



Photo by Jocelyn Augustino, FEMA

# KATRINA'S AMERICA: Failure, Racism, and Profiteering

BY MICHAEL I. NIMAN

IT'S PAINFULLY DIFFICULT FOR ME to wrap my mind around images of Americans lying dead by the score, their corpses being eaten by rats and dogs. As a brave new America trudges forward into the twenty-first century armed with a new set of national priorities, there's something acutely unnatural about this disaster. Because it didn't have to happen.

As we all saw, the New Orleans calamity was ultimately the result of benign neglect by federal and state governments. Up to five days passed and stranded, hungry, dehydrated New Orleans residents were still clinging to their rooftops exposed to the elements—and dying by the score. Those who made their way to the official evacuation points at the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center only found themselves waiting for days without sanitary facilities, sometimes without food, water, or medical care—still waiting for evacuation—or help of any kind. Some people needed dialysis. Some needed insulin. Some were just old and frail or newly born. Some of them died.

But the Bush administration took a perfectly horrible disaster and managed to make it worse. Remember all those stories of gang violence, murder, and

rape in the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center? The tales of sexually abused corpses being found in the restrooms? They were, but for one or two exceptions, completely fictional. The mental images of such mayhem, however, were compelling. In their wake, pundits called for a military occupation of New Orleans. And for the first time since the Civil War we all stood by dumbfounded as an entire American city was illegally put under military control—ostensibly to hold the cannibals at bay.

## PROPERTY OVER PEOPLE

Once the seed of fear was planted it spread like an out of control virus. Officials predictably gave the order to suspend life-saving search and rescue operations and instead focus on stopping “looting” and restoring “order.” When historians revisit the great flood of New Orleans this will be the great shame—the order to value property over human life—to value the property of the wealthy over the lives of the poor.

George W. Bush responded to a reporter's query by explaining that there would be “zero tolerance” for looting, even, according to Bush, if someone is “looting” food or water—this after flood victims were left

to fend for themselves for four days. Louisiana's Democratic governor, Kathleen Blanco, added a "shoot to kill" provision to Bush's "zero tolerance" proclamation, placing "restoring order" and protecting property as a priority over rescuing still-stranded victims. When National Guard troops from thirteen states finally made their way into New Orleans five days after the storm, the scene they created looked more like an occupation than a rescue. Many troops aggressively pointed their rifles at hungry black survivors who approached them seeking aid.

The National Guard wasn't there to help when people were clinging to roofs. But they were there, along with regular Army troops and mercenaries from the Blackwater Corporation, to point guns in the faces of New Orleans residents who just survived a week of

**Whites were quick to believe that the predominantly black city across the canal had descended into chaos.**

hell. There were reports of troops kicking in doors in New Orleans to evict survivors from their own homes. Such behavior is expected when the orders say, "Shoot to kill," and many of the shooters have just returned from grisly duty subduing Iraqi cities. As governor Blanco put it, "These troops are fresh back from Iraq, well trained, experienced,

battle-tested and under my orders to restore order in the streets." She went on to add, "They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill and they are more than willing to do so if necessary and I expect they will."

These mostly young and inexperienced troops, almost all of who lack the professional training required of urban police officers, were, put simply, scared shitless. Their training and their experience equipped them to secure hostile territory as invaders fighting an insurgency in war-torn Iraq. In New Orleans, they used war jargon, with one guardsman who returned from Iraq explaining to Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* that his mission was to "clear" buildings from "enemies" or "hostile people." New Orleans residents who refused to vacate their mostly undamaged houses reported troops raiding their homes during the middle of night, threatening them at gunpoint. It's the fear thing again, coupled with an unclear mission.

It's also illegal. The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878

forbids U.S. regular military personnel (who are now working along with National Guard) to engage in domestic law enforcement activities. They can fix bridges, rescue people, feed people, but not point weapons at citizens. There are a number of reasons for this, the most obvious of which is that electorates in democracies should control the military, not be controlled by it.

## THE GRETNA POSSE

Remember all those stories about armed gangs opening fire on rescue aircraft? Well, according to the FAA, these attacks were also myths. But there were armed gangs—the most notorious of which wore the uniform of the Gretna (Jefferson Parish) Sheriff's Department. The Gretna posse posted themselves on the Highway 90 bridge connecting their dry, unflooded community with New Orleans. There, for days, they opened fire, shooting over the heads of flood survivors trying to evacuate by foot out of New Orleans. According to paramedics, the good ol' Gretna boys even made at least one incursion across the bridge into New Orleans, attacking and disbursing flood evacuees awaiting evacuation in a makeshift camp on the median of the Ponchartrain Expressway—seizing their "looted" food and water.

I suppose the Gretna Sheriff's attack on evacuees could be written off simply as just one more episode in Louisiana's long racist history. But it seems more complicated than that. Police officers are trained professionals, supposedly capable of working under extreme pressure, and they are supposed to offer the first line of support when disaster strikes. No doubt there will be plenty of forensic sociology going on to see what made them snap—what turned the supposed good guys into some of the worst thugs this awful tragedy has sired.

