

# An Organizing Principle

An Interview with The Honorable Mitch Landrieu, Founder, E Pluribus Unum

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Mitch Landrieu is a best-selling author, speaker, advisor, and the former Mayor of the City of New Orleans. In 2015, Landrieu was named "Public Official of the Year" by Governing, and in 2016 was voted "America's top turnaround mayor" in a survey of mayors compiled by Politico. He also received the prestigious John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award. In his New York Times best-selling book, In the Shadow of Statues: A White Southerner Confronts History, Landrieu recounts his personal journey confronting racism and tackles the broader history of slavery, race relations, and institutional inequalities that still plague America. Growing up in a politically active and socially conscious family, Landrieu's political roots run deep in Louisiana, where he served two terms as lieutenant governor and 16 years in the state legislature. He also served as president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Landrieu earned a BA in political science and theatre from The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. and a JD degree from Loyola University Law School in New Orleans.*



The Hon. Mitch Landrieu

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** *E Pluribus Unum (unumfund.org) firmly believes that we are better together than we are apart, and cities and towns will only thrive if they find a way to unite around common purpose with shared responsibility and opportunity. E Pluribus Unum brings people together across the American South around the issues of race, equity, economic opportunity and violence, proving the American motto that "out of many, one," and we are better for it.*

## What attracted you to public service and interested you in serving as Mayor of New Orleans?

My journey in public service and in life has been guided by my parents, Moon and Verna. My father Moon, of course, was a former mayor and HUD Secretary. My mother was very religious and also involved in politics along the way. They had very progressive views on race, especially for their time, and it was rooted in their deep and abiding faith. I would say my ethos in public service and for helping those less fortunate is rooted in my Catholic faith. One of my mentors, Father Harry Tompson, said to go where you can do the most good for the most people in the shortest amount of time, as well as to run to the fire and not be afraid to fail. He also educated me on the power of "we" and the awesomeness of "responsibility." I remember him

saying you have a responsibility, even if you don't want to do something, even if you're not at fault. New Orleans needed me most at the time and so I put my passion and effort into helping rebuild my hometown.

## How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

First, in order to lead effectively, you have to have the support of the people. Second, I would say that I have never accomplished anything on my own. I have built great teams to help execute on a shared vision. In a way, I see myself as a facilitator, leveraging my abilities to link public sector, private sector, not-for-profit, faith and community leaders and organizations all toward one goal. I also think there are some key governing rules in play especially in times of crisis, starting with a need for clear command, control and communication.

## How do you define resilience and how has resilience impacted your work?

Resilience is not just a "buzzword," it is crucial for our ability to sustain our way of life. Resilience is the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems within a city to survive, adapt and grow no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience. In our effort to rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, resilience became an important organizing principle.

## Leading a city, especially in 2020, means being on the front lines of responding to multiple crises and challenges. From your past experience leading New Orleans, how critical is resilience in facing these challenges?

First and foremost, disasters will continue to strike, and they will happen more frequently and more violently. For New Orleans, and many coastal cities, climate change in particular is a matter of life and death, but so are a lack of equity and opportunity for all. We must strike a balance between human needs and the environment that surrounds us while also combating the chronic stresses of violence, poverty, and inequality. They have to be looked at together rather than in silos. That is why resilience planning is so important – it calls out that we cannot do one without addressing the other. As we think about future challenges and opportunities beyond this pandemic, we must build back better. That's what resilience is all about. We have a responsibility to get it right and set our city, state and country on a more just and sustainable path for generations to come. We cannot afford to fail.

## What contribution can New Orleans make to build a more resilient world?

New Orleans has become a global leader in resilience thinking and action. Now, some 15 years after Hurricane Katrina and 10 years after the BP oil spill, we are stronger, more knowledgeable, and more innovative than ever before. We are much better positioned to build the future city, one that is responsive to our delta and coastal geography, locally forged and globally connected, and founded on the equity of opportunity and social mobility. While our challenges are many, our will and capacity to act have never been greater. New Orleans, because of the recovery from Hurricane Katrina and then the BP oil spill, has become this nation's most immediate laboratory for innovation and change.

## What advice do you offer young people about the need for resilience as they find their way forward during this uncertain time?

Resilience is ultimately a lens through which you can look at public policy and planning. The actions we take today will shape our future city for the coming generation or more. The sorts of questions we want to answer are critical for our young people to weigh in on: What sort of community will this be? How can we become more equitable, more adaptable, and more prosperous? How can we make our home communities more aligned with its natural environment? Just as Hurricane Katrina magnified the problems that already existed in New Orleans before the storm hit from high poverty to poorly maintained infrastructure, this current moment has highlighted racist systems and the inability to reckon with our country's history. Just as the last 15 years provided new opportunities for growth and change, this moment can also serve as a pivot for some of our deep-seated challenges with racism and racial inequities. It is the connection between our environment, opportunity and equity that our young people will really find relevant about "resilience."

## Do you feel it is critical to have collaboration and strong global alliances in order to build a more resilient world?

Creating new partnerships between all levels of government and the private and not-for-profit sectors is so important. There has to be shared responsibility between local, state and federal officials, the private sector, and individuals and communities.

More broadly, resilience thrives in partnerships. Success requires appropriate scale, execution and coordination. As a global community, we must have a resilience agenda which includes a robust government infrastructure, effective planning, and forward-looking public policy. ●