Brinkley drubs Nagin in Katrina account; Sources include his political opponents
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By Gordon Russell

Best-selling Tulane University historian Douglas Brinkley rips government leaders at all levels for their wan response to Hurricane Katrina -- with his most acidic prose reserved for Mayor Ray Nagin -- in an article that will hit New York City newsstands today in the latest issue of Vanity Fair.

Brinkley, who since Katrina has been outspoken in his criticism of Nagin in frequent appearances on national media outlets -- at one point calling his handling of the crisis "criminal" -- makes ample use of a historian's license to analyze and assign blame. He faults the government response to the killer storm from top to bottom in the article, which is excerpted from his 700-page book on Katrina to be released Tuesday.

For example, President Bush, by Brinkley's lights, put too much trust in ill-equipped federal appointees, particularly Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and then-FEMA Director Michael Brown. Bush also engaged in a pointless set-to with Gov. Kathleen Blanco over who would control federal troops in Louisiana, Brinkley alleges.

As for Blanco, Brinkley credits her with working hard and sleeping little, but suggests she was beyond her depth. He notes that in a phone call with the president the night of the storm, Blanco asked for "everything you've got," but didn't specify what she needed. And he quotes Brown, who has since resigned from FEMA, as saying Blanco "reminded me of an aunt I have whom I love to pieces. But I would never trust this aunt to run a state or be a mayor. . . . I just see Blanco as this really nice woman who is just way beyond her level of ability."

But Brinkley's harshest critiques are saved for Nagin, whom he paints variously as fastidious, frightened, irresponsible, out of touch and, at times, unstable. Notably, the named sources for several unflattering anecdotes include two of Nagin's opponents in the April 22 mayoral primary, Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu and Audubon Nature Institute chief Ron Forman, as well as Forman's wife, Sally, who served as Nagin's communications director until her husband declared his intention to run for mayor.

Nagin, who declined to comment on the specifics of what he labeled "political satire," pointedly questioned the timing of Brinkley's article and book, less than three weeks before the May 20 runoff.

"He was not there so he does not know what he is talking about," Nagin said. "Any real credible historian would not publish a book in the middle of a re-election campaign. This is nothing more than a political hit that will (have) zero impact on me."

Landrieu, Nagin's opponent in the runoff, is quoted by Brinkley describing his efforts to find Nagin the day after the storm to ask him "why school buses and those belonging to
the Regional Transit Authority hadn't been activated to transport evacuees." Landrieu first encountered Sally Forman, according to the article, who said she was looking for Chief Administrative Officer Brenda Hatfield, who would know where the bus keys were.

"It would have seemed farcical if the circumstances hadn't been so dire," Brinkley writes.

The article says Landrieu eventually found Nagin on the 27th floor of the Hyatt hotel, which had become the emergency operations center and sleeping quarters for city administrators and where Brinkley says -- in one of the loaded phrases that pepper the article -- Nagin was "hunkered down" and "cloistered."

Landrieu tells Brinkley that Nagin was "sitting in a room, trying to pick up information from the TV and radio." After Landrieu asked Nagin if he needed anything, the article says, "Nagin stared straight ahead and answered, 'We're looking for a command-and-control structure.' "

Brinkley then summarizes: "To some observers, the naive politician was turning into a pathetic figure, the city's skipper who didn't know what a boom was."

In another anecdote, Brinkley mocks Nagin for spending a long time showering and grooming himself in the bathroom of Air Force One in an anecdote attributed to Ron Forman.

"A top priority for Nagin, in addition to the shower, was that his head be shaved properly, possibly for his photo op with President Bush," the article says. "But, like a teenager, Nagin just wouldn't get out of the bathroom. Aides rapped on the door, telling the mayor, 'You've got five minutes and then the president gets here.' They knocked again. But, still, Nagin dallied. . . . One agent kicked the door and told Nagin to get out; the president had arrived and didn't have time to waste on vanity."

In other glimpses of Nagin, Brinkley raises questions about the mayor's mental stability. Blanco, describing a profanity-laced tirade launched by Nagin aboard the president's plane, said the mayor was "falling apart" and told him to "get out of town" to get some sleep.

When Nagin eventually decamped to Dallas for a trip Brinkley says lasted five days, beginning Sept. 7, Blanco railed that he was gone too long. "In the heat of everything that was going on, he's screaming about no leadership and he's a total void."

(In the article, Nagin tells Brinkley he doesn't understand the governor's anger, noting that he waited to leave until the entire city had been evacuated.)

And after his famous rant on WWL radio the Thursday after the storm -- in which Nagin urged federal officials to "get off their asses and do something" -- he "broke down
"crying" and then "sequestered himself in a bathroom" for 20 minutes, in a tale Brinkley attributed to Sally Forman and City Councilwoman Jacquelyn Brechtel Clarkson.

Sally Forman disputed details of the account Tuesday evening, saying Clarkson was not in the room during the phone call, as Brinkley claims, and that Nagin did not retreat to a bathroom afterward.

"It's simply not true," she said. "That's not the way it happened."

Clarkson, however, says she was in the room, along with Sally Forman, several police officers and two other mayoral aides.

She said Nagin did retreat to the bathroom, though she does not recall him staying there for an extended period.

"I just thought he was very emotional, which I found understandable," she said.

While Brinkley is unrelenting in his disdain for Nagin's performance, he offers a couple of modest compliments amid the brickbats.

Among other things, he said Nagin's radio tirade "was a perfect reflection of the mood of the city on Thursday," though he suggests that the rant was disingenuous in places.

And Nagin's outburst aboard Air Force One, Brinkley asserts, may have been over the top, but the "theatrics paid off," resulting in a private conference between Blanco and Bush to sort the matter out.

Nagin isn't the only one who comes in for some minor praise. Brinkley credits Blanco's refusal to cede control of National Guard units to the president with changing the course of Bush's second term in office.

"Her effective, if clumsy, showdown with the president subtly changed the second term of George W. Bush, leaving him open to other attempts to curtail the sweeping power he had assumed for himself," Brinkley asserts.

While Nagin dismissed the article and the upcoming book as a political attack timed for the election, Brinkley noted that the publication deadline was set long before the date for city elections was established.

It remains to be seen whether other scholars will embrace Brinkley's history-in-a-hurry, or whether they will view it as simply a work of political analysis.

Early America historian Warren Billings, newly retired from the University of New Orleans and back from an evacuation to Virginia, said he considered writing about Katrina but "to this day I don't feel that I can write on any of that stuff. I'm just too close
to it. I don't have that distance. Professor Brinkley has a different view of all that. That's him."

Billings added: "He writes all over the place and fancies himself a commentator on contemporary issues. I would look at it as a first draft of history."