Imagine a major hurricane hits New Orleans. Within hours the President of the United States is on Air Force One headed for the stricken city. Upon landing in the no-electricity darkness, with a flashlight held to his face, he announces, "This is the President of the United States and I'm here to help you!"¹

The year was 1965. The President, Lyndon Johnson.

Forty years later a more devastating hurricane strikes New Orleans. Neither the President nor any other federal official is there to help. The city would sustain lasting damage – and so would the President.

Unlike the revolution, Katrina was televised, and what viewers saw was a deluge of degradation and despair. Tens of thousands of people, mostly black, many elderly and infirm – pleading from rooftops, herded into and around the city's Convention Center and Superdome without food or water, left to rot in the hot sun along the interstate.

"I am a citizen of the United States" one woman repeated over and over, waiting with her bundles of possessions beside a freeway overpass.²

Clarice Butler, who worked for 28 years as a nurses' assistant, described being stranded on the interstate:

"They tried to kill us. When you keep people on top of the interstate for five days, with no food and water, that's killing people. ... Helicopters at night shining a light down on us. They know we was there. Policemen, the army, the whole nine yards, ambulance passing us up like we wasn't nothing. ... We was treated worse than an animal."³

She is right about that.

The Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, in keeping with the mission statement of the national organization, "Compassion and mercy for those who cannot
speak for themselves," evacuated all 263 of their New Orleans' shelter's dogs and cats. They were safely in Houston before New Orleans' Mayor, Ray Nagin, concerned about the impact of an evacuation on the city's hotel industry, would finally issue a mandatory evacuation order.\textsuperscript{4} By then, Sunday morning, it would be too late.

"Though more than 100,000 residents had no way to get out of the city on their own, New Orleans had no real evacuation plan, save to tell people to go the Superdome and wait for buses.\textsuperscript{5}

New Orleans was 63 percent black, half of whom lived below the poverty level. More than one in three black households – and nearly three in five poor black households – lacked a vehicle. Among white households, only 15 percent were without a car.

So thousands would be stranded, and they would be overwhelmingly black and poor. That was horrendous enough. Even worse was that it would take five days before meaningful help would arrive.

So from the outset Katrina was about race. We would expect the story of Katrina to be suffused with race. America, after all, unscrambled spells "I am race". That could well be the tagline for Katrina. That is certainly what Americans saw on their television sets. Some would say, with no apology to Clarence Thomas, that we witnessed a modern-day lynching.

In 1935, my parents were living in Louisiana when a neighbor's cousin, Jerome Wilson, was lynched. My father's writing about the lynching and the family was published 60 years later, with an introduction by historian Adam Fairclough. Fairclough writes that my father "stopped short of arguing that lynching was a deliberate effort to dispossess black landholders. ... He did show, however, that lynching could destroy the work of several generations in a single day."\textsuperscript{6}

The same, of course, could be said of Katrina. A case in point is New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. The Lower Ninth, one of the most heavily damaged areas of the city, was almost exclusively black. Although its poverty rate was higher than the city as a whole, so was its rate of home ownership. Almost 60 percent of the Lower Ninth's residents owned their own homes, compared with 47 percent in the city as a whole, partly as a result of homes being passed down through generations in this deeply rooted community.

Now, as it appears increasingly likely that the Lower Ninth Ward will not be rebuilt, it can be said that Katrina, like lynching, not only "destroy[ed] the work of generations in a single day," but is resulting in "a deliberate effort to dispossess black landholders."
Although I want to focus on New Orleans and the black/white paradigm, Katrina, of
course, was bigger in its geographic and racial and ethnic scope. Nearly 145,000 people of
Mexican origin in the Gulf Coast region were displaced by the storm, along with nearly 50,000
Vietnamese fishermen. So was part of the oldest Filipino community in North America, as well
as members of several American Indian tribes.

Overall, according to the Congressional Research Service, "the 700,000 people acutely
affected by Katrina were more likely than Americans overall to be poor; minority (most often
African-American); less likely to be connected to the workforce, and more likely to be
educationally disadvantaged."

New Orleans suffered the greatest physical damage to a major American City in history,
as Katrina flooded more than 80 percent of the city. The storm damaged or destroyed more than
200,000 housing units and caused damage in excess of $100 billion. The amount of insured
damage from Katrina exceeded $55 billion, more than Hurricane Andrew, the Northridge
earthquake, and the World Trade Center attack combined.

The latter damaged 16 square miles of Manhattan compared to the 90,000 square miles
lashed by Katrina. As of June, 2006, the debris removed post-Katrina was 15 times the volume
removed from the World Trade Center site.

As we examine the response to Katrina, we ought to bear in mind that the federal
government established the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund. It awarded an average of
$2 million, tax free, to families of every victim, including foreigners and illegal immigrants.

