

Ugly doesn't change, even when you see it coming. Neither does stupid.

I'm talking about the decision by LSU to fire Ivor van Heerden, the head of the LSU Hurricane Center who earned world-wide renown for his work before and after Hurricane Katrina. This move had been rumored and threatened almost since van Heerden began his post-storm work, but it was no less repulsive for its inevitability.

As someone who covered that story, I always thought the state should be rewarding van Heerden, not chasing him away, because metro area residents -- indeed, citizens of any U.S. community currently relying on federal levees to keep them safe -- owe Van Heerden a huge debt.

Here's why.

In the days immediately after Katrina, the world thought New Orleans had been ravaged by a huge storm simply too large for the high-tech flood protection system built at great cost by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. And according to some members of Congress and many media commentators, that's just what we deserved for living here, below sea level.

In fact, that was the official story being put out by the corps.

But about a week after the storm, as van Heerden and engineers on his staff began inspecting the deadly breaches in that system, the story began to change. They were expecting to see evidence of over-topping, signs Katrina was just too big for the system, the very scenario the center had predicted the day before the storm came ashore.

What they found was something else: Signs of catastrophic engineering failures.

In other words, the floodwalls and levees failed not because they were too small, but because they had been either poorly designed, poorly built -- or both.

The world's media immediately gravitated to van Heerden not just because this was shocking news, but also because it came from a hurricane expert with a staff of geotechnical engineers qualified in the science of flood protection.

And he was the only person from this area even talking about the issue.

Incredibly, the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans -- the two political entities most grievously damaged by the disaster -- showed no inclination to launch their own investigations. They were content to leave the examination of the tragedy to the same outfit that built the system in the first place: the Corps of Engineers.

Thankfully, van Heerden wouldn't let this happen. He put together a group of engineers and scientists from LSU and the private sector and convinced the state attorney general and the Department of Transportation and Development to give "Team Louisiana" official status.

You'd think the university would take pride in one of its own leading such important work. Just the opposite happened.

From the start, van Heerden was pressured by LSU administrators to go easy. At one point he was issued a gag order. It seemed the more problems Team Louisiana uncovered, the more intense the sniping from Baton Rouge.

Some of that was due to classic campus politics: jealousies, rivalries and professional disputes. Some of it was self-inflicted; even van Heerden's admirers admitted he could be difficult to work with, due to an often uncompromising style and a penchant for going public with results before final drafts were approved.

But van Heerden's real danger to LSU was his threat to funding.

The federal government is the largest source of research funding for universities, and LSU was lining up tens of millions of dollars for coastal and wetlands work -- much of which might be partnered with the corps. Having one of its professors lobbing bombs at the feds made some at the university fear for the LSU pocketbook.

That's why members of Team Louisiana, as well as researchers from other universities, were warned to shut up or risk their careers. Fortunately for all of us they decided their ethics -- as professors, engineers and citizens -- compelled them to continue to work for the public good.

Anyone who thinks I'm overstating the case need only look at the Interagency Performance Review Task Force Report, the corps' official explanation of what happened during Katrina. After spending \$20 million over eight months, the first page of the report states it found "no evidence of government or contractor negligence or malfeasance."

Please.

How about ignoring information that the structures they were building were as much as two feet lower than claimed? Or skipping over alerts that its storm modeling was outdated? Or failing to inspect projects as required by law? Or a mandatory review process that was so sloppy, it missed obvious mistakes by subcontractors?

And how about this verdict: If the project has been built properly, some of the flooding would not have occurred, and much of the rest would have been reduced to the point of nuisance instead of disaster.

That's just the start of a very long list.

Team Louisiana pointed the way to early exposure of these mistakes and many more. Van Heerden was the only Louisiana official to speak on the record, and loudly. If he hadn't persisted, who knows what the corps would have failed to find out, or how much more dangerous our lives would be today.

Now, rather than build on that very significant accomplishment, LSU has decided to clean out those who made it happens.

That's ugly and stupid.

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Bob Marshall is a staff writer. He can be reached at rmarshall@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3539.