

# LETTERS



## **Recognizing the Security Threat at Old River Control**

While visiting New Orleans in March, I persuaded three siblings and our father to join me on an expedition to visit the Old River Control structure between Lettsworth and Vidalia, Louisiana. If you want to get people to join you on an eight-hour field trip, you need a compelling story. Mine is this: Old River Control is the single most important piece of infrastructure in the United States. It is also the most vulnerable. Old River Control is not an app. It's not ironically hip. It's not even very big. It is a collection of rather drab, utilitarian engineering projects built in the 1950s and '60s to keep the Mississippi River from flowing into the Atchafalaya.

The *Atcha-who-dat?* as a Saints fan might ask.

A bit of hydrology: Rivers like the Mississippi meander—that is, twitch back and forth across the landscape in geological time. Like people—and governments—rivers are inherently lazy. Via the Atchafalaya River, it's only about 140 miles to the Gulf of Mexico, versus 315 via the Mississippi. The water would like to take the shortest route to the Gulf.

The problem is that for the past 300 years, the people of Louisiana have staked their future on the lower Mississippi's staying where it was when Europeans started building permanent structures. The stretch of river below Baton Rouge to New Orleans and the Gulf is home to the bulk of the country's petrochemical industries, and four of its largest ports: the Port of South Louisiana, New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Plaquemines. In 2016, 4,400 oceangoing vessels and more than 63,000 barges called at the sprawling Port of South Louisiana alone.

Left to its own devices, the Mississippi River would meander over to the Atchafalaya watershed, so the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) built Old River Control, as well as the nearby Morganza Spillway, to keep the relative volume of water in the lower Mississippi and the Atchafalaya at a ratio of about 70-to-30. If you read about the Old River Control, the focus of concern



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is always whether it can be overwhelmed by “the next big flood,” like the one that overwhelmed the Great Plains and Upper Midwest this winter. The concern is more than justified. As a USACE flyer puts it:

If the Mississippi changed course it would turn the present river channel into a saltwater estuary and the effects on southern Louisiana would be catastrophic. Corporations have constructed billions of dollars worth of petrochemical plants, refineries, grain elevators, and fossil fuel and nuclear electrical generating plants, most of which depend on fresh water for their manufacturing process, along both banks of the Mississippi River. Also, cities below Baton Rouge, including New Orleans, would be hard-pressed to find drinking water.

([www.mvn.usace.army.mil/.../OldRiverControlBrochure.pdf](http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/.../OldRiverControlBrochure.pdf))

This is to say nothing of the loss of those four ports—and their customers from Pennsylvania to Minnesota to Kansas who would be left high and dry. But the short-term consequences of a failure of Old River Control would be devastating not just to the industry, shipping, and people living between Baton Rouge and New Orleans and beyond. Doubling the volume of the Atchafalaya in an instant would cause devastating floods across south central Louisiana, wash out Interstate 10 and innumerable petroleum facilities, and drown a good part of Morgan City, among other places. The loss of life would be incalculable. It would take decades to rebuild. The American economy would be a shambles.

The Corps’s focus on its tango with Mother Nature is a quaint holdover from a more innocent time. While the engineers of the USACE do an impressive job with their mandate, you have to wonder about

the Army of the USACE. What is truly disturbing about visiting Old River Control is that the whole complex employs fewer than forty people, and there is absolutely no security. The two-lane Louisiana Route 15 runs over the Old River Lock, the Auxiliary Structure, the Low Sill Structure, and the Sidney A. Murray Hydroelectric Station—all of which control the flow of water from the Mississippi to the Atchafalaya.

None of this is a state secret. That USACE flyer quoted above is available on the internet, complete with maps and driving directions from Baton Rouge. And people write about this constantly, no one more engagingly than John McPhee, in a 1987 *New Yorker* article entitled “Atchafalaya,” republished in his collection, *The Control of Nature* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989).

Given what we know of terrorism, foreign and homegrown, and the ease with which one can turn a car or truck into a bomb—think back to the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, and especially the 171 killed in the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995—the fact that anyone can freely drive across what McPhee likened to “surgical tape” on a wound in the Mississippi is incomprehensible. This is not to say that the authorities are completely unconcerned with security. An orange sign wired to a chain link fence reads: “Call 1-800-Call-Spy if you see suspicious activity.”

If the federal government considers national security as something more than just a political talking point, it should be infinitely harder for anyone to get anywhere near Old River Control by car, truck, or boat than it is to board a plane at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport or enter the average Manhattan office building.

Out of sight, out of mind may be all right for the average citizen. But for the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security to overlook the vulnerability of Old River Control to manmade destruction is criminal.

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