Nor did anyone seriously contemplate not rebuilding the World Trade
Center, even though it had been attacked twice.

Every major city that has been destroyed in modern times either by war or natural
disaster has been rebuilt, including San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake; Hiroshima,
Nagasaki and Dresden following World War II; Tangshan, China, destroyed by an earthquake in
1976; and the Congolese city of Goma, wiped out by lava four years ago.

We also should bear in mind that Katrina did not occur in a vacuum. The Gulf War was
not removed from the Gulf Coast. Katrina served to underscore how the war in Iraq has
weakened, rather than strengthened, our defenses, including our levees.

The problem isn't that we cannot prosecute a war in the Persian Gulf and protect our
citizens on the Gulf Coast at home. The problem is that we cannot do either one.
They used September 11th as an excuse to wage war in Iraq. They used the hurricane to wash away decent pay for workers and for minority- and women-owned businesses. They are turning the recovery over to the same no-bid corporate looters who are profiting from the disaster of Iraq.

They boasted that they wanted to make the government so small it would drown in a bathtub – and in New Orleans, it did.

This is the first lesson that emerges from Katrina – it teaches us the consequences of anti-government government, under which government's role in protecting its people is limited or destroyed and government is used exclusively to wage war and protect and defend corporate interests.

One of the other lessons, all of which are interconnected, is the highlighting of the racial and class divide in this country. Although New Orleans was unique in many ways – music, cuisine, culture – its race and class issues were the norm and not the exception.

And finally, Katrina resulted in a loss of moral authority for the United States, at home and abroad. Americans were not the only ones who watched Katrina's disaster unfold on television. The images were seen around the world. If we at home felt revulsion and shame, imagine what our enemies abroad thought – or even our friends. It is reminiscent of the role segregation played in international politics.

In 1946, Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote:

"The existence of discrimination against minority groups in this country has an adverse effect on our relations with other countries. ... Frequently we find it next to impossible to formulate a satisfactory answer to our critics in other countries."

The Truman Administration's brief in Brown v. Board of Education argued that school desegregation was in the national interest because of foreign policy concerns. The United States, the brief argued:

"is trying to prove to the people of the world, of every nationality, race and color, that a free democracy is the most civilized and most secure form of government yet devised by man.

Racial discrimination furnishes grist for the communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubts even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith."
As survivors floundered and bodies floated in New Orleans' streets, neither "civilized" nor "secure" described our democratic form of government. And, viewers, here and around the globe, wondered: where was that government in the time of these citizens' greatest need?

As Virginia Republican Congressman Thomas Davis III later described it – while the hurricane was bearing down on the Gulf Coast, "the president is still at his ranch, the vice-president is still fly fishing in Wyoming, the president's chief of staff is in Maine. In retrospect, don't you think it would have been better to pull together?" asked Davis. "They should have had better leadership. It is disengagement."8

Davis could have added that in the days immediately following Katrina's landfall, as New Orleans filled with water, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld attended a San Diego Padres baseball game. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was on the town in New York City, taking in a Broadway show, attending the U.S. Open, and shopping for shoes. And Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff went to Atlanta to attend a conference on Avian flu.

Their indifference could not have been born of ignorance. A 2001 FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) report ranked a major hurricane striking New Orleans as one of the three most likely potential disasters, after a terrorist attack on New York City and a San Francisco earthquake.

It reminds us of the August 6th, 2001 memo advising President Bush: "Bin Laden determined to strike in U. S."

On Sunday, August 28th, 2005, Katrina was upgraded to a Category 5 hurricane, the highest on the scale. The National Weather Service issued a special statement, warning that in the event of a Category 4 or 5 hit,

"Most of the area will be uninhabitable for weeks, perhaps longer. ... At least one half of well-constructed homes will have roof and wall failure. All gabled roofs will fail, leaving those homes severely damaged or destroyed. ... Power outages will last for weeks. ... Water shortages will make human suffering incredible by modern standards."

That afternoon, President Bush, from his Texas ranch, and Secretary Chertoff participated in a videoconference convened by Michael "Brownie" Brown, director of FEMA. They were briefed by Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center, who specifically warned that the levees could be "topped."
President Bush asked no questions of any of the assembled experts and made no attempt to ascertain the level of preparedness.

Katrina made landfall at 7 the next morning as a Category 4 hurricane. By 8 AM, Mayor Nagin was reporting on the "Today Show" that "there is already water coming over some of the levee systems." Bush, for his part, called Secretary Chertoff – to discuss immigration!

The President said: "I spoke to Mike Chertoff today – I knew people would want me to discuss this issue [immigration], so we got us an airplane on – a telephone on Air Force One, so I called him. I said, are you working with the governor? He said, 'You bet we are'."

