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The floods of '97: return of the 'Devil in Davenport'

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As of mid-April, hundreds of square miles of north central U.S. farm states are under water in the Missouri/Upper Mississippi river basins. While the immediate cause is a natural phenomenon—the coincidence of heavy snow pack, rapid melt-rate, and rains—the floods are not a "natural" disaster; the floods are a man-made disaster, caused by the last 30 years of "de-industrial" policy.

When the Great Flood of 1993 hit the Missouri/Upper Mississippi river basins (engineers called it a 500-year hydrological event), *EIR*'s *Feature,* headlined "The Devil in Davenport," commissioned by Lyndon LaRouche, focussed attention on the demented thinking processes of a nation that doesn't have the sense to prepare for natural disasters, even going so far as to substitute riverboat casino gambling and other tourist attraction gimmicks in place of its physical economy. This is the work of the Devil.

The reference is to Davenport, Iowa, the Mississippi River town, whose locals decided to approve riverboat gambling, as a cure-all to economic depression in the U.S. agricultural heartland; and also decided to *not* build levees, because it would spoil the riverfront view for gamblers and tourists.

Davenport was flooded in 1993; and now, again, in April 1997. In contrast, adjacent towns with levees remained safe and dry. (Davenport is one of the Quad Cities, along with Bettendorf, Iowa, and Moline and Rock Island, Illinois, that span the Mississippi River.)

The damage toll from this spring's "Flood of '97" in the upper Midwest will be huge. But, as the "Devil in Davenport" shows, it comes directly from policies associated with the last 30 years of U.S. economic decline, during the hallelujah days of post-industrial policies. The flood-blighted region lacks adequate infrastructure, its agricultural base is in crisis, and the measures taken in response—such as legalizing gambling—have taken things from bad to worse.

South Dakota shows national policy crisis

South Dakota has been given federal disaster status twice in the last four months, first because of severe blizzards, and now, because of the flooding. But the breakdown situation in the state epitomizes the disaster in national economic policy thinking. South Dakota is the most agriculture-dependent state in the nation. Recent years of international "free trade" (i.e., trade rigged to favor international cartels and conglomerates) have all but ruined the once-independent farmer base in the state. Ratios of rail track lengths, power supplies, and other infrastructure essentials have all *declined* per farm and per unit area in the state. Worse, planned water-control projects were cancelled. Ron Wieczorek, a South Dakota farmer and political activist with the FDR-PAC, whose advisory board includes Lyndon LaRouche, described the situation for *EIR* on April 17:

"In February this year, 21% fewer cattle were placed on feed than a year ago. There are 7,000 fewer milk cows in the state than a year ago. There are 32% fewer hogs in the state than two years ago. Current commodity prices paid to farmers are less than half of the parity they need to survive. With this kind of collapse in agriculture, there is no end in sight, because the only alternative sources of revenue in the state are gambling and tourism.

"The situation is that March sales tax collection dropped eight-tenths of 1%—this is the first time that sales tax collection has dropped since the major drought of 1975-76."

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What the Devil did in Davenport in the 1993 floods: Rather than fight for infrastructure to protect the agricultural heartland from natural disasters, cities like Davenport opted for riverboat gambling and scenic downtown waterfronts—and no flood levees, thank you.

Thus, South Dakota's state, local, and household finances are in crisis. State actions to provide several million dollars worth of giveaway loans and tax abatements (the state has no corporate income tax, and no law against usury) to entice companies such as Citibank's credit card division and IBP (the largest meat cartel company in the world) to locate their "business" in the state, are backfiring.

On April 14, a special legislative session was convened in the state capital, Pierre, to take up emergency measures for floods, finances, and the economy. Lawmakers were anxious to work fast, because South Dakota lacks the money to pay the $20,000 per day it costs to run a legislative session. Gov. Bill Janklow asked for a 2¢ increase in the gas tax; the Democrats gave him 3¢. Wieczorek released a statement calling for economy-building measures based on infrastructure projects, and LaRouche's proposal for a New Bretton Woods Conference to reconstruct a stable international monetary system. Whatever comes out of state initiatives, the South Dakota crisis poses the question of the urgent need for national, and international, policy changes.

Devil's spawn in California, Ohio

The other regions of the United States hard hit by floods in the last six months are suffering damage for the same reasons as the upper Midwest, even if they are not in as dramatically bad shape as South Dakota. California and the Ohio Valley states are examples.

In California, dozens of counties were hit by floods when, over December-January, warm temperatures brought a sudden snow-melt at the same time as heavy rains: The two combined as a huge runoff into the Sacramento and San Joaquin basins, and the Sacramento Delta. Infrastructure plans to deal with such exigencies had been drawn up in the 1950s, because this region is one among many in the world with high variability in rainfall patterns. Yet these plans for northern California were not completed.

For example, federal funding for the proposed Auburn Dam, part of the upper Sacramento system program, was cancelled by Congress in 1996, following other cancellations over the years. Worse, maintenance on many levees and some other completed improvements was not kept up. Levees dating back to before 1900 were neither upgraded nor replaced by reinforced retaining walls. Rationalizations combined budget constraints with "environmental" concerns. In fact, some earthen levees, considered wildlife habitats, had been weakened after becoming riddled with muskrat holes. They broke—the work of the Devil.

