowed into Lakeview, a prosperous white enclave on one side of City Park, and Gentilly, a mostly black middle- and working-class community on the other. There were dozens more breaches in the New Orleans flood-protection system. That proved fatal in a city that geographically resembled nothing so much as a giant bowl that sits 50 percent below sea level. By the time the lake and the city reached equilibrium, 80 percent of the city was covered in water. Television couldnt get enough of the images of devastation and despair once its producers learned of the flooding late Monday or early Tuesday morning. Sitting in Atlanta, Alden McDonald remembers seeing those first images out of New Orleansof people stranded on rooftops and on elevated highways and on small strips of high ground, of entire neighborhoods underwater. No one was talking about New Orleans East, but the longer McDonald watched, the more certain he felt he was doomed. He had loaned tens of millions of dollars out to homeowners and entrepreneurs in the East, and now their properties were probably lying under four to six feet of water, unless it was under eight to ten feet. The only thing I could think of is, All of these people lost their real estate, which I had as collateral, McDonald said. He began tallying up what else had probably been destroyed, starting with the banks paper files. Most of the banks most essential documentsthe deeds for houses, the titles for carswere still at the old headquarters and would be underwater. Sitting in his friends home, he wondered if his banks days as an independent institution were over. Im wiped out, McDonald told himself. McDonald could have called a hundred people to commiserate. On his BlackBerry he had the private numbers of fellow bank presidents and a long list of elected officials. He had close friends he had known since childhood. Yet he kept redialing Russell Labbe, a Liberty employee whose tenure dated back to when McDonalds office was a small room with cheap paneling in a trailer. Labbe, who grew up on the edge of a bayou, had been piloting boats since he was a child. He had also worked as a general contractor prior to taking a job as a kind of Mr. Fixit, jack-of-all-trades, at Liberty in the 1970s. Labbe had celebrated his seventieth birthday shortly before Katrina, but he was a sturdy man who stood six feet two inches tall. He was calling me every hour, Labbe said of McDonald. In McDonalds memory it was probably more like every half hour. Sometimes McDonald was phoning to talk through strategies for getting into the city. Other times it was to ask Labbe what he might have heard about specific neighborhoods since they had last spoken. Mainly it felt good, McDonald acknowledged, to talk solutions rather than to stare helplessly at the television. They spoke countless more times over the coming weeks, especially while water still covered much of the city. I must have taken fifteen boat trips in, Labbe said. It was always something. Something that had to be done right away. Because thats Aldenif he needs it, he needs it now. McDonald was eager to get back to New Orleans. If not the city itself, then at least Baton Rouge, which was seventy miles to the northwest

and a lot closer than Atlanta to his drowned-out life. If anything were to happen to their New Orleans operations, the banks doomsday plan called for key bank personnel to rendezvous in Baton Rouge, where the bank operated three branches. (They operated another two in Jackson, Mississippi, 180 miles due north of New Orleans.) On Wednesday, with barely more than the clothes on his back, McDonald flew from Atlanta to Baton Rouge. Fortunately, he said, I took four pairs of underwear. Finding a hotel room in Baton Rouge was impossible. For those first few days he was in town, McDonald couch-surfed. Even when providence delivered a house in Baton Rouge to use indefinitely, the well-connected bank president continued to live like a much younger version of himself. This house that in normal times might comfortably have slept five or six more resembled a youth hostel during the summer high season. Several people from the bank, including his son Todd, took up more or less full-time residence there. And what was he supposed to do when someone such as Ronnie Burns, an old family friend who also sat on the Liberty board of directors, called to say he needed to be in Baton Rouge for a few nights? People were sleeping on floor space wherever they could find it, Burns reported. There mustve been like twenty people staying there. At least McDonald usually managed to keep a bedroom for himself. EVERYONE CALLED IT THE Southern branch, this Liberty outpost in Baton Rouge across the street from Southern University, a historically black college that sits along the banks of the Mississippi. The branch wasnt much to look ata tan-brick building with a corrugated-tin roof damaged in one corner. McDonald even had considered tearing it down and rebuilding something nicer. But this functional facility had a set of back offices that would serve as a temporary command center. Long before Katrina, McDonald had thought to install extra T1 lines and store extra phones and other backup equipment on-site. For the foreseeable future, this modest-size branch housing a single ATM machine would serve as headquarters for a bank with $350 million in assets and thirty-five thousand customers. McDonald could list a hundred things he needed to do to save Liberty, and then another hundred things after that. But nothing preoccupied his attention like his lack of a centralized computer. Tuesday came and went and still the disaster backup firm had not received a backup tape. No package arrived on Wednesday or Thursday, either. Liberty owned two mainframe computers. Yet one was underwater and the other was useless in a city without electricity. Until the computer tapes showed up in Philadelphia, no interbank networks such as STAR or Plus could monitor how much money a Liberty customer had in his or her account. The satellite imagery the cable networks broadcast in the hours before Katrina made landfall showed a giant white pinwheel of angry clouds stretching some five hundred miles across. That was McDonalds mistake; he had not counted on the storms vastness. Airports across the Southwest were affected by Katrina and packages were stacking up in Memphis, where FedEx had its main hub. Both packages McDonald had sent for overnight delivery were being stored somewhere on the grounds of FedExs sprawling facility. McDonald spent upwards of $15,000 to charter a plane to ferry someone first to Memphis and then to Philadelphia, once he had located one of the missing tapes. Yet that wasnt enough. On Friday, McDonalds IT chief broke the bad news: the backup firm needed more from the bank before Liberty could be back on the interbank network. Worse, what was needed was inside the banks New Orleans headquarters. McDonald could only laugh over the tens of thousands of dollars he had paid to the recovery company about the years. It was that or cry, he said. Did a customer who had temporarily relocated to Tallahassee, Florida, have the money to cover the $300 she was requesting from an ATM? Who could say until the bank was back on the interbank network. Russell Labbe didnt flinch when McDonald asked him to go into New Orleans and pick up what they needed. I knew this had to happen or we had no bank, Labbe said. Discretion dictated they wait for the authorities to empty New Orleans of most of those trapped there. On Saturday, Labbe decided he would head into the city early Sunday morning. He would bring a gun, he said, because youd be crazy to go into that scene without one. When you have a hurricane like this, theyll steal your boat. Theyll steal your truck. People will shoot you.I. The Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, as the Industrial Canal is formally known, was built in the 1920s as a shortcut between Lake Pontchartrain, the enormous body of water lying just north of New Orleans, and the Mississippi River.