The President was flying to Arizona, where he shared a birthday cake photo-op with Senator John McCain and visited a resort to promote the Medicare drug benefit. From there he flew to California, also to discuss the drug benefit.

Meanwhile, "Brownie" waited five hours after Katrina hit to ask Secretary Chertoff to dispatch 1,000 Homeland Security employees to the region. It would take two days for them to arrive.

It would be Wednesday before Bush, advised to end his six week vacation early, would return to Washington. He left Crawford and boarded Air Force One quicker during his 2004 vacation to save one woman on life support than he did in 2005 to save an entire region of the country and thousands of people in grave peril.

The President's first view of Katrina's devastation would be from the air, and the nation's view of him would be "of the president as aloof, out of touch, even befuddled."9

It wasn't just the President's disengagement, his lack of leadership. It was also the inappropriateness of his manner and his remarks.

On Wednesday, when Bush gave his first major address on Katrina, The New York Times said,

"Nothing about the President's demeanor ... which seemed casual to the point of carelessness – suggested that he understood the depth of the current crisis."

When Bush finally visited the Gulf Coast on Friday, September 2, the fifth day of the Katrina crisis, he bemoaned the fact that millionaire Mississippi Senator Trent Lott "lost his entire house" and said he was "looking forward to sitting on the porch" of Lott's "fantastic [new] house". In New Orleans, Bush joked about his partying and drinking days in the French Quarter.
The President comes by his insensitivity naturally. His mother, Barbara Bush, touring Houston's Astrodome, where thousands of Katrina evacuees were housed, remarked:

"... And so many of the people in the arena here ... were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them."

It was during his Friday tour that the President infamously told Michael Brown, "Brownie, you're doing a heckuva a job."

That prompted Calvin Trillin to write the following poem:

"A qualified guy, I wish I had added.
Your resume's super, even if padded.
We wanted the best to lead FEMA's forces,
And who would know more than a man who knows horses.
You saw that the storm was more than some showers,
And sent off a memo in four or five hours.
You found out that life in the Dome was not Super -
And only a day after Anderson Cooper.
A heckuva job! You know how to lead 'em.
We hope to award you the Medal of Freedom."10

In short, the Administration's response to Hurricane Katrina was a gumbo of inaction, insensitivity and incompetence. According to a Washington Post-ABC News poll conducted in March, 63 percent of Americans disapproved of Bush's handling of Katrina.11

Said presidential historian Robert Dallek:

"The sort of limited commitment that this president has to using federal power to ameliorate domestic problems registered powerfully in this Katrina episode. It triggered Bush's downturn."12

It was Edmund Burke who said, "The government which governs best is the government which governs least."

By that standard the Bush Administration has done a heckuva job on the domestic front.

Long before Katrina destroyed the Gulf Coast, the Bush Administration was destroying FEMA. Again, this was not done out of ignorance, but

"out of a deliberate determination to prove that the federal government simply should not be in the business of disaster management."13

As Joe Allbaugh, the former Texas campaign aide whom Bush picked as his first FEMA director, testified before a Senate subcommittee in May, 2001:
"Many are concerned that federal disaster assistance may have evolved into an oversized entitlement program and a disincentive to effective state and local risk management. ... Expectations of when the federal government should be involved and the degree of involvement may have ballooned beyond what is an appropriate level."\(^{14}\)

So Bush's appointees went about the business of privatizing disaster, causing scores of FEMA's staffers to leave in dismay. As one commentator observed, the Bush Administration's "hostility toward government all but guaranteed that the physical damage inflicted by a hurricane would be exacerbated by the human damage caused by incompetence."\(^{15}\)

In a revealing move for the government official charged with disaster management, Michael Brown, hours after Katrina hit, issued a press statement urging people to contribute to a list of 16 recommended private charities.

In the days immediately following Katrina and into the present, private groups did respond to people's needs. The NAACP, the Sierra Club, the AFL-CIO, Change to Win and others all got to work on housing, labor, voting and environmental issues. During spring break, the Common Ground Collective, founded after Katrina by Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther, brought 2900 volunteers from 220 colleges and eight countries to New Orleans. Another spring break effort brought more than a thousand students from historically black colleges into the community. Thousands upon thousands of private citizens across the country opened their homes and their hearts to the people of the Gulf Coast region.

But voluntarism is no substitute for government. The NAACP's history is almost a 100-year chronicle of self-help, but as Martin Luther King said:

"It is all right to tell a man to lift himself by his bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps."

The Bush Administration's anti-government approach was everywhere in evidence in Katrina's immediate aftermath. The day after the storm hit, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration suspended enforcement of job safety and health standards in the area. Although enforcement resumed in Mississippi in late June, it remains suspended in New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana.

