

Former New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin sentenced to 10 years in prison

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Former mayor of New Orleans Ray Nagin, a Democrat, infamous for his callous conduct during and after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was sentenced to ten years in federal prison on Wednesday on 20 corruption counts.

The trial earlier this year established that Nagin leaned heavily on kickback schemes involving city contractors worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, operations that increased significantly in scope after Hurricane Katrina. Nagin solicited numerous vacations to Hawaii and Jamaica, from city technology vendor Mark St. Pierre, who according to the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* “essentially ran” the city’s technology office.

In addition, Nagin used his position to prop up Stone Age LLC, a company he owned with his two sons, soliciting hundreds of thousands of dollars and free granite from city contractors and business from the Home Depot in exchange for helping the company receive approval to open a new store.

The twenty charges together carry a maximum sentence of 257 years. However, federal sentencing guidelines recommend a sentence of 15-20 years. Judge Helen Berrigan justified the relatively low sentence of 10 years by referencing both his age and public perception resulting from the trial effectively guaranteeing that he will never be able to run for office again, in addition to the relatively small scale of Nagin’s graft when compared to recent cases such as Louisiana congressman William Jefferson, who ran a mafia-style operation from his office. In addition, she also rather ludicrously cited his relationship with his family, many of whom were also involved in the bribery operation, and mentioned in passing his supposed “genuine, if all too infrequent” desire to help the city.

In the days before the sentencing, last-ditch appeals were lodged by Nagin’s wife and three children to Judge Berrigan, portraying Nagin as a committed family man and honest public servant and the federal prosecutors as corrupt and vindictive. Nagin’s wife, Seletha Smith-Nagin, asked that Berrigan delay the sentencing in light of the online commenting scandal currently embroiling the US Attorney’s office in New Orleans. The revelations that high-ranking officials in the US Attorney’s office had been posting anonymously in the comments section of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* newspaper’s website resulted in several appeals being filed in cases prosecuted by former US Attorney Jim Letten, and the vacating of the convictions of five police officers involved in the notorious Danziger Bridge massacre during Hurricane Katrina (see: Federal judge overturns post-Katrina police killing verdict).

For hundreds of thousands of workers in the area, Nagin personified the unrestrained greed, cynicism, and outright criminality that contributed directly to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina and ended in the subsequent looting of public infrastructure by private corporations. Nagin won his first term as mayor in 2002 running as a “political outsider,” a high-ranking executive for Cox Communications and pro-business reformer endorsed by the New Orleans business community.

As Hurricane Katrina approached the Gulf Coast, Nagin waited until a day prior to landfall to order an evacuation, leaving tens of thousands of city residents stranded and with no means to leave the city. As residents struggled to survive, Nagin made the rounds on television talk shows to demonize them as looters, rapists and murderers.

In the 2006 election Nagin resorted to identity politics

to shore up his declining support, cynically and crudely declaring his intent to make New Orleans a “chocolate city” once again, referring to the demographic shift away from a black majority in the aftermath of Katrina. After winning re-election on a low turnout, Nagin set to work privatizing the city’s public infrastructure, gutting services, demolishing the city’s public housing projects, and converting almost all of the schools in the city into privately-run charter schools.

Nevertheless, he alienated his former supporters and allies by his sheer crudeness. Nagin’s attempts to market himself after leaving office, either as a private consultant or public speaker, quickly failed. His memoirs, which he had to publish himself, were treated as a laughingstock by the media. The expense of the trial forced him into bankruptcy, and the political establishment in the state is clearly glad to be rid of him.

Former mayor of New Orleans and CEO of the Urban League Marc Morial released a statement to the media declaring, “Justice has been served for the wrongdoing committed, and this matter can finally be put behind us.”



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