NO SENSE IN REBUILDING:

The plan to rebuild New Orleans in its present location is a powerful fiscal hurricane heading our way. It's even more dangerous than the fiscal sandstorm being spent to rebuild Iraq.

I understand the objective for rebuilding Iraq: to stabilize democracy in the volatile and oil-rich Middle East. I do not understand the objective for rebuilding a city in such an impossibly vulnerable location. The land is too low, the sea too high, the soils too soft, the river too high and the exposure to storms too extreme.

I propose that we take the best part of New Orleans -- its regional culture and people -- and graft them to a patch of similar, but more stable, ground farther upriver in Louisiana. I propose that we abandon the flooded city that sprawled accidentally on soils with the consistency of creamy peanut butter. Let's rename the place Bayous National Park and use it for a century or so until it's swallowed by the sea.

Every region of this great country has different needs at different times, and we're all in this together. I would mortgage my children's future if I thought the plan to rebuild New Orleans was justified and winnable. It is neither. By rebuilding in the same spot, we will weaken the fiscal heart of our nation to strengthen an exterior limb that has already gone too soft to save. Sometimes, amputation is the best answer.

The general public appreciates its geologists when they dig up dinosaur bones or discover commodities such as oil, gas, coal, metal and stone. But they often wish we would go away when we warn them about things they'd prefer not to think about, or are unable to comprehend.

"Home Sweet Home": This sentiment is first on the list of reasons to rebuild in place, especially for those with personal ties to the city. "We Shall Overcome": Humans are resilient; the urge to stay the course is inborn. "We Can Do It": Architectural engineering is a thrilling challenge, whether for space stations or urban hydraulic works. "The City that Survived": The travel-tourism industry needs New Orleans because it's a cultural gem.

The swirl of such emotions -- home, resilience, challenge and excitement -- makes New Orleans residents vulnerable to politicians who promise what they want to hear, rather than what they must hear.

Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and rock avalanches are relatively easy to comprehend because only one earth process is dominant and because the energy is released dramatically. More chronic and complicated hazards, such as the one facing New Orleans today, are much more difficult to comprehend. Resorting to analogy, the so-called war to save New Orleans is less a series of pitched battles against hurricanes than a protracted siege. Four natural armies are camped outside the dikes that wall in the city: the army of the sinking land, the army of the rising sea, the army of the retreating shoreline and the army of the rising river bed. Their patience is endless. Their victory is certain. It's only a matter of time.

Residents could escape when these four armies are sleeping between hurricanes, then rebuild (New) New Orleans in a place where its people can be defended with certainty. Moving the city to higher ground will cost as much or more than rebuilding it where it is. But at least this would be a one-time capital investment. Rebuilding the city after each hurricane disaster is worse than a bad investment. It's throwing more of our hard-earned dollars down the bottomless drain into the Gulf of Mexico.
My plea is simple. Don't let federal big-spenders borrow more than we are borrowing already. Don't let scientific illiteracy be exploited in the emotionally charged theater of politics.

I'm as outraged as many by the suffering of those who were left behind, and by the looters and shooters who manifest the worst our species has to offer. And I know the pain of having to move away from a personal heartland.

But my strongest feeling is dread -- for the next generation of schoolchildren who will learn about deltas, floods and bayous in underfunded schools because there was no money left in the treasury.