From September 5\(^{th}\) to October 21\(^{st}\), 2005, the Department of Homeland Security suspended sanctions for employers under federal immigration law. This is part of the reason why
roughly 64 percent of construction workers in New Orleans are Latino, half of them undocumented. New Orleans' Latino population grew from 3 to more than 20 percent in the few months after Katrina.

Three days after suspending sanctions under immigration law, President Bush suspended provisions of the Davis-Bacon Act, allowing his contractor cronies to pay less than prevailing wage rates for construction workers. This time, pressure from labor unions forced Bush to reverse himself.

But he wasn't done. On September 9th, 2005, the Department of Labor suspended the requirement that federal contractors submit written affirmative action and non-discrimination plans. Again, under pressure, the suspension was lifted three months later.

The levees could not hold back the water, but the federal government has managed to hold back the aid. Despite four emergency spending bills passed by Congress totaling $110 billion, federal agencies had spent only $44 billion by Katrina's first anniversary. The Government Accountability Office reported in July "that disbursement of Small Business Administration recovery loans was marred by 'significant delays'." The Brookings Institution found that "FEMA provided the most cumbersome, reflexively slow response we've ever seen when it comes to disaster assistance."

A year after the storm, HUD had spent only $100 million of its authorized $17.1 billion.

Says the Minority Staff Director for the House Appropriations Committee, "They talk about 'commitments' and 'obligations' – they've invented new terms for not spending money."

The Administration's indifference led rapper Kanye West, days after the hurricane, to famously remark, on live television, "George Bush doesn't like black people."

His comment was not off-the-cuff. It was premeditated and preceded by the following:

"I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, 'They're looting.' You see a white family, it says, 'They're looking for food.' And you know it's been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black."

The specific media example to which West referred was a photo from Agence France-Presse and one from the Associated Press. The AFP caption described two whites "finding" food; the AP caption described a black man "looting" a grocery store. Just as "finders" became "looters", "evacuees" became "refugees" in the press. A bipartisan House Committee report
found media reports of gunshots fired at rescue helicopters, rapes and murder at the Superdome, and mass rioting in the streets to be unsubstantiated at best and outright false at worst. The New Orleans Times Picayune concluded:

"Few of the widely reported atrocities have been backed with evidence. The piles of bodies never materialized, and soldiers, police officers and rescue personnel on the front lines say that although anarchy reigned at times and people suffered unimaginable indignities, most of the worst crimes reported at the time never happened."19

So Kanye West's comments – including the observation that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" – were not ill-informed. Political scientist Michael Dawson and two colleagues surveyed blacks and whites as to whether West's remarks were unjustified. Only 9 percent of blacks answered "yes" compared to 56 percent of whites.20 This follows a pattern.

Dawson also asked whether the government's response would have been faster if the victims had been white. Eighty-four percent of blacks said "yes" while only 20 percent of whites agreed. Similarly, in a Newsweek poll, twice as many blacks as whites – 65 percent versus 31 percent – thought the government responded slowly because the victims were black.

When Dawson asked whether Katrina showed that racial inequality remains a major problem in the United States, 90 percent of blacks answered "yes" while only 38 percent of whites thought so.

These responses are consistent with a much larger black/white divide: "nearly four-fifths of blacks (78%) believe that blacks will either never or not in their lifetimes achieve racial equality in the United States. On the other hand, nearly two-thirds of whites (66%) believe that blacks have either achieved or will soon achieve racial equality."21

This, in turn, may partially explain why only a minority of whites – 42 percent – were sympathetic towards those stranded in the wake of Katrina.22

This "blame the victim" mentality suggests racial animus. It is closely connected to the ignorance that underlies the surprise expressed by many at the level of inequality on display in the Katrina crisis.

Gunnar Myrdal wrote about this white ignorance in An American Dilemma more than six decades ago:

"[T]o an extent this ignorance is not simply 'natural' but is part of the opportunistic escape reaction. ... [T]he ignorance about the Negro is not, it must
be stressed, just random lack of interest and knowledge. It is a tense and high-strung restriction and distortion of knowledge.\textsuperscript{23}

The struggle for equality has defined New Orleans and Louisiana as it has defined the rest of the South. Although its origins as a French colony and its cultural diversity have made Louisiana different from other Southern states, they share a racial history of slavery, segregation, and white supremacy.

A third of a million slaves – one-half of the state's population – undergirded Louisiana's antebellum economy. "Slave trading was a daily, bloody, highly visible public affair of New Orleans life."\textsuperscript{24}

By 1840 there were more than 23,000 slaves in New Orleans and almost as many free blacks. By Reconstruction, "more people in both the 'white' and the 'black' populations had ancestors in the other racial group than in any other U.S. city."\textsuperscript{25} Although free people of color had some legal rights that distinguished them from the enslaved, all blacks were subordinated, no matter their class status. In 1874, the New Orleans \textit{Bulletin} declared: "the white race rules the world – the white race rules America – and the white race will rule Louisiana – and the white race shall rule New Orleans."\textsuperscript{26}

Subordination often was maintained through violence. In 1874, in the middle of Canal Street, still today one of the city's main thoroughfares, 3,500 armed white supremacists attacked the newly-minted black-led government. In 1891 the white New Orleans City Council had a monument erected to commemorate the attack. The monument stands today.

