EDITORIAL: Evading blame again

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That peculiar ability the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has to reach conclusions bearing no relationship to the facts before them should no longer surprise anyone in the New Orleans area. Yet, the agency's most recent claim -- that the Aug. 29 breaches in local floodwalls played only a minor role in that day's catastrophic flooding -- has raised the ire of scientists who say the corps' shoddy engineering was the primary cause of the death and destruction.

As has been the case for months, the only people who seem comfortable with the corps' construction of the flood protection system are those who work for the agency.

"We will all be surprised," Dan Hitchings recently told a congressional committee, "when it is soon shown how much water poured into New Orleans before certain floodwalls collapsed."

Mr. Hitchings is the civilian head of the corps' Task Force Guardian, which is supposed to be rebuilding local flood walls and levees to their pre-storm levels. By downplaying the seriousness of the breaches, Mr. Hitchings is distancing the corps from the devastation that followed Hurricane Katrina. In effect, he is suggesting that death and destruction would have occurred even if the floodwalls and levees had remained intact -- and at the same time predicting that future death and destruction won't be the corps' fault either.

Ivor van Heerden, assistant director of the LSU Hurricane Center, and J. David Rogers, an engineering professor at the University of Missouri-Rolla, pointed out what they say are falsehoods and fallacies in Hitchings' statement.

Mr. Van Heerden says that 92 percent of the flood water volume in St. Bernard Parish and 65 percent of that volume in eastern New Orleans can be linked to breaches and that there were breaches because the corps didn't design the system properly. Mr. Rogers points out that even if significant amounts of water came in before the breaches, that doesn't mean the levees they should have breached -- and doesn't mean the corps is absolved of any role in the disaster.

Even if the rising water exceeded the height of the floodwalls - - a claim scientists outside the corps dispute -- Mr. Rogers says the floodwalls should have been built to survive that overtopping. "It's not just about Category 3 height," he said. "It's about Category 3 survivable."

The corps should take responsibility and be accountable for its work. Its job is to protect, and it should be committed to that task. Instead, agency heads continue to deny their past mistakes and pre-denying the ones we may discover in the future.