

# Don't Be Mad at the Mirror

Oct 18 2005

During the 1980s, Vladimir Posner explained the policies, actions, and culture of the Soviet Union to the American Public. He was the spokesperson for Russia and Americans loved him; he spoke flawless American English and was charming and funny. Nevertheless, he admitted in a recent interview, he failed to convince anyone that the actions and policies of the Soviet Union were sound or just. The reason for this, he explained, is that the actions of his country were neither sound nor just—and that people understand the difference between actions and words. No amount of talking—or propaganda—will obscure the reality of the intentions and actions of a community. In Russia they have a saying: Don't be mad at the mirror if you have an ugly face.

As a community, New Orleans takes a certain amount of pride in dancing the line between reality and illusion. Masking for carnival, our tacit complicity in political corruption, the myth of our racially harmonious gumbo: like a hustler in Jackson Square, each of these winks at the outsider and says, "Just trust us on this, don't look to close."

But now the stakes are higher than they have ever been. We can continue to wink. We can allow the same politicians to divert contracts to their friends. We can permit our business and political leaders to think small. We can reestablish the same factions and continue squabbling over the same crumbs.

Or, we can come together as a community and demand that the residents of New Orleans have a voice in setting priorities, in the strategic planning process, in budget priorities, and in managing the performance of our elected officials. We can establish and adhere to evidence-based quality standards for implementation, budget, and accountability to ensure that our input is translated into truly beneficial programs.

We have an historic opportunity to create communities that are vibrant, sustainable, and equitable. We can retool our economy to take advantage of emerging trends. We can be a leader in the creative application of sustainable building and energy efficient technologies. We can incorporate affordable housing and locally owned and managed businesses into our planning so that everyone benefits from the rebuilding of our communities. We can create a functioning public school system. We can ensure that the environment is clean and safe for our children.

If we are to make these dreams a reality, we will need help. We will need Federal, State, and private funding. We will need expertise from across the country and across the globe. And we won't get this if people believe that it is politics as usual in the Big Easy: questionable contracts, poverty-based economy, failing schools, corrupt law enforcement, a degenerating environment. Don't be mad at the mirror if you have an ugly face.

Let's change the reality. The rest will take care of itself.