In the modern civil rights era, New Orleans felt the glare of the national media during the school integration crisis of 1960. High school students rioted, whites boycotted, and Ruby Bridges attended school all alone.

Business leaders, concerned particularly about the tourist industry, began to play a more active role in overseeing racial change. "By 1962," says historian Adam Fairclough, "New Orleans no longer presented a face of die-hard racism."\textsuperscript{27} But Fairclough characterizes New Orleans' business elite as men "of small compromises rather than strategic vision. ... The concentration of old wealth made New Orleans one of the most conservative cities in the South."\textsuperscript{28}

The school integration crisis triggered lasting white flight. Between 1960 and 2000, New Orleans went from 37 percent to 67 percent black.
If the Katrina crisis played out against a racial history, it also had a more specific historical antecedent: the Mississippi flood of 1927, the greatest flood ever known. Minor among the horrors that blacks endured then was an incident near Mounds Landing, Mississippi. On the levee two armed white men stood with 200 black sharecroppers. When a steamer sent by the Red Cross stopped, the whites refused to let any blacks board.29

Fast forward to Katrina. A group of 200 mostly black evacuees was instructed by New Orleans police to walk across a bridge to Gretna, a majority white suburb. There they were met by warning gunshots from Gretna police, who refused them safe passage.

During the flood of 1927, the ruling class in New Orleans took the extraordinary step of dynamiting the levee 12 miles below Canal Street, inundating St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes. They did so needlessly as it turned out because the levees above New Orleans did not hold. But the New Orleans elite proved themselves willing to flood the country people to save the city.

It was this incident that was immortalized in Randy Newman's song, "Louisiana 1927," with its haunting refrain: "They're trying to wash us away, they're trying to wash us away." It was not unreasonable that as Katrina floods washed them away, blacks in New Orleans, particularly Lower Niners, wondered if the disaster was really "natural."

Life was not easy in the Big Easy for Lower Niners and other blacks before Katrina. Four in ten black families lived in poverty, the highest rate in the nation for blacks living in cities. The majority of these subsisted on incomes less than half the official poverty level.

In the region affected by Katrina, more than one million lived in poverty before the storm. Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama are, respectively, the first, second, and eighth poorest states in the union.

Poverty in the United States is not confined to the South, of course. Today, 37 million Americans live in poverty. They represent about 13 percent of the population – the highest percentage in the developed world. Their number has grown since 2001, with 5.4 million people having slipped below the poverty line during the Bush Administration.

And the gap has grown between the haves and the have-nots. The top 20 percent of earners take over half the national income, while the bottom 20 percent get just 3.4 percent. Black Americans, of course, are more likely to be among the bottom-earners than the top.
Almost a quarter of black Americans nationwide live below the poverty line as compared to only 8.6 percent of whites.

Media images during the Katrina coverage made it obvious that the dying and the suffering were predominantly black and poor. Though some wanted to engage in a "race or class" debate, even President Bush acknowledged that they are intertwined.

In his Jackson Square speech, Bush spoke of the "deep, persistent poverty" which exists in our country. "That poverty", the President said, "has its roots in a history of racial discrimination."

The truth is that race trumps class. As Michael Dyson has written, "[c]oncentrated poverty doesn't victimize poor whites in the same way it does poor blacks." That is why "[c]omparisons between poor whites and poor blacks in New Orleans ... clearly showed that poor whites were much better off overall." It is why "[t]he public school system served poor whites better than poor blacks; poor white children were less likely to attend schools in areas of concentrated poverty."

W.E.B. DuBois, one of the founders of the NAACP, was the first social theorist to link class to race. He understood then what we must understand now: "race never stands apart from economic realities."

In 1968, the Kerner Commission concluded that "white racism" was the single most important cause of continued racial inequality in income, housing, employment, education and life chances between blacks and whites.

But by the middle 1970s, the growing numbers of blacks pressing into traditionally white institutions created a backlash in the discourse about race.

Opinion leaders – both inside and outside government – began to reformulate the terms of the discussion. No longer was the Kerner Commission's finding acceptable. Instead, black behavior became the reason why blacks and whites live in separate worlds. Racism retreated and pathology advanced, and the burden of racial problem solving shifted from racism's perpetrators to its victims.

The failure of the lesser breeds to enjoy society's fruits became their fault alone. Thus pressure for additional, stronger civil rights laws became special pleading. America's most
privileged population – white men – suddenly became a victim class. Aggressive and insatiable blacks were responsible for America's demise.