This year, the flooding in the Ohio River Basin states likewise hit the Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky communities hardest, wherever the post-industrial considerations had forestalled building or upgrading infrastructure.

National infrastructure program required

This brief review makes the point that what is required is a national program of emergency economic measures, to build the infrastructure that the nation requires—water

systems, rail, waterway and other transport, electrical power, etc.

In everyday thinking, some people associate building large-scale infrastructure with war mobilizations, such as the Alcan Highway, or the port of Mobile, Alabama, both "defense" projects. But the same degree of determination to win is required for economic development policy now. The infrastructure is needed both for its own sake, and because the effect of constructing it sparks lasting economic growth, unlike post-industrial "industries" such as casino gambling and other "entertainment." In the former, an estimated 3 million jobs would be directly involved, and another 3 million in supply-line industry and services.

A peacetime example of setting a deliberately high "horizon line" of economic benefits expected from an infrastructure-building policy, is that of the 1930s Tennessee Valley Authority. The power, water control, and agricultural landscaping that ensued from this river basin project provided for a long-distant future.

The centerpiece of such mobilizations—in war or in peace—is the machine-tool design sector, the R&D activity that comes up with the new machinery to build the new machinery, which is the marker of a successful economy.

From this development-based vantage point, the flooding in the Missouri and Upper Mississippi river basins tells us only one thing: Get on with the job.

In 1934, the first big dam on the Missouri, the Fort Peck Dam, was begun by the Works Progress Administration, the Depression-era agency that provided jobs-building public works.

In 1944, Congress authorized the Missouri River Basin Project, calling for a program to construct 137 dams, reservoirs, and other improvements on the Missouri and its tributaries—but these projects were never completed. The "Big Six" dams and reservoirs on the Missouri (Fort Peck, Garrison, Oahe, Big Bend, Fort Randall, Gavins Point), all earthen dams, were finished, and are being put to maximum use right now for outflow control, but the full basin projects—including more dams, levees, irrigation systems, pumps, and diversions—were never finished. There is likewise undone work on the channels of the Upper Mississippi Basin.

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy, attending the christening of South Dakota's Ohae Dam, declared that dams were more important to our national security than all the missile sites being built at that time throughout the Dakotas. Wieczorek points out that, back then, the state and federal governments' agreement was for the state to give up land for the reservoirs, and to receive, in exchange, the benefits of flood control. "This would have doubled the generating capacity of the river, provided irrigation for the entire eastern part of the state, as well as controlled flooding," he said. Instead, with the post-industrial shift, "the 12 water pumps were all pulled out, and everything that had been started [power, irrigation] was cancelled." Wieczorek added, "If locks were put on the originally planned five dams, this would create 13,000 jobs directly, and another 13,000 jobs indirectly in terms of suppliers of materials, and so forth.

"The Jim River, where recent flooding took place, was supposed to be channeled as part of this original project; and had that been done, there would not have been any flooding there at all."

The original engineering priorities for the Missouri and Upper Mississippi basins were based on certain hydrological features of this region. The weather pattern in these basins is what climatologists call "continental," i.e., it is the center of a land mass, where weather patterns are prone to be extreme, with high summer heat, and frigid winters. The same is true, for example, of Central Asia. Infrastructure to manage these extremes is essential to make such expanses fertile.

Moreover, in the last Ice Age, the retreating glaciers left poor drainage patterns in much of the region, so that, for example, the state of Minnesota earned the nickname, "Land O' Lakes."

What happened this year is that heavy snows, an early melt-rate, and rains all occurred when the ground was already saturated. This caused a huge flow of runoff in the Upper Mississippi and Missouri river systems. In Fargo, South Dakota, for example, there were 75 inches of snow this winter (22 inches are considered normal). Then, 70°F temperatures struck in late March. The floods soon followed.

The need for a national approach to infrastructure is underscored by the costliness, and craziness, of local, makeshift "flood protection." Well over 100,000 people were evacuated, at one point or another, in Minnesota and other states. Dozens of towns have put up temporary levees and dikes. Because of high melt-rates in Montana and Wyoming, some communities will have to maintain these until July.

The South Dakota government provided 700,000 bags for localities to fill with sand; and in March, the state ordered another 700,000, shipped in express from Japan. One thousand prison inmates were detailed by South Dakota Gov. Bill Janklow to work filling bags, centralized on prison farms at Sioux Falls and Huron.

Thousands of volunteers are needed for full-time tending of makeshift levees. "Sandbag U." is the name for a bagging depot, manned by North Dakota State University students. In Fargo, South Dakota, 180 students from North High School formed a three-team brigade to toss 25-pound sandbags to raise the dikes, one mile south of downtown. (Since 1989, Fargo built some additional improvements on the Red River, but far from enough.) Nevertheless, when the "500-year" flood level hit the Red River at Fargo, on April 18, some dikes gave way, and evacuations in parts of the downtown, and downriver at Grand Forks, got under way.

As of April 18, residents of Davenport, Iowa came out to man their five-foot-high, temporary sandbag dike, to protect what they could of downtown and their baseball stadium.