

# Did Sniper Aggravate

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A News Analysis

## Tensions? Many Say 'No'

By ALLAN KATZ

Did the shootout with a black sniper at the Downtown Howard Johnson Motor Lodge seriously aggravate racial tensions in New Orleans?

Nationally syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak concluded the answer to that question is "yes." But, there are a lot of New Orleanians who don't agree with that conclusion anymore than they agree with another statement in their column that claimed corrosive fear of violence at Mardi Gras now grips the city.

The column, written by Novak after a brief visit to New Orleans, appeared in The States-Item on Feb. 7. Because the column foresaw permanent and damaging effect to the city springing from the sniper tragedy, it has been the subject of wide comment by white and black New Orleanians.

**NOVAK WROTE,** "Racial tensions (in New Orleans) are clearly aggravated by the shootout."

Because Novak did not name any of his sources, it is not possible to say who he spoke to or what they might have told him that created his impression that New Orleans was on an "inevitable racial course which here, as elsewhere, transcends moments of terrible violence: the flight of

the white and future political power of the black."

While New Orleanians obviously are not claiming that the sniper incident was good for the city, many dispute Novak's conclusion that the shootout had a permanent and lasting negative effect on race relations in the city.

Mayor Moon Landrieu says, "I feel there were real tensions immediately after the incident. But, I also believe these were dissipated in a few days. In my opinion, that brief tension lasted mostly because of the various theories of conspiracy and the many rumors that went around."

**AS FOR THE** white flight to the suburbs that Novak saw as an inevitable outcome of the violence at the Howard Johnson's, Landrieu says "The fact is that all the latest studies, including the 1970 census, show that New Orleans is gaining population for the first time in many years.

"While the rate of growth is slow, it does suggest that the flight to the suburbs is slow-

ing rather than speeding up. It also reflects the opening of new areas of Eastern New Orleans and Algiers. In addition, while it is not a great flood, it is interesting to us to see increasing numbers of young couples choosing to stay in the city and re-do older homes.

"If there is to be a flight to the suburbs because of the sniper incident, it has not yet made itself apparent," says the mayor.

In general, there seems to be wide agreement with the mayor's view that the sharpest racial tensions were felt immediately after the sniper incident and have since receded. That is not to suggest that all tension has evaporated in this city, which, like any other urban center in America, has more than its fair share of crime in the streets.

AS CECIL CARTER, head of the city's Human Relations Committee, observes: "For the first few days after the sniper tragedy, white and black people seemed to be eyeing each other on the street, on the job, in the supermarket, on the bus, as if to say, 'Just where do you fit into this? Are you going to say or do anything that will threaten or aggravate me?'"

But, for reasons not entirely clear to anyone, perhaps having to do with the mix of ethnic groups that make up New Orleans, much of this seems to have been put aside today.

"While everything obviously is not perfect or great, people in general, at least as I observe them, seem to have set aside their initial fears and are going about their business in what might be called the New Orleans syndrome — that ability to put something bad, whether it be a hurricane or a shootout, behind us and go on to the next thing."

Similarly, Bill Stewart, an assistant at the human relations committee, says:

"NEW ORLEANS seems to be digesting the sniper incident as the city digests so many other things. The attitude is, 'Let's just cool things down and get back to business.' In fact, I think New Orleans — both white and black New Orleans — have largely done that."

Another view is offered by James Hayes, a member of the human relations commit-

tee and an active civic worker in the Treme area. He says, "New Orleans is going to fool itself about the sniper incident as we have fooled ourselves about so many other things.

"We are already saying that we have a good racial environment here and that the sniper was a fluke. Well, the truth, although we hate to admit it, is that we do not have a very good racial environment in New Orleans.

"Because black people are not up-tight and are not wearing Mark Essex buttons or the like, there is a tendency for white New Orleanians to say, 'See, our city hasn't any racial problems.'"

"THE TRUTH MORE likely is that the black community sees Mark Essex' act as a hopeless, suicidal gesture but that doesn't mean we think everything is great.

"So," concluded Hayes, "while I do agree that Novak was wrong in picturing a tension-gripped city, I don't think the fact that we are putting the sniper behind us is necessarily a good thing."

If a lot of New Orleanians think Novak may have been off-base in seeing pervasive racial tension as the legacy of the sniper, he appears to have been somewhat closer to the mark in two other areas.

Novak wrote, "Law enforcement officials here privately complain that responsible black leaders refuse to publicly and unequivocally condemn the slain sniper.

"FOR THEIR PART, black leaders fume over the delay of city officials to say once and for all that Essex was a loner without help. . . . That delay encourages white apprehensions that one or two black revolutionary triggermen are still at large."

While Landrieu says he sees no urgent need for black community leaders to say anything about the sniper, other whites did.

One black leader who can testify to that is state Rep. Louis Charbonnet III, who was an outspoken critic earlier of the proposed Felony Action Squad.

"Yes," says Charbonnet, "I did get a lot of calls asking if I had gotten laryngitis after the sniper incident.

"WELL, I DIDN'T make a

statement and I didn't talk about it in public until now.

But, what could I say? What white legislators were called upon to make a statement?

"Now, let me say that it was not the white people who I consider to be community leaders or highly responsible who called me to shout insults.

"I think it was those people who wanted to hear the black community of New Orleans apologize for Mark Essex. But, what did we have to apologize for?

"Here was a boy from Kansas who came here and vented his frustration in a suicide mission. What could I say about him? The black community in New Orleans did not invite him here nor did we send him up to that rooftop. Had he been white, I would not have called upon Mayor Landrieu to make an apology on behalf of the white community.

"AND, TO HIS credit, Mayor Landrieu did not ask me to make a statement about Essex on behalf of the black community."

The second matter, Novak's reference to black concern over the delay in issuing the police report on the sniper incident, is summed up by Hayes.

"Every day that (Police Supt. Clarence) Giarrusso delays in issuing the report, it adds to the conspiracy theory and more barroom stories are publicized as though they were fact. The entire question ought to be put to rest one way or another and the evidence that led to the conclusion — whatever it is — made public."

There is one more element of Novak's references to racial tension that has sparked wide comment and conjecture.

Novak wrote, "Admittedly, Essex is a heroic figure to jobless young blacks in New Orleans."

NOT EVERYONE agrees about that, either.

William Rousselle of the Free Southern Theatre says, "I have reason to know that it is true. I'm not saying that you could get 10 of them — or even one — to go up on the rooftop with a rifle. But, I am saying that the truth —

though some people don't want to hear it and others will imagine it as even worse that it is — is that Mark Essex is seen by some black people in the ghetto as a hero figure who tied up a city for two days and died fighting against hopeless odds. That ought to be a sobering thought."

But, Charbonnet doesn't agree with Novak or Rousselle.

Of Essex being seen as a hero figure, he says, "That's a lot of bull. Essex is seen by many of the people who I talk to as a sick kid who couldn't handle his frustration.

"I'm not going to tell you that there aren't some black kids who see Essex as a hero. There may well be. Some white kids have taken a few people as hero figures that blacks and many other whites don't see in that light at all.

"But to suggest that Essex has a widespread following who see him a towering hero is, at best, a completely unproven generalization."