The cause of racial inequality migrated from bigotry and discrimination to individual and group misbehavior, equating race with deficiency. We saw this over and over again in reactions to Katrina.

Writing about Katrina, syndicated columnist George Will, for example, bemoaned the attention paid to race. "America's always fast-flowing river of race-obsessing has overflowed its banks," he pontificated. He preferred to attack black mothers and their sons:

"... it is a safe surmise that more than 80% of African American births in inner-city New Orleans – as in some other inner cities – were to women without husbands. That translates into a large and constantly renewed cohort of lightly parented adolescent males, and that translates into chaos in neighborhoods and schools, come rain or come shine."

For Bill O'Reilly of the Fox News Channel the lesson of Katrina was this, "If you refuse to learn, it you refuse to work hard, if you become addicted, if you live a gangsta-life, you will be poor and powerless just like many of those in New Orleans."34

And Rush Limbaugh weighed in with the claim that a "welfare state mentality" prevented poor blacks in New Orleans from escaping their fate. "Race, in this circumstance," said Limbaugh, "is a poisonous weapon ..."35

In fact, race, in this circumstance and many others, is the crucial variable that proves that not all differences are equal.

Present day inequality and racial disparities are cumulative. They are the result of racial advantages compounded over time – and they "produce racialized patterns of accumulation and disaccumulation. As a result, racial inequality is imbedded into the fabric of post-civil rights movement American society."

Another front against racial justice was also opened in the mid-seventies and has gained strength and power ever since. Often led by scholars and academicians and funded by corporate America, this effort, part of the anti-government movement, aimed at removing government regulation from every aspect of life and found a handy, hated target in civil rights.

Today's apologists argue that discrimination against minorities is not a problem; society has to protect itself from discrimination against the majority instead.
They argue that America is color blind, despite reams of evidence to the contrary, including a recent national survey which reported that the majority of whites believe blacks and Hispanics prefer welfare to work, are lazier, more prone to violence, less intelligent and less patriotic.

It might have been proper yesterday, they maintain, to aim big guns at racism, at segregated jobs, schools and ballot boxes. The ills we face today, they say, are crime, teenage pregnancy, welfare dependency and family disintegration. These call, they claim, for new approaches and abandoning government's help.

But poverty's symptoms must not be confused with poverty's causes.

DuBois knew this more than one hundred years ago. In his landmark study that became The Philadelphia Negro, published in 1899, Dr. DuBois wrote:

"[M]en have a right to object to a race so poor and ignorant and inefficient as the mass of Negroes; but if their policy in the past is parent of much of this condition, and if today by shutting black boys and girls out of most avenues of decent employment they are increasing pauperism and vice, then they must hold themselves largely responsible for the deplorable results."36

 Sadly, what was true more than one hundred years ago is still true today. "The deplorable results" of government conduct and misconduct were on view for all to see in the wake of Katrina.

Progressives ought to use the lessons of Katrina to recapture the race issue from the political right, to return to a time when whites say, as President Johnson did in 1965, "[t]heir cause must be our cause, too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice."

As John Hope Franklin writes:

"All whites ... benefited from American slavery. All blacks had no rights they could claim as their own. All whites, including the vast majority who owned no slaves, were not only encouraged but authorized to exercise dominion over all slaves, thereby adding to the system of control."

... even poor whites benefited from the legal advantage they enjoyed over all blacks as well as from the psychological advantage of having a group beneath them."

"Most living Americans do have a connection with slavery. They have inherited the preferential advantage, if they are white, and the loathsome disadvantage, if they are black, and these positions are virtually as alive today as they were in the 19th Century."37
That is inherited white privilege – it is truly the gift that keeps on giving.

In the past, Americans came to agree on guaranteeing blacks' right to vote and to integrate public places; they disagree strongly today, however, on both the wisdom of and techniques required for extending equality beyond these public spheres, and many even dispute whether anti-black bias still persists.

Many Americans maintain – from corporate and government sponsored pulpits, newspaper op-ed pages and television and radio talk shows – that racial discrimination is an ancient artifact. Thus the '70s, '80s and '90s are now defined as a bias-free present where white supremacy has been vanquished, and black disadvantage is rooted in black misbehavior, where culture, not color, is at fault.

Acceptance of that argument allows the degradation of the national discourse on race, the substitution of victimizer for victim, the return of Social Darwinism to the American scene, the substitution of culture for physiognomy as the bigot's favored source of black inferiority.

How did we retreat from the War on Poverty and surrender to a war on the poor? How did we capitulate to an ideology that argues that poor people seek their condition and enjoy it, that they live in squalor by choice? That their neighborhoods waste away because their inhabitants are less than worthy human beings? And most pernicious, that government's efforts to assist the poor are less legitimate and less defensible than public assistance routinely given to corporations and the comfortable?

