Katrina's Unnatural Disaster: A Tragedy of Black Suffering and White Denial

Manning Marable

Unquestionably, the September 2005 Hurricane Katrina was the largest natural disaster in U.S. history. Yet contrary to the assertions of President George W. Bush that no one could have "anticipated the breach of [New Orleans's] levees" and the massive flooding and destruction of one of America's historic cities in the wake of a major hurricane, the catastrophe we have witnessed was widely predicted for decades. A 2002 special report of the New Orleans Times-Picayune, for example, warned, "Its only a matter of time before South Louisiana takes a direct hit from a major hurricane.... Levees, our best protection from flooding, may turn against us." The Times-Picayune predicted that such a disaster might "decimate the region" from flooding, and that in New Orleans, "100,000 will be left to face the fury." That same year, in a New York Times editorial opinion, Adam Cohen predicted coldly, "If the Big One hits, New Orleans could disappear." A direct major hurricane strike, Cohen estimated, would certainly force Lake Pontchartrain's waters "over levees and into the city.... There could be 100,000 deaths." Thousands "could be stranded on roofs, surrounded by a witches' brew of contaminated water."

A natural disaster for New Orleans was statistically inevitable. But what made the New Orleans tragedy an "unnatural disaster" was the federal government's gross incompetence and indifference in preparing the necessary measures to preserve the lives and property of hundreds of thousands of its citizens. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), established in 1979, has been plagued for years with financial mismanagement, administrative incompetence, and cronyism.

The litany of FEMA's bureaucratic blunders has been amply documented: its insistence that vital supplies of food, water, and medical aid were impossible to deliver to thousands of people stranded at New Orleans's downtown Morial Convention Center, though entertainers and reporters easily reached the site; its inability to rescue thousands of residents marooned on the roofs and in flooded
houses for days; the failure to seek deployment of active-duty troops in large numbers until three days after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast region. But the incompetence goes deeper than that. FEMA's Director Michael Brown actually instructed fire departments in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama not to send emergency vehicles or personnel into devastated areas unless local or state officials communicated specific requests for them—at a time when most towns and cities lacked working telephones, fax machines, and Internet access. Florida's proposal to send 500 airboats to assist rescue efforts was blocked by FEMA. Thousands of urgently needed generators, communications equipment, and trailers and freight cars of food went undelivered for weeks. Meanwhile, hundreds of dead bodies floated in New Orleans's streets and rotted in desolate houses. Millions of desperate Americans who attempted to phone FEMA's toll-free telephone number for assistance heard recorded messages that all lines were busy or were disconnected.

Even before Katrina struck, it was obvious that the overwhelming majority of New Orleans residents who would be trapped inside the city to face the deluge would be poor and working-class African Americans, who made up nearly 70 percent of the city's population. As the levees collapsed and the city's Ninth Ward flooded, tens of thousands of evacuees were herded into the Superdome and Convention Center, where they were forced to endure days without toilets and running water, food, electricity, and medical help. Hundreds of black evacuees seeking escape on a bridge across the Mississippi River were confronted and forcibly pushed back into the city. One paramedic who witnessed the incident stated: "I believe it was racism. It was callousness, it was cruelty."

As the media began to document this unprecedented tragedy, the vast majority of New Orleans's victims were "the faces at the bottom of America's well—the poor, black and disabled," as Monica Haynes and Erv Dyer, reporters for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, observed. "The indelible television images of mostly black people living in subhuman conditions for nearly a week have prompted some to ask whether race played a role in how quickly or how not-so-quickly federal and state agencies responded in Katrina's aftermath."

However, much of the media coverage cruelly manipulated racist stereotypes in its coverage. In one well-publicized example, the Associated Press released two photographs of New Orleans residents wading through chest-deep water, carrying food obtained from a grocery store. The whites were described as carrying "bread and soda from a local grocery store" that they found; the black man pictured was characterized as having "loot[ed] a grocery store." A London Financial Times reporter, on September 5, 2005, declared New Orleans had become "a city of rape" and "a war zone," with thousands subjected to "looting" and "arson." Administrators in Homeland Security and FEMA justified their lack of emergency aid by claiming that they had not anticipated that "people would loot gun stores . . . and shoot at police, rescue officials and helicopters.