## THE FEAR FACTOR

This is a story about fear. As individuals and as an organization they were shitting their pants with fear. They believed the hype. New Orleans had descended into chaos. And now the cannibal vampire zombies were marching over the bridge to decimate Jefferson Parish! According to witnesses, the Gretna Sheriff's Department turned people—old people, nursing home residents, children, and of course women and men—back into the desperate straights of New Orleans.

This fear is, of course, the bastard child of a

racist society. That's why whites were so quick to believe that the predominantly black city across the canal had descended into a violent self-destructive chaos. Ultimately the blame must lie with a media culture quick to play the race card and churn out unsubstantiated stories of mass mayhem in New Orleans' black neighborhoods.

As evacuees are finally settling in to the relative safety of their new digs they're coming forward with thousands of stories of selfless bravery, sacrifice, and countless communities pulling together to help each other and to save lives. I'm sure there were rapes, murders, and thefts as well. But that shouldn't have been the story of the day and it shouldn't have set the tempo for the ensuing media coverage that eclipsed the far more numerous and noble stories of heroism.

## IGNORING REALITY

Public relations professionals often advise clients that are clearly guilty of some wrongdoing to publicly admit to their guilt. The theory is that the public is more likely to forgive someone who admits to their obvious faults than to forgive someone who insists on compounding their wrongdoing with denials. Hence, on September 15, the world was treated to what may be the best performance of George W. Bush's political career. In the spirit of Richard Nixon's classic "Checkers" speech, we got Bush's "we could have done better" speech—an extraordinary piece of understatement.

The speech was a pure Karl Rove attack on reality. New Orleans residents, wealthy and poor alike, will have the right of return. And they'll have homes, schools, jobs, and hospitals when they get there. Endemic poverty, never an issue for this administration, will be addressed. Unemployed workers from the region will be rehired to rebuild the region. Bush even addressed the rationale for affirmative action, explaining that blacks have historically been locked out of economic opportunities in the Gulf region. Liberal stalwart Ted Kennedy couldn't have said it better.

The problem is that while Bush's performance was superb it was just that, a superb performance, with the emphasis on performance. Displaced New Orleaners listening to it told reporters that he spoke great words, but they were just words—the jury is out until there is action. And even then, what action could possibly make up for the depraved indifference to human life demonstrated by federal officials early on as this disaster unfolded?



The fifth day of waiting for help. Photo by Tony Allen-Mills

## SCREW THE VICTIMS

Furthermore, rather than act on Bush's rhetorical promises, his administration and his allies in Congress are moving ahead in business-as-usual fashion, continuing to screw hurricane survivors while covering up their own tracks. The day before Bush made his "we'll do everything possible" speech, Senate Republicans killed an attempt to establish a bipartisan commission to investigate the federal government's handling of the response to Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans levee breaks—this as hundreds of reports are emerging of federal officials preventing thousands of aid workers, boats, and truckloads of donated food and water to enter the region. The Senate's action came on the same day that Knight Ridder uncovered federal documents showing that it was Homeland Security Chief Michael Chertoff, and not FEMA Chief Michael Brown, who had the authority to dispatch immediate aid to the region. Brown, who was certainly inept, took the fall while Chertoff escaped responsibility—in effect living on to screw up the next disaster. And there will be no investigation.

Moreover, while Bush promised to hire unemployed

victims of Katrina to help in the rebuilding effort, his administration is using the disaster as a rationale to request that federal laws be waived that require contractors receiving federal funds to hire workers at prevailing regional wages—this supposedly to “expedite” reconstruction. *Democracy Now!* reports that one New Orleans hotel chain, owned by a major contributor to the Republican Party and slated to receive federal contracts to house emergency workers, already moved ahead and brought in Mexican citizens from Texas to work at sub par wages refurbishing their properties.

In the weeks leading up to Bush’s speech Americans opened their wallets and broke all previous records for charitable giving, anteing up hundreds of millions of dollars for hurricane relief. And the Bush administration joined suit, promising a \$60 billion down payment on what will be at least \$100 billion in federal funding for the disaster area. At the same time people were giving, various administration-connected firms were stepping up, like pigs at the feeding trough, putting their hands out to receive.

## DISASTER PROFITEERS

Foremost among those profiting from Katrina is the Halliburton Corporation, which received a no-bid contract for rebuilding military facilities damaged by the storm. Dick Cheney was Halliburton’s CEO until 2000, when he left that position to run for Vice President. He still receives nearly a quarter million dollars per year in deferred compensation from his former employer. Halliburton also received over \$9 billion

in federal contracts as a result of the Iraq invasion. A recent Pentagon audit questions over \$1.03 billion of those charges, documenting almost a half billion dollars worth of “unsupported” costs. Halliburton is a major donor to the Republican Party—recycling government war, and now disaster relief, funding into Republican campaigns. In es-

sence, the longer the Iraq war goes on and the greater the Gulf Coast damage, the more taxpayer money gets funneled to support Republican campaign ads.

