

FEB 14 1973

Mardi Gras Tension Disputed

Hotels Have No Room for Fear

By ALLAN KATZ

Is the aftermath of the shootout at the Howard Johnson's Downtown Motor Lodge in January a corrosive fear in this Mardi Gras city that new violence might break out during the Carnival season?

Many New Orleanians who think the answer to that question is an adamant "no" were surprised last week to discover that a nationally syndicated columnist thought the answer was a qualified "yes."

The possibility that a "corrosive fear" had invaded New Orleans in the wake of the Howard Johnson's tragedy was answered affirmatively by columnist Robert Novak in the Rowland Evans-Novak column carried here Feb. 7 by the States-Item and in newspapers throughout the nation.

NOVAK ALSO wondered whether

the sniping incident had not poisoned the commerce and race relations of New Orleans and affected the city's politics as well.

It may be worthy of note that the questions Novak pursued have been little studied in depth by news media here. Now, in the wake of the Novak column, there is concern in a variety of business circles that the column may have drawn conclusions not warranted by the facts and that the resulting miscalculations could have done damage to the city.

"I have a lot of respect for the integrity of Bob Novak but I think some of his conclusions were definitely wrong while he was on target with other conclusions," says Mayor Moon Landrieu.

THE PRIMARY question raised by Novak concerned the upcoming Mardi Gras celebration. He wrote, "White cit-

izens of New Orleans tell both themselves and visitors they fear the worst — a fear with clear racial overtones."

While it is true that some whites — and blacks — in New Orleans are fearful about what might happen this Carnival, and plan to stay away from night parades and remain indoors on Mardi Gras, there is legitimate question as to whether that represents a majority view or anything close to it.

It might also be noted that the hotels here are reporting a booming business in out-of-town reservations for Mardi Gras — an indication that those white citizens Novak found warning visitors of horrors to be visited upon the city during Carnival are not exactly turning away the flow of would-be visitors.

"I honestly can't remember a Mardi Gras when there were fewer rumors or less tension," says Mayor Landrieu. "Compared to the real fears that have been harbored in the past about the Hell's Angels when they were supposedly coming to New Orleans, the influx of hippies of a couple of years ago and various other rumors, this is a very calm Mardi Gras."

"We are doing the best business for Mardi Gras that we have done in the past four years," says Dan Mikulak, manager of the Fairmont-Roosevelt Hotel. "If there is any fear, it is certainly not being conveyed to us by the people who are planning to come here for Mardi Gras."

"The Jung Hotel tells us that they are down to the last few rooms," says Jimmie Fore, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Tourist and Convention Commission. "The Marriott has booked a convention in during Mardi Gras week, something that has occurred only rarely, if ever, in the past. This should be the best Mardi Gras in some years. I'm not aware of any corrosive fear afflicting the city, although I don't doubt that some people are fearful. But, I don't think that

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'No Room for Fear'

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is a majority view nor do I think any corrosive fears are warranted by the facts."

"IF THERE WAS this terrible fear in the city, I could think that it would impact our businesses," says Robert Sonfiedl, president of Maison Blanche.

"Yet, our Canal street store, the flagship store in our chain, has suffered no setback in sales, even in the month of January when the sniping occurred and downtown was closed for 24 hours.

"I think the fear and the fright lasted only a brief period of time before the city of New Orleans recovered its poise."

"Retail sales in the downtown area appear from preliminary reports to actually be up over 1972 for the month of January, hardly an indication of corrosive fear," says Andrew Flores, an analyst at the Chamber of Commerce.

"The white and Negro people of New Orleans haven't been frightened out of Mardi Gras in the past by the rumors about the Hell's Angels and the hippies; so I guess we won't get scared out of our boots this time," says Mrs. Sue Stevens, a secretary for a wholesale grocery firm here. "Each year that I can remember, it's been something — Negro gangs that were going to knock over whites or some other thing. But, I've never seen a bad incident, during Mardi Gras for all the talk. I won't stay home from Mardi Gras."

"I'm not going to tell you that there won't be any incidents at Mardi Gras," says Cecil Carter, director of the city's Human Relations commission. "Each year, there are scattered incidents.

What I mean is, it isn't remarkable if somebody some where in New Orleans gets punched in the mouth on Mardi Gras day.

"What I think may happen is that each incident that occurs will be viewed and studied carefully as though it were definitely an outgrowth of the Howard Johnson's tragedy when that simply will not necessarily be the case. Police statistics show Mardi Gras has grown more peaceful each year rather than more rowdy. There is no reason to expect this year to be different."

"I honestly believe there will be incidents that occur this year because of the sniping incident that would not have occurred had there been no gun battle at the Howard Johnson's," says William Rouselle, an official of the Free Southern Theatre here.

"I also believe that Mardi Gras is stretched out too long and that increases the danger of incidents. But, I don't think New Orleans is a city torn by racial fear or that the sniping incident destroyed the city's future."

The above views do not represent a majority opinion anymore than do Novak's broad generalization that "white citizens of New Orleans" expect the worst. But, they do indicate that there is no single view of what Mardi Gras '73 holds in store for the city and not anything close to everyone here — white or black — expects the Carnival to turn into a disaster.

Beyond arguing that a pervasive fear for violence at Mardi Gras gripped New Orleans, Novak offered some other observations about other phases of New Orleans' race relations, economy and politics that will be looked at in subsequent stories.