The flood of racialized images of a terrorized, crime-engulfed city prompted hundreds of white ambulance drivers and emergency personnel to refuse to enter the New Orleans disaster zone. Television reports locally and nationally quickly proliferated false exposes about "babies in the Convention Center who got their throats cut" and "armed hordes" hijacking ambulances and trucks. Baton Rouge's Mayor Kip Holden imposed a strict curfew on its facility that held evacuees, warning of possible violence by "New Orleans thugs." That none of these sensationalized stories was true hardly mattered: As Matt Welch of the online edition of Reason magazine noted, the "deadly bigotry" of the media probably helped to "kill Katrina victims."

The terrible destruction of thousands of homes and businesses, and the relocation of over 1 million New Orleans and Gulf area residents, was perceived as a golden opportunity by corporate and conservative political elites who had long desired to "remake" the historic city. Even before the corpses of black victims had been cleared from New Orleans's flooded streets, corporations closely associated with George W. Bush's administration secured noncompetitive, multibillion-dollar reconstruction contracts. Brown and Root, a subsidiary of Halliburton, for example, was awarded the contract to reconstruct Louisiana and Mississippi naval bases. Bechtel was authorized to provide short-term housing for several hundred thousand displaced evacuees. Shaw, the Louisiana engineering corporation, received lucrative contracts for rebuilding throughout the area. Bush waived provisions of the Davis-Bacon Act, allowing corporations to hire workers below the minimum wage. After Congress authorized over 100 billion dollars for the region's reconstruction, Halliburton's stock price surged on Wall Street. Local corporate subcontractors and developers who directly profited from federal subsidies set into motion plans for what local African Americans feared could quickly become a gentrification removal of thousands of black households from devastated urban neighborhoods.

Behind the plans to "rebuild" New Orleans may be racially inspired objectives by Republicans to reduce the size of the city's all-black voting precincts.
About 60 percent of New Orleans’s electorate is African American, which normally turns out at 50 percent in local elections. All-white affluent neighborhoods have turnout rates exceeding 70 percent. In the 1994 mayoral race, only 6 percent of the city’s white voters supported the successful black candidate Marc Morial.14

The African American political analyst Earl Ofari Hutchinson speculated that “the loss of thousands of black votes” could easily “crack the thirty years of black, and Democratic dominance of City Hall in New Orleans.” The seat of the black Democrat William Jefferson, who represents the city in Congress, could be in jeopardy. Even more seriously, Hutchinson observed, the massive African American vote in New Orleans in 2000 and 2004 “enabled Democrats to bag many top state and local offices, but just narrowly. A shift of a few thousand votes could tip those offices back to Republicans.”15

Nationally, most African American leaders, public officials, and intellectuals were overwhelmed and outraged by the flood of racist stereotypes in the media and their government’s appalling inaction to rescue thousands of black and poor people. They observed that the most devastated sections of the city were nearly all black and mostly poor. Local blacks had been largely ignored in preparations for evacuating the city.16 Beverly Wright, the director of Xavier University’s Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, expressed the general sentiment of most African Americans by declaring: “I am very angry, and I really, really believe that [the crisis] is driven by race .... When you look at who is left behind, it is very disturbing to me.”17 Wright’s viewpoint was echoed by many black intellectuals. For example, Harvard’s Professor Lani Guinier observed that, in American society, “poor black people are the throw-away people. And we pathologize them in order to justify our disregard.”18 Some reporters assigned to the Katrina crisis soon began to reflect these mounting criticisms.

