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## Interview: Robert Livingston

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# ‘A Catastrophe Worse Than 9/11’

*Rep. Robert Livingston is a former Republican Congressman from Louisiana. He was interviewed by Bill Jones on Sept. 2*



**EIR:** You mentioned earlier that you thought Hurricane Katrina was much worse than 9/11.

**Livingston:** Without a doubt, it's huge. Because, even in the earthquakes in California, or 9/11 in New York, the survivors were able to disperse, to go to either their homes or other homes. Their businesses were, for the most part intact. They'd go to their jobs, they had hospitals available, they had schools available. And life could carry on, without too much disruption. Certainly, there was tragedy, and great loss of life, and loss of some things. But basically, the communities weren't in jeopardy of *dying*.

In this case, not just New Orleans, but throughout south Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, you've got whole communities that are wiped out: No homes, no businesses, no jobs, no hospitals, no schools. No infrastructure. No nothin'!

It's a tragedy of immense proportions, and to hear speculation that we should just abandon the area because it's low, is—incredible. I think if this tragedy had happened in Miami, there wouldn't be any hesitation about rebuilding Miami. The American taxpayer didn't hesitate to put up at least \$50 billion to rebuild California after the earthquakes. We would never abandon San Francisco or Los Angeles. The American taxpayer would stand up. And so, *any* suggestion that, because it's subject to hurricanes or it's too low, that we should just forget about it, is ridiculous.

**EIR:** The region really plays a decisive role in the entire U.S. economy.

**Livingston:** The area of the Mississippi River is one of the chief contributors to America's eco-system in the country. The Mississippi River tributary system represents about a third of the geography of the country. River traffic is the cheapest, most environmentally sensitive, and clean mode

of transportation. One barge can be utilized—or would have to be replaced by some 58 18-wheelers on the highways, and Lord knows how many planes. If you stop river traffic, you'd clog the highways, you'd overburden airlines and the airports—you just couldn't do it. The bulk traffic which goes through the Port of New Orleans, which is the biggest port for bulk traffic in the country, is irreplaceable. And the energy reserves. Twenty-five percent to 30% of America's domestic energy needs are dependent upon the Greater New Orleans area, southeast Louisiana, in producing those energy needs. And then, of course, the water-borne commerce from all around the world, enters the port, as well as up and down the Mississippi River, that provides farmers access to selling their commodities all around the world.

This is a critical area of the world. And historically it's been critical, frankly since the Europeans first settled in America. New Orleans was one of the first great cities. With the final battle of the War of 1812, fought in 1815 in the Battle of New Orleans, Gen. Andrew Jackson put a cap on the British and all of their ambitions to have a significant presence in the Continental United States.

**EIR:** That's an important chunk of history.

**Livingston:** It's *tremendously* historically important.

We suffered a major catastrophe. This was a *Category 5* storm when it started coming in, after it left Florida. And it whittled down (ha!—"whittled down") to a *Category 4*. All of our planning for the Corps of Engineers for flood control has been for *Category 3*, because it was a matter of affordability and benefit/cost ratios.

The fact is, we are such a contributing part of the ecosystem, that it's imperative that the money be spent.

It's always been a fight, between other regions of the country that didn't want to spend money on the Corps of Engineers, and *especially* the environmental community and many of the sympathetic press! "Oh—don't spend on locks and dams and levees. That's crazy! Let's let the natural alluvial flow take place, and preserve nature." It was *asinine* then, and it's *asinine* now! We're seeing the folly of it.

And it's virtually the same with every administration, going back to the beginning. There's always been a battle between Congress and OMB [Office of Management and Budget]. And fortunately, members of Congress, who live in the watershed areas, have generally prevailed—not to the full extent—but at least to a significant extent, and put money in these projects to try to keep floods from inundating their communities. And we have succeeded. But obviously, we didn't succeed enough.

**EIR:** There was also Mike Parker who was the head of the Army Corps who was arguing, I guess a year or so ago—

**Livingston:** No, more than that. When Bush first came in, he appointed Mike Parker as head of the Corps of Engineers.

And Mike argued vociferously that the budget was inadequate, and OMB got so offended that Mike got sacked. And that was very unfortunate. Mike was right. And I regret that.