Indeed, what was a grim disaster for Gulf Coast residents created a golden opportunity for some corporations, a pork buffet for Cheney and Bush buddies. They have turned the recovery over to the same corporate looters who have benefited from the disaster in Iraq.

The Shaw Group, for example, a major player in the Iraqi reconstruction, received more than half a billion dollars' worth of Katrina-related contracts awarded by the Army Corps of Engineers and FEMA. The Shaw Group's lobbyist is now none other than Joe Allbaugh, former director of FEMA.

Kellogg, Brown & Root, the Halliburton subsidiary, was awarded $169 million to fix pumps and repair military basis.
"Most of these recovery contracts were awarded without adequate competition or oversight." The government already has identified more than $425 million in corporate fraud in Katrina-related contracts.

So we have a good idea of who is rebuilding New Orleans. The question is for whom? The same people who could not get out of New Orleans cannot get back. It is estimated that about 267,000 of its citizens have not returned, more than 80 percent of whom are black.

So post-Katrina New Orleans is whiter and wealthier. Nine months after the hurricane, the black population was down 42 percent while the median household income was up 9 percent.

Just as "black and other low-income communities of color are not accidental, but created by policy choices," so is the whitewashing of New Orleans.

This is a development long hoped for by many. Representative Richard H. Baker, a Republican from Baton Rouge, said immediately after the hurricane: "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it. But God did." The Baton Rouge Advocate editorialized:

"It is time to think rationally, not politically: New Orleans and Louisiana would be better off if the state does not rebuild Southern University in New Orleans. ... Its existence has always been more about racial politics than educational policy."

Southern, of course, is a historically black university. The editorial suggested that its students could "attend community colleges."

The view of New Orleans' white ruling class was stated bluntly by James Reiss:

"Those who want to see this city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, geographically, and politically. ... I'm not just speaking for myself here. The way we've been living is not going to happen again, or we're out."

Reiss is a wealthy shipbuilder – so wealthy that in the aftermath of Katrina he "helicoptered in an Israeli security company to guard his ... house and those of his neighbors." He is also a major player in Mayor Nagin's rebuilding plans.

Nagin, first elected mayor in 2002 with 85 percent of the white vote against a black opponent, ran on a "pointedly pro-business, Republican-sounding platform. He soon became the darling of ... the conservative business elite." Historian Doug Brinkley says:
"Always deferential to whites, Nagin broke with the civil rights tradition of the city's black leadership. At the same time, he worked hard to distance himself from the left-leaning legacies of such previous Democratic mayors as Sidney Barthelemy, Moon Landrieu, and Marc Morial."46

Nagin became known as Ray Ragin. Nagin supported Bush in 2002 and endorsed Kathleen Blanco's Republican opponent in her race for governor, beginning a feud which deeply affected state and local coordination during Katrina's crisis.

That Nagin was re-elected mayor post-Katrina against a white opponent is a testament to racial politics in America. The black majority which overwhelmingly voted for him may represent the last black majority in the city for the foreseeable future. The best estimate is that New Orleans is currently 44 percent white and 46 percent black.47

New Orleans' future is fraught with uncertainty, not least because of the prospect of another devastating flood. The Army Corps of Engineers, in a 6,000 page report issued after Katrina, admitted that it had built a hurricane protection system "in name only" and that it had done almost everything wrong. Even repaired, the levees now offer no more protection than they did before the storm.

While this creates uncertainty for everyone and all the citizens of New Orleans have suffered tremendous loss and are still dealing with adversity, those who were the most vulnerable before the storm face the greatest obstacles in trying to return and rebuild.

This would be the case even without policy and funding decisions designed to discourage them. But one in-depth study has concluded:

"The unfortunate truth is, in evaluating the ability of New Orleans' residents to return, ... under current policies and funding, few communities can be expected to recover. Most of those who have returned, or will be able to return or relocate to the New Orleans metropolitan region, will be white and relative well-off."48

Again, the Lower Ninth Ward is illustrative. Just as it was no accident that blacks lived there, it is also no accident that they cannot come back. The Lower Ninth Ward is actually not particularly low, but historically it was undesirable land. Originally home to poor blacks and immigrant laborers from Ireland, Germany, and Italy, it became almost exclusively black and poor as suburbanization policies and racial preferences enabled the Europeans to move.

More than 80 percent of the housing units in the Lower Ninth Ward sustained major damage during Katrina, but only 38 percent of them were insured. This compares with 80
percent of the homes in Lakeview, an upscale white neighborhood that also sustained severe
damage.

Lower Niners, like other poor people, are also kept from returning by their greater
dependence on public services compared to other residents of the city. Less likely to have access
to a car, blacks relied more heavily on public transit than any other group, including poor
whites. A year after Katrina, only slightly more than half of the city's public transit routes were
operational. Charity Hospital remained closed, as did the majority of public schools.