Desiree Cooper, a columnist for the Detroit Free Press, drew parallels between the economic devastation of New Orleans and Detroit, noting that “the poverty rate in both cities rivals that of Third World nations. So as I watched the hurricane coverage, with racism and poverty creating the perfect storm, I couldn’t help but think: If Detroit were underwater, no one would bother to rescue us either.”19

By mid-September, 2005, 60 percent of African Americans surveyed in a national poll believed that “the federal government’s delay in helping the victims in New Orleans was because the victims were black.” By contrast, only 12 percent of white Americans agreed.20 In response, the Bush administration unleashed its black apologists to deny any racial intent of its policies and actions. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice insisted, “Nobody, especially the President, would have left people unattended.”21 The black conservative ideologue John McWhorter, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, ridiculed the accusations of racism as “nasty, circular, [and] unprovable .... It’s not a matter of somebody in Washington deciding we don’t need to rush [to New Orleans] because they’re all poor jungle bunnies anyway.”22

African Americans were stunned and perplexed by white America’s general apathy and denial about the racial implications of the Katrina catastrophe. On a nationally televised fundraiser for the hurricane’s victims, the rap artist Kanye West sparked controversy by denouncing “the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well off as slow as possible.”23 Blacks were especially infuriated with the descriptions of poor black evacuees as “refugees” by officials and the media. Black Congresswoman Diane Watson protested vigorously, “‘Refugee’ calls up to mind people that come here from different lands and have to be taken care of. . . . These are American citizens.”24 But the racial stigmatization of New Orleans’s outcasts forced many African Americans to ponder whether their government and white institutions had become incapable of expressing true compassion for the suffering of their people. The prominent Princeton University professor Cornel West, at a Columbia University forum sponsored by the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, pondered whether “black suffering is required for the preservation of white America.”25

West’s provocative query ought to be explored seriously. The U.S. government and America’s entire political economy were constructed on a racial foundation. Blacks were excluded by race from civic participation and voting for several hundred years; they were segregated into residential ghettos, denied credit and capital by banks, and relegated to the worst jobs for generations. Over time, popular cultural and social attitudes about black subordination and white superiority were aggressively reinforced by the weight of discriminatory law and public policy. Psychologically, is the specter of black suffering and death in some manner reaffirming the traditional racial hierarchy, the practices of black exclusion and marginalization?

Even before Katrina’s racial debate had receded from the media, the ques-
tion of racial insensitivity was posed again by William Bennett, secretary of education under Ronald Reagan. In early October 2005, Bennett announced to his national radio audience: "I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose—you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down." Perhaps covering his racial gaffe, Bennett immediately added, "That would be an impossible, ridiculous and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down." The New York Times columnist Bob Herbert interpreted Bennett's remarks as the central aspect of the Republican Party's "bigotry, racially divisive tactics and outright anti-black policies. That someone who's been a stalwart of that outfit might muse publicly about the potential benefits of exterminating blacks is not surprising to me at all... Bill Bennett's twisted fantasies are a malignant outgrowth of our polarized past." Bennett's repugnant statements, combined with most white Americans' blind refusal to recognize a racial tragedy in New Orleans, illustrate how deeply rooted racial injustice remains in America.

Has the public spectacle of black suffering and anguish evolved into what might be defined as a "civic ritual," reconfirming the racial hierarchy, with blackness permanently relegated to a subordinate status? In the summer of 2005, the U.S. Senate seemed to confirm Cornel West's hypothesis, as it was forced to confront the civic ritual of lynching. Between 1882 and 1927, over 3,500 blacks were lynched in the United States, about 95 percent in the South. An unknown number of additional African Americans were killed, especially in rural and remote areas where we have few means to reconstruct these crimes.

In Marion, Indiana, on August 7, 1930, a massive white mob stormed the jail in the local county courthouse, seizing two incarcerated African American teenagers, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, who had been accused of raping a white woman and men armed with baseball bats, crowbars, and guns beat and then lynched the two black boys. A photograph of the Marian lynching that was reproduced in my book Freedom, co-written with Leith Mullings, depicts smiling young adults, a pregnant woman, teenage girls, and a middle-aged man pointing proudly to one of the dangling corpses.  