But, I have to say, that in the early years, the Bush Administration took the same tactic, because of OMB, that the Clinton Administration took for eight years. And that is, “Oh—take the money out of the Corps of Engineers, it’s a piggy-bank.” That attitude reversed, because Congress weighed in.

**EIR:** Tell me how you see the economic effects? This as the hub, as you mentioned, of the whole grain market coming down the Mississippi, and a lot of other things. How do you see the overall economic implications?

**Livingston:** I think within a matter of a couple of weeks, two or three weeks, they could get the river working again. Got to get dredges, and deploy dredges, and whatnot. Certainly for barge traffic. And then they could deploy the ships down below the mouth of the river. I don’t think they’re going to have any deep-draft vessels going up and down the river any time quickly, but eventually they can do that. But, in the meantime, they can certainly get barge traffic through fairly quickly, and that will help going up and down the river. But it’s going to be a while.

In terms of the oil and gas—I mean, you’ve got rigs displaced, and totally knocked off their stands. You’ve got refining capacity that’s been impeded. We’re already seeing that that’s having an economic impact across the nation. The price of gasoline’s going up, and I think you’re going to see a major spike this weekend—if the supplies are available.

And, in terms of access to goods—say, fisheries, and commodities that are produced down there? Well, that’s all at a standstill.

And of course, those people that don’t have homes—businesses, jobs, hospitals, schools, or transportation, is going to have a rippling effect all around the nation.

**EIR:** There’s been also a kind of philosophical shift over the last two decades, where people made the argument that all this infrastructural investment should not be in the purview of the government but left to private enterprise. Do you think we’ll see a change of thinking after this?

**Livingston:** Certain things people can not do for themselves. I mean, you know, people can not build highways. Unless they’re toll highways, and then, you’re talking about just the richest people in the world. People can’t build airports, people can’t build infrastructure for communities. People can do things—but certain things government has to do for them. And defense is clearly one. *Civil* defense is clearly one. And investment in infrastructure is clearly one.

**EIR:** The internal improvements here from at least the early

1800s—building the first public road out to the West, was also a government infrastructural venture.

**Livingston:** There was also the railroad—well, the railroad was privately built, actually, for the most part; but it was funded by bonds, issued by Congress. Clearly, yes, the whole Interstate highway system, was paid for and prompted by Dwight Eisenhower. The WPA stepped in during the Depression. And I think that this is a WPA-type project. I mean, you’re going to have to have *a lot* of things built at the taxpayer expense! And simply to say, “Well, they shouldn’t have been there in the first place,” is absurd! They are there, and they’re going to continue to contribute, because they are necessary! For all of those components of the economy that I talked about, and many that I haven’t.

**EIR:** Tell me, one of the other things that is worrisome, is the aftermath in terms of the possible spread of diseases. You’ve had, obviously, as we see so clearly on that this was a very impoverished area, and a lot of poor people, who are now homeless are moving in large areas of standing water—

**Livingston:** Well, this is a major problem. And there are some *wonderful* first responders. But, the hospitals that are within the City of New Orleans, don’t have toilets that flush; the water’s off. The electricity in some instances is off; some of them have generators. And then, there are looters and marauders outside, beating down the door for the drugs. They’re working under *tremendously* difficult circumstances, and many of them haven’t left, and they’re still trying to do their job and help people. But, we haven’t even shut off the water yet, I mean, the water from the river, and the lake. We’ve got to shut that water off; you’ve got to drain the water out.

You literally have to evacuate the city completely. The standing water in New Orleans poses an increasing threat. You’ve got the possibilities of typhoid and cholera starting to spread—I mean, “starting to spread”; I haven’t heard any instances of it, yet, but those are possibilities. In addition, there’s another disease, it’s called “being hit by a bullet.” And that’s already going on.

**EIR:** That’s been a big problem. But, then there’s also the question that this would require, in this type of situation, major efforts on the part of government, in accordance with the “general welfare” clause, to try and rebuild. How do you see this occurring?

**Livingston:** Well, I personally would like to see them send in the Marines. I mean, I think this is a military operation, just like it was in Iraq. So, that, in my opinion—restoring civil order, that’s number one. And once you restore civil order, and reduce the floods, and eliminate the water, pump it out, restore electricity, then things will start coming back to normal.