Something serious has happened to what used to be among the core values and integral components of American pragmatism: common sense, prudence, logic and reason. Take two examples:

- In the wake of this summer's catastrophic pair of hurricanes, advocacy groups and politicians alike have hastened to call for the complete rebuilding of the South. An emotional response bordering on hubris is very much the human thing to do: resisting natural disasters; refusing to draw lessons from experience; hoping against hope; reckless folly and systemic learning-impairment spring eternal.

Although it is appropriate to provide for those savaged by natural calamities, thoughtless, knee-jerk, flat-earth rebuilding of the South square on the tracks of nature's fast freights is as insane as funding that rebuilding on the backs, and at the expense, of this nation's most vulnerable groups and individuals. Impulsively reconstructing targets of the last disaster to become sitting ducks for the next, makes no sense: economically, societally or humanely.

What's desperately needed, although rarely mentioned or acknowledged, is informed, considered thoughtful planning: to rebuild what is essential and environmentally appropriate coupled with humane and compassionate relocation out of manifest harm's way of what cannot be sensibly restored. This has been done in flood-prone Missouri. There the cost of relocating out the floodplain was a fraction of the cost of rebuilding within it with the added benefit of minimizing disaster recovery costs and lives lost in the inevitably successive floods. It can be done elsewhere.

In past decades, local and state governments and agencies of the federal bureaucracy - although fully apprised of the risks, not only to New Orleans but the entire Gulf Coast - have repeatedly neglected or underfunded projects that would have mitigated or reduced the impact of this summer's storms. Moreover, with tax breaks, cheap hazard insurance and cynical, self-serving neglect of existing protective regulations, these same governmental units have historically encouraged and subsidized inappropriate, environmentally unsound development, not just in the coastal South but nationwide, just making matters worse.

Why do we continue to do so? Following the next predictable, inevitable, foreseen and anticipated disaster, will cleanup and reconstruction then again be funded at public expense in the same areas. Why? Who promotes such cyclic scenarios: mindlessly repetitive, learning-deficient automata, or just hack politicians pandering to their clientesles' demands?

The net effect is to take resources and well-being from the poor while giving to the rich, particularly construction industry corporations, in such a way as to guarantee they'll be back for more following the next,
utterly predictable catastrophe. Is not this a strategy one notch less onerous than creating calamities for those same industries to rebuild?

Of course it would be as wrong not to assist those injured or dispossessed by natural calamities, as it would be to fund reconstruction at the expense of healthcare, student loans and other socially vital programs.

But it is also wrong, however politically expedient in the short term, to give carte blanche to rebuilding for its own sake without demanding planning, intelligently designed to prevent or minimize repetitions of the misery and suffering to human, and destruction of environmental and material, resources.

Our initial impulse is to recreate, to rebuild as it was, trusting that the next time will not be the same. But irrationality is the perpetuation of repeatedly unsuccessful strategies in the hope differing outcomes will ensue the next time. Arrogance, stubborn intransigence and planning based on hope and wishful-thinking are a poor substitute for viable, long-term effective initiatives.

Rationality is finding better ways sustainably to utilize the environment for the benefit of all, the environment included! And rationality would have those who can most easily afford, and who will most profit from, rebuilding be required to shoulder their share of the burden, monetarily and otherwise. Neither appears to be part of the plan. Why not?

- The debate over 'intelligent' design ultimately reduces to knowledge vs faith. Knowledge is about that part of the truth that is known and has been verified by experience. Faith is about belief. Trust is faith based; verification is experientially based; the two are coupled in Reagan's dictum: trust but verify.

As Carl Sagen wrote: believing is wonderful fun, but what is believed isn't necessarily true (or even verifiable). The mechanism of evolution is an example of something that is known about as well as we humans are able to know anything: via extensive experiential verification.

'Intelligent' design is a belief some choose to hold. It is not verified, probably cannot be so, but anyone who chooses to live his or her life according to hope and wish-fulfilling fantasies is at liberty to do so, so long as s/he doesn't unduly entrain and seduce naive and unwary others, e.g. children, in the delusional process.

Representing unverified and unverifiable beliefs as knowledge in public schooling paid for and supported by the tax base at large seems a profligate squandering of the public trust and treasury, an exercise in inefficacy.

However, relying on hope and fantasy, in lieu of truth, in designing survival strategies likely will ultimately upgrade the quality, if not the quantity, of the human gene-pool.

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