

## Hurricane Katrina: No Plan for the Poor

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New Orleans is a beautiful, genteel city with its infamous French Quarter, old mansions and cemeteries. It's excellent food, good jazz, rich history, and relaxed atmosphere has always been a very attractive draw to those who seek some good, old fashioned "Southern Hospitality". I had last visited New Orleans in 1992 when the city turned into a giant party for Mardi Gras. I was staying about 40 miles north of city and while driving into town; I was stunned by the poverty that surrounded this quaint and charming city. Houses with no doors or windows. Children inadequately clothed for the cooler weather conditions in February. It didn't seem possible that in a country as wealthy as the United States, such poverty could exist.

Since Hurricane Katrina hit, this city of 480,000 people is in ruins. After a week, 80% of the city is still flooded. The death toll is expected to rise into the thousands. People were living in deplorable conditions for days before rescuers could get to them. The high winds and damaging rains flattened the other cities in Katrina's path. Most areas are still without power. The newspapers, television and internet are filled with stories of dramatic rescues, bodies floating in the stagnant flood waters, massive looting, and people searching for loved ones. Eventually, the levees will be repaired and the water will be pumped out. It will probably be at least a few months before people can return. Then what? While people were dying, House of Representative speaker J. Dennis Hastert suggested that New Orleans should be leveled because of its geography. Four major hurricanes caused millions of dollars in damage to the neighboring state of Florida in 2004. There was never a suggestion that the state be leveled due to its geography but you must remember, our President's brother is the governor and the state is more economically and politically desirable.

So, what will be left for those who return? It could take up to 6 months for new construction to begin. The public infrastructure will need to be repaired, things like levees, bridges and highways. Many of the 200,000 homes in New Orleans, along with hundreds along the gulf coast are expected to require total rebuilding. Others might be salvageable but still need repairs. Unlike Florida, where there is a major housing boom, none of the major publicly traded home building firms has operations in Louisiana and Mississippi, and most home builders are smaller, locally based outfits. Damage to the Louisiana ports will compound the delays and shortages. Another big concern is the availability and cost of labor. Skilled workers are one of the housing industries biggest costs. The relentless pace of new home building—nearly 2 million starts each year—along with a surge of remodeling has drained labor pools around the country.

Although it may take up to a year, those who are fortunate enough to have flood or hurricane insurance will be able to recover some of their material losses. But what about the others? 27.9% of Louisiana's population lives in poverty, more than double the national average. Louisiana has a history of turning its back to the needs of its poorest of citizens. It became clear when the evacuation of New Orleans took place. Yes, the

evacuation notice came in time but only for those with a car to drive. The state never bothered to address the issue of the 100,000 people without cars, who were unable to leave no matter how badly they wanted to. These people were herded into the Superdome, forced to live in deplorable conditions for days before they were rescued. Others were sent to the convention center where they were virtually left to die.

In the face of such a tragedy, it is time for Americans to take close look at who we are and find ways to live up to the standards that our government wants to portray to the world. First, we need to look at our feelings toward racism. Rapper Kanye West, whose remarks were deleted during a telethon to raise money for the hurricane, said it best. "If you see a black family, it says they're looting. When you see a white family, it says they're looking for food." New Orleans is 67.3% black. Some say that this is not the time to discuss race because everyone's energy needs to be focused on saving lives but others believe that this IS the time to address this while the attention of the nation and the world is focused on this tragedy.

President Bush also needs to be a leader. . Four days had passed before the President had paid a visit to one of the deadliest disasters in American History. He flew over the area in a helicopter, hugged a few refugees, gave a press conference and left. He sent his father, Bush Senior, to visit the 15,000 evacuees living in the Houston Astro Dome. When the United States was receiving offers of aid from countries all over the world, President Bush said that he was not seeking foreign aid. "This country is going to rise up and take care of it." This prompted an angry editorial the next day from the Jamaican Newspaper the Gleaner "sometimes even the high and mighty need to realize that we all need each other and that they would not lose face were they to accept some tangible help from others who have been beneficiaries of their generosity in the past." Then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated, "We've turned down no offers." This is an opportunity for the United States joined the world again.

I close with an excerpt from an editorial I read in the Daily News, Sept 4, 2005, "Surely, as we look around our own communities and see the deterioration of our infrastructure, the failure to plan for the future and provide the basic services needed to ensure a high quality of life, we ought to take a hard look at the leadership we are getting from our officials. We ought also examine our own passivity, even as the politicians squabble about the secondary matters and divvy up the public wealth in ways that provide precious little public benefit...Let us open our hearts to help those who have lost so much because of Hurricane Katrina, and let us start paying attention to the issues close to our own homes. We must all work to make our communities healthier and safer."

Resources:

Roadblocks to Rebuilding by Annette Haddad, LA Times, Sept 4, 2005

Louisiana's poverty Politics by Emily Metzgar, LA Times, Sept 4 2005

Images of the Victims Spark A Racial Debate by Tomas Alex Tizon, LA Times, Sep 3, 2005

An American Tragedy, editorial Staff, Daily News, Sept 4, 2005.