THE ROAD AHEAD
CHARTING THE
FUTURE OF NEW ORLEANS AND THE GULF COAST

More than a year has passed since Hurricane Katrina crashed ashore at New Orleans and across the Gulf Coast region, causing the deaths of more than 1,800 people while ripping asunder one of America’s most colorful and diverse cities. Despite myriad newspaper retrospectives, PBS specials and a mammoth multi-part HBO documentary, it remains nearly impossible for anyone outside the affected area to grasp the damage wrought by the nation’s worst natural disaster.

By Joseph McLaughlin
The devastation is indescribable,” says Donald Kettl, the Stanley I. Sheerr Endowed Term Chair in the Social Sciences. “Imagine that everything from the Schuylkill River to the Penn campus has been flattened and everything from campus to Wayne, Pa., has become a ghost town.” That’s just New Orleans. The storm left a trail of destruction from the east Texas border all the way to Alabama and beyond. A new hurricane season has come and gone, yet little has been done to restore the area, and even less has been decided about how New Orleans and the surrounding communities should build a future for the region.

Part of the problem, Kettl says, is that the astonishing ruin makes it difficult to know where to begin. “What’s the first mile of road you should rebuild? The first mile of sewerage? The first mile of electric cable?” he asks. And if a site were chosen, what would go there? “You’ve heard a lot of people say that New Orleans will come back bigger and better, but we don’t want to create more hurricane bait. Anyone who makes judgments about what should go where immediately triggers questions of a racial and economic nature that aren’t easily answered.”

Kettl has spent the past year working with Congress to develop an effective response plan for future disasters. Believing that calamities like Hurricane Katrina exceed the ability of state and local governments to handle them, he is calling on the federal government to assume the role of emergency coordinator for all relief units. As for FEMA, the much-maligned agency that tried to negotiate the disaster from within the deepest recesses of the Homeland Security Department, its focus also must change. “FEMA must concentrate its efforts on coordinating all the related bits of governmental capacity,” he argues. “It must take responsibility for all of the first responders.”

That may eliminate much of the confusion and ineptitude that reigned in the days following the storm, but what concerns Richard Walden, C’68, L’72, is what happens in the ensuing weeks and months. The founder and CEO of Operation USA, a Los Angeles-based disaster-relief agency, Walden has helped rebuild devastated communities around the world. His group has provided roughly $7 million in aid to the Gulf Coast region, including $700,000 in direct cash grants to public health clinics — first in places like Baton Rouge, La., and Jackson, Miss., and later in Biloxi, Miss., and New Orleans.

Walden has come under fire from the Red Cross for saying that Americans should give more support to relief agencies like his, which focus on long-term recovery and rebuilding efforts. He criticized the Red Cross in particular, which defines itself only as a first responder yet grabbed the lion’s share of Hurricane Katrina contributions. “The Red Cross got 55 percent of the money donated to Katrina victims — that’s $2 billion — even though they were initially only offering immediate disaster relief,” he says.

Discussing how the next Katrina-style disaster should be handled is cold comfort to thousands of displaced New Orleans residents who wonder if they will ever return to the Crescent City. Many of those hit hardest by the storm were poor blacks with no way of leaving the city when Katrina struck. At present, they continue their lives in states as close as Texas and as far away as Oregon.

Reuniting this far-flung community is essential to restoring New Orleans’ vibrant cultural pastiche, says..."
Elijah Anderson, the Charles and William Day Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences. “The first thing the government must do is restore people’s faith in the system by doing what it promises, namely, serving and protecting its citizens,” he says. “Faith and confidence must be built through deeds, not just talk.”

Anderson points to a recent study by the National Science Foundation that shows how Katrina chiefly affected poor and black residents who were concentrated in the city’s lowest-lying areas. Black neighborhoods were disproportionately destroyed, and now Anderson fears that their destruction may be permanent, mostly because he believes the Republican-dominated government has no real interest in restoring them. Even worse, he says, is that blacks assumed from the outset that they would bear the brunt of the devastation and the past year’s inaction has only proven them right.

“If George W. Bush were concerned about this and made an honest public appeal, I’m sure that many good people both black and white would give him an opportunity walk the walk,” Anderson says. “But his administration is really out to lunch on this issue. In fact, they’re not generally concerned with social issues at all.”

More and more residents from all backgrounds are beginning to believe that New Orleans’ problems will have to be solved by New Orleans’ people. People like Sydney Besthoff, W’49, whose family has been tied to the city since his grandfather opened the first Katz and Besthoff drug store on Canal Street in 1905. Before last year, Besthoff had never evacuated due to a hurricane. He might have stayed on for Katrina, except that his grandchildren were with him at the time. “With them in my care, I thought I’d better do things safely,” he says.

Besthoff is content to work at his own pace, re-establishing his home and doing his part to bring the city back to life. “We have to be continual about it, just work little by little on a regular basis and get things done,” he says. In addition to refurbishing his house, one of his top priorities is restoring a prized five-acre sculpture garden he established in 2003 at the New Orleans Museum of Art. A gift to the city, it charged no admission fee and attracted nearly 300,000 visitors a year.

This past spring, the region attracted roughly 100 visitors from Penn — undergraduates who spent their mid-semester break gutting houses and laying foundations. Spread across the Gulf Coast region from Gulfport, Miss., to Lafayette, La., they came together for a forum in New Orleans sponsored by the School of Arts and Sciences’ Fox Leadership Program. There they heard from several Penn alums who are active in the rebuilding. Many of the students returned after classes ended in May — between 10 and 15 new arrivals each week for the next two months.

While the fate of New Orleans hangs in the balance, concrete ideas about how to rescue the city are scarce. It remains to be seen whether those strategies that have emerged will bear fruit. “New Orleans is the single greatest public planning opportunity in generations, if not ever, and yet nobody’s been able to come up with anything like a consensus,” Kettl says. “There is the chance for people to think big thoughts about this, but right now nobody really knows how it’s going to come out.”

Into the vacuum has stepped a small group of New Orleans residents who aren’t waiting for help from outside sources to reclaim their former lives. Over the past year, Kettl has watched them return to their demolished city and work tirelessly to raise their homes from the rubble. “Imagine living in an area the size of West Philadelphia and you’re one of only three or four people who live there,” he says. “There are no people, no lights except for the ones in your house, and you’re all on your own because the police can’t possibly cover the entire area.”

Kettl likens these people to 19th-century settlers who created from nothing the trading posts that would grow into great Midwestern cities. “These people are doing in the middle of their city what homesteaders used to do in the Wild West,” he says. “Maybe it will happen that way in New Orleans — block by block, homesteader by homesteader. But for every Kansas City and Denver that has thrived, many others have faded into oblivion.”

more hurricane bait.” —DONALD KETTL, POLITICAL SCIENCE