A third young African American, a sixteen-year-old shoeshine boy named James Cameron, was also seized and beaten by the mob that night. Several men lifted Cameron up, and a noose was slipped around his neck. Just at that moment, a local white man in the crowd pushed forward and declared that young Cameron was innocent. Years later, on June 13, 2005, speaking at a U.S. Senate new conference, ninety-one-year-old James Cameron recalled: "They took the rope off my neck, those hands that had been so rough and ready to kill or had already killed, they took the rope off my neck and they allowed me to start walking and stagger back to jail, which was just a half-block away." Cameron, the only known survivor of an attempted lynching, had come to the Capitol as part of an effort to obtain a formal apology from the Senate for its historic refusal to pass federal legislation outlawing lynching. For decades, Southern senators had filibustered legislative attempts to ratify anti-lynching legislation, denouncing such bills as an unnecessary interference with states' rights. Prompted by the emotional testimony of Cameron and the family members and descendants of lynching victims, the Senate finally issued an apology for lynching—the first time in U.S. history that Congress has acknowledged and expressed regret for historical crimes against African Americans—in a formal resolution. What was most significant, perhaps, was that only eighty-five of the one hundred U.S. senators had co-sponsored the resolution when it came up for a vote voice. The fifteen senators who did not initially co-sponsor the bill were Republicans. Belatedly, seven senators subsequently signed an oversize copy of the Senate's anti-lynching resolution, which was to be publicly displayed. The eight senators who still refused to concede an apology are Lamar Alexander (Republican of Tennessee), Thad Cochran (Republican of Mississippi), John Cornyn (Republican of Texas), Michael Enzi (Republican of Wyoming), Judd Gregg (Republican of New Hampshire), Trent Lott (Republican of Mississippi), John Sununu (Republican of New Hampshire), and Craig Thomas (Republican of Wyoming).

Why the steadfast refusal to acknowledge the forensic evidence and the obvious human pain and suffering inflicted on not only the victims of racist violence but on their descendants? Because in a racist society—by this I mean a society deeply stratified, with "whiteness" defined at the top and "blackness" occupying the bottom rungs—the obliteration of the black past is absolutely essential to the preservation of white hegemony, or domination. Since "race" itself is a fraudulent concept, devoid of scientific reality, "racism" can only be rationalized and justified through the suppression of black accounts or evidence that challenges society's understanding about itself and its own past. Racism is perpetuated and reinforced by the "historical logic of whiteness," which repeat-
edly presents whites as the primary (and frequently sole) actors in the important decisions that have influenced the course of human events. This kind of history deliberately excludes blacks and other racialized groups from having the capacity to become actors in shaping major social outcomes.

In this process of falsification, two elements are crucial: the suppression of evidence of black resistance, and the obscuring of any records of white crimes and exploitation committed against blacks as an oppressed group. In this manner, white Americans can more easily absolve themselves of the historical responsibility for the actions of their great-grandparents, grandparents, parents—and of themselves. Thus, the destructive consequences of modern structural racism that can be easily measured by social scientists within contemporary U.S. society today, as well as the human suffering we have witnessed in New Orleans, can be said to have absolutely nothing to do with "racism." Denial of responsibility for racism permits the racial chasm in America to grow wider with each passing year.

When the "unnatural disaster" of the New Orleans tragedy of race and class is examined in the context of American structural racism, the denial by many whites of the reality of black suffering becomes clear. It parallels the denial of the Turkish government of the massive genocide of the Armenian population committed by the Ottoman Empire in 1915-16. It mirrors the repulsive anti-Semitism of those who to this day deny the horrific reality of the Holocaust during World War II. Until the denial of suffering ceases, there is no possibility of constructing meaningful, corrective measures in addressing the racial chasm that continues to fracture the foundations of democratic life and a truly civil society in America.

Notes

opinion polls confirmed that most black Americans believed that racism was behind the federal government's inaction to aid Katrina's victims. A Pew Institute poll, for example, indicated that 66 percent of blacks surveyed "felt the government would have reacted faster if the stranded victims had been mainly white than black." See Alex Massie, "Racial Tensions Simmer as Blacks Bear Brunt of Slow Official Response," available online at http://news.scotsman.com/opinion.cfm?id=1920892005 (accessed December 13, 2005).


25. Ibid.


Bibliography


