

The Saints vs. The Falcons: Triumph or tragedy

Joan Chittister | Oct. 2, 2006 From Where I Stand

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Like most of the rest of the country, it seems, I watched the return of the New Orleans Saints to the Superdome. And like most of the rest of the country, too, up until that night, I doubt that I had ever seen either the Saints or their opponents, the Atlanta Falcons, play more than once.

These are not my teams. These are not the great teams of the country.

But this was no ordinary game. This was not simply couch-potato time in TV land. This game was not to be slept through or talked through or ignored. Here, in front of our very eyes, was a football game that had overtones of the mythical, the heroic, the epic.

We were clearly not simply here to watch football alone. We were here to see the American spirit rise unscathed from the grave of disaster -- where disaster was a decidedly unacceptable situation here in the Promised Land. This game had all the earmarks of a national renaissance.

And the city of New Orleans did everything it could to make it happen.

New Orleans loves a parade so the game, like so much in New Orleans over the years, started with one. People from every level of New Orleans marched into the stadium ahead of the team to the sound of Mardi Gras music. And well they should.

These were the first responders of the city who worked day and night to provide security and aid to those stranded during Hurricane Katrina.

They were the old jazz musicians of the city, the soul of New Orleans, who had once played on Bourbon Street and now were left looking for instruments to replace what had been lost in the flood.

These were representatives of once New Orleans families, now scattered across the country, who had returned to the Dome in which they almost died to prove that even though life moves on, there are some things we never leave.

This game, the announcers said, marked "The Rebirth of a City." Except everyone knew it wasn't. Not really. Not completely. Not yet anyway.

If anything, the game was, at best, the *beginning* of the rebirth of a city: provided that business would come

back, of course -- as the team had; provided that the fans would come back -- as displaced fans from everywhere had that night; provided that the tourists would come back -- as they have yet to do.

Indeed, this was no ordinary game. It was a game that made us all sit up and think for a moment.

Underneath all the regular football rituals, this game carried with it an undercurrent of the unspoken. This game, unlike the usual weekly contests of professional athletes, went far beyond the betting line and the expectations that come with million dollar contracts. No, it wasn't the love of the sport that accounted for the level of excitement, of nostalgia, or personal investment, of pain. This was about far greater human endeavors than that. This game commemorated great human challenge, great ordinary heroes -- and great tragedy.

"The greatest natural tragedy in U.S. history," the commentators called Hurricane Katrina and its devastation of New Orleans, with almost forgotten parts of Mississippi and parts of the Gulf Coast with it. But what they failed to say often enough, what the glitz and the glamour, the rock concert climate and powerful partisanship of the place, is that in New Orleans, at least, the tragedy continues.

The figures tell some of the story -- but not all.

The now famous Ninth Ward is almost empty.

More than half the population of New Orleans -- some figures say two-thirds -- has disappeared somewhere.

According to *The Washington Post* (Katrina, One Year Later, Aug. 29, 2006, A14), more than 19,000 businesses were destroyed in the storm and more than 200,000 apartments and homes.

At least 1,800 people were declared dead, 700 missing.

Over a million people were displaced. In international language -- when we're talking about other countries -- we call such people "internal refugees."

Whole sections of this once colorful place with its happy admixture of Cajun culture, great food, party animals, and echoes of plantation beauty are quiet now. Destroyed. Pitiably abandoned.

And in the midst of need like this, of the \$110 billion appropriated by the government for recovery in the area, only \$44 billion of it has been spent.

The total cost of the devastation, according to Risk Management Solutions of New Jersey is \$125 billion dollars. And every penny of it is necessary if there is really going to be a rebirth of New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast.

You could see the whole traumatizing, unfinished, paralyzing affect of it in the faces of people on the TV screen during that football game.

You could see it in the determination on the faces of each member of a team that was willing New Orleans to rise again.

You could also see it in the body language of the displaced families who watched the game on small TV sets from overcrowded basement rooms in the city.

You could see it most clearly in the cutaways of devastated houses and empty buildings and abandoned neighborhoods the network showed between segments of the game itself.

You could hear it in the pleas for aid from football players and musician groups and private funding sources across the country for an area in which 28 percent of the population was already living under the poverty line before the hurricane even hit.

In them, the tragedy was palpable. And we all wanted resurrection for them.

Which raises an even more troubling human question.

There was another ghost hanging over the Dome that night. As we saw scene after scene of total desolation go by in the poorest quarter of New Orleans, another tragedy went silently, steadily on -- just as traumatic for the innocent who find themselves caught up in it.

This other tragedy too has a parade: Humvees, tanks, bombers and foot soldiers. But it doesn't suffer from a lack of funds. No funds have been held back here. Furthermore, this tragedy wasn't natural. And it was certainly never necessary.

In Iraq now, between 43,000-48,000 non-combatants -- men, women and children -- have been killed.

The cost of the disaster in Iraq has reached \$317 billion dollars. We've paid or borrowed or mortgaged the country for every cent of it and we're not done paying yet.

But in this case, we're not spending to rebuild a country in need; we're paying to tear it down. In this case, we are the hurricane.

From where I stand, it seems that the question must surely be, how is it that we can pay for destruction but not for development? What is there about us now, that fails to see the tragedy behind both parades?

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