

The Corps and the Shore By Orrin H. Pilkey

The US Army Corps of Engineers has been bombarded with criticism for the failure of the levees and canals around New Orleans. Experts from LSU and elsewhere think the failures were largely due to faulty design rather than a simple overtopping of the dikes by high water. Thus, the Corps is an agency that failed to protect a major city from a hazard recognized more than 50 years ago.

On America's gulf and Atlantic shoreline, I have interacted with beach projects of the Corps for almost four decades. Design of these artificial beaches is always based on Corps-devised mathematical models that we have demonstrated to be completely detached from reality.

Before an artificial beach can be built, the Corps must first come up with a favorable cost assessment that requires the agency to predict how long the new beach will last. This is where the mathematical models come in. Although such a prediction is impossible to make since beach life spans depend upon randomly occurring storms, the Corps somehow always seems to find in favor of building the beach.

And then, as has happened on some publicly funded North Carolina beach nourishment projects, the beach may be constructed of poor material, public access may be limited and the beach (always) disappears faster than predicted. Bad NC beaches include projects on Emerald Isle, Pine Knoll Shores, Atlantic Beach and Oak Island; and a common explanation for a lost beach is that an unusual storm came by, the same excuse used for the broken New Orleans levees. In all of these cases, the Corps either carried out or approved these beach projects.

The Corps of Engineers is not a servant of the people; it is a servant of Congress. The agency is set up so that it must sing for its supper. It must have projects to survive: no projects - no agency. Under these difficult circumstances, we couldn't possibly expect any agency to function objectively and competently. Instead, the Corps takes on virtually every congressionally mandated pork project, and finds justification for even the most outrageous projects without blinking. Fundamentally then, the blame for the wayward action of the Corps falls on Congress.

My view of the history of the US Army Corps of Engineers is that during the depression, the Corps snapped up a cadre of highly competent engineers from the vast pool of unemployed engineers. The agency maintained a quality staff for two or three decades before it began to deteriorate. Today the Corps is not a sought-after place of employment by top engineering graduates from any school.

In response to criticism of an overemphasis on engineering, the Corps hired some geologists and biologists. But scientists weren't given much leeway in an agency dominated by engineers, and top candidates avoided the stifling bureaucracy that now pervades the Corps.

Today, the Corps is an agency so seeped in its own preservation that it can hardly distinguish truth from fiction. Efforts to justify unjustifiable projects, both large and small, have long since poisoned the well of integrity to the point that study results are unblushingly bent to find the truth according to a project's survival needs.

There are efforts afoot in Congress to provide oversight of the Corps, at least for major projects, which will help immensely. Certainly the agency needs to be closely monitored if it is ordered to rebuild the New Orleans levees.

But a major revamping of the agency is needed to de-politicize and de-militarize it. It needs to be freed from the day-to-day control of Congress and its pork barrels.

Americans need and deserve a much better national engineering agency. Large-scale events in New Orleans and small-scale events in North Carolina clearly demonstrate why.

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