Another early recipient of Katrina funding is the Shaw Group. Like Halliburton, the Shaw Group is represented in Washington by lobbyist Joe Allbaugh, who is Bush’s former campaign manager and his first FEMA chief. Allbaugh stepped down as FEMA chief to begin working for Halliburton when the U.S. invaded Iraq. If early contracts are any indication, then, we can expect lots of grubby Republican Party connected fingers helping themselves to relief funds.

At the state level, Louisiana contracted to pay the Kenyon subsidiary of Texas-based Service Corporation International (SCI) \$119,000 per day for removing corpses from the New Orleans area. SCI previously made headlines for dumping hundreds of bodies they were contracted to bury. The company paid out over \$100 million to settle lawsuits filed by the families of the deceased whose corpses SCI desecrated. Another lawsuit charges that three SCI-owned funeral homes contracted with an unregulated crematorium that stockpiled rotting bodies in sheds and outdoor piles instead of cremating them. The Louisiana contract puts Kenyon in charge of counting the dead.

A key problem here is that we’re not only putting one of the most corrupt federal administrations in history in charge of allotting \$60 billion in relief funding—they in turn will be allotting much of that money to two of the most corrupt statehouses in the nation. The Washington, D.C., based *Corporate Crime Reporter* compiled a study of state governments, looking at the rates at which officials were convicted of crimes. Their final report ranked Mississippi as the most corrupt state government and Louisiana as the third most corrupt in the nation. The real looting on the Gulf Coast has barely begun.

## FAITH BASED RIP-OFFS

Of course Bush, in his “confronting reality” speech, addressed the misappropriation of relief funds issue, promising, in essence, that the wolves can be trusted to watch over the henhouse. He explained that there will be federal oversight monitoring the distribution of taxpayers’ \$60 billion. He also spoke highly of “faith-based” relief initiatives. Given Bush’s penchant for head-on crashes with reality, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that one of the first Katrina rip-offs was a “faith-based” initiative aided and abetted by FEMA.



Immediately after Katrina struck, FEMA posted a list of charitable organizations on their website, highlighting three. One of the three highlighted organizations was Pat Robertson's Operation Blessing.

Operation Blessing was busted in 1994 after collecting money under the guise of supporting the airlift of Rwandan refugees. According to a report in the *Nation*, they used their planes to transport diamond-mining equipment for a company that Robertson owned personally in partnership with the military ruler of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko. The Virginia Office of Consumer Affairs concluded that Robertson "willfully induced contributions from the public through the use of misleading statements and other implications," using the nonprofit Operation Blessing as a front for his profit making ventures. Virginia's Republican Attorney General, Mark Earley, intervened and thwarted any criminal prosecution of Robertson, who, according to the *Nation*, in turn donated \$35,000 to Earley's reelection campaign. This made the never-charged Robertson Earley's largest contributor. Earley is now head of his own "faith-based" service agency, providing hurricane relief services in Louisiana.

Meanwhile, on Pat Robertson's *700 Club* television show, correspondent Gary Lane went on the air days after the hurricane and chastised the non-Christian religious beliefs held by some of the evacuees stuck in the Superdome.

## ETHNIC CLEANSING

As we've all seen, the vast majority of the victims who were put in death's path, not by a storm alone but by a host of government policies, were black. Their problems didn't begin with Hurricane Katrina. Prior to the storm New Orleans' black population had to struggle against hundreds of years of political and economic marginalization. Most recently, black New Orleans residents struggled to stay in their homes as their low-rent communities were threatened by gentrification.

Today the region's largest black city—also the base of power for the Louisiana's Democratic party—is in ruins. Most New Orleans residents didn't own their own homes and about 40 percent of those who did lacked adequate insurance. People who struggled to stay in their affordable New Orleans homes are now gone—shipped off to out-of-state "refugee centers." New Orleans will be rebuilt. But who will have a say in how that rebuilding will take place? It's doubtful that

the traditionally disenfranchised population will have much power in shaping the new New Orleans.

In sum, federal policies have allowed New Orleans' black community to drown. A new city will take shape in place of the culturally unique cradle of history the world learned to love. Middle-class homeowners will get insurance money to rebuild. Landlords will be compensated for their losses. The French Quarter will once again host tourists—probably as the jeweled center of a tacky-tacky sanitized Disneyesque sort of Las Vegas by the Bayou—a Cancun of the South. But will the black community that struggled since slavery days to survive in southern Louisiana ever be able to return to and reclaim the city and heritage this flood took from them? Will their historic culture of resistance to white supremacy continue to flourish? And if history proves the answer is no, what else can we call this other than "ethnic cleansing?" ■

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