

"KATRINA'S UNNATURAL DISASTER"

Part II of a Two-Part Series

Dr. Manning Marable
"Along the Color Line"

Racism has always been pervasive in the American media's representation of black people. Yet it took the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina to illustrate to the entire world how racial stereotyping can turn a natural disaster into an unnatural disaster of race and class.

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 exposés about “babies in the Convention Center who got their throats cut” and “armed hordes” high-jacking 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 were true hardly mattered: as Matt Welch of on-line Reason noted, the “deadly bigotry” of the media probably helped to “kill Katrina victims.”

The terrible destruction of thousands of homes and businesses, and relocation of over one 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 eagerly secured non-competitive, multi-billion 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 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. Their pain would be translated into billions of dollars in profits for others.

Behind these corporate plans to "rebuild" New Orleans may also 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 six percent of the city's white voters supported successful black candidate Marc Morial.

African-American political analyst Earl Ofari Hutchinson has 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 black Democrat William Jefferson, who represents the city in Congress, could now 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.”

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