More than 90 percent of K through 12 students in the Lower Ninth Ward attended public
schools. By contrast, only 33 percent of Lakeview's students relied on public education.
Overall, pre-Katrina, more than 80 percent of K through 12 students across the city attended
public schools. Almost half (46 percent) of the white students made it back to the classroom for
the 2005-2006 school year, while only a little over one in ten (12 percent) of black students
returned.

Just as the Lower Ninth Ward was the only neighborhood in New Orleans to be cordoned
off by troops after Katrina, it is the only one that, a year after the storm, remained without full
gas, electricity, and water services.

While no one has suggested not rebuilding Lakeview which, like the Lower Ninth Ward,
was doomed by a levee break – the Lower Ninth is a prime target of city-shrinkers.

Beginning almost immediately after Katrina, fears have been raised that a largely white
elite, whose goal is to reshape the economic, racial, and political landscape of New Orleans, will
determine how the city is rebuilt.

Twelve days after Katrina hit, James Reiss, the helicopter-protected shipbuilder,
organized a meeting between Mayor Nagin and New Orleans' business leaders. The gathering,
which excluded most of the city's black elected officials, focused on rebuilding New Orleans
"with better services and fewer poor people."49

Fewer poor people, of course, would mean less black political power. In the days
immediately following Katrina, Ronald Utt of the Heritage Foundation observed, "The
Democrats' margin of victory" [in Louisiana] is "living in the Astrodome in Houston."50 Today
in New Orleans cars sport bumper sticks proclaiming: GO BACK TO HOUSTON.

Out of this initial meeting was born the Mayor's Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB)
Commission, charged with preparing a master plan to rebuild the city. In concert with the Urban
Land Institute, a think tank of corporate land developers, BNOB proposed forced mass buyouts of low-lying neighborhoods, including the Ninth Ward, for conversion into "green corridors" – "black people's neighborhoods into white people's parks", as one commentator characterized it.51

When federal funding failed to materialize, BNOB stopped meeting. Its plans for social engineering, however, clearly have not been abandoned.

Pre-Katrina, for example, New Orleans had the largest public housing and federally subsidized housing population in the United States. The Housing Authority of New Orleans, acting under HUD receivership, recently decided to demolish more than half of the city's public housing units.

The State of Louisiana, for its part, will not reverse the whitewashing of New Orleans. Although communities of color faced the most damage to rental properties, the State's Road Home Program provides no financial assistance to renters. Similarly, although all predominantly white communities in New Orleans had higher rates of homeowners' insurance than predominantly black communities, the Road Home Program provides less aid to rebuild to uninsured homeowners.

The Louisiana Recovery Authority, which controls the distribution of federal funds allocated for reconstruction, is dominated by big business. Of its 29 members appointed by Governor Blanco, not one is a grassroots black representative.

More than a year ago, on September 15, 2005, President Bush told the nation: "[W]e have a duty to confront [New Orleans'] poverty with bold action. ... We will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives."

The reality has not matched the rhetoric. Not only has the White House sat on its pledges, its allies in Congress offset Gulf relief with $40 billion worth of cuts in Medicaid, food stamps and student loans.

Early on, Treasury Secretary John Snow refused to guarantee New Orleans municipal bonds, forcing Mayor Nagin to lay off 3,000 city employers just when the city needed them the most. The Bush Administration blocked efforts to increase Medicaid coverage for Katrina evacuees and to give Louisiana a share of the income from its offshore oil and gas leases.
Meanwhile, the Small Business Administration redlined black neighborhoods in rejecting loan applications by local businesses and homeowners, while Bush officials sabotaged a Senate bill which would have given small businesses emergency bridge loans.

"As a result, the economic foundations of the city's African-American middle class (public sector jobs and small businesses) have been swept away by deliberate decisions made in the White House."52

As the city sinks and shrinks, the current battle of New Orleans will be won or lost on the strength of local grassroots organization and a national sense of urgency.

One year after the Great Flood of 1927, Huey Long launched his first campaign for governor of Louisiana. His platform was summarized in a speech under the Evangeline Oak in St. Martinsville, which was memorialized in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem:

"... It is here under this oak where Evangeline waited for her lover, Gabriel, who never came. This oak is an immortal spot, made so by Longfellow's poem, but Evangeline is not the only one who has waited here in disappointment. Where are the schools that you have waited for your children to have, that have never come? Where are the roads and the highways that you send your money to build, that are no nearer now than ever before? Where are the institutions to care for the sick and disabled? Evangeline wept bitter tears in her disappointment, but it lasted only through one lifetime. Your tears in this country, around this oak, have lasted for generations. Give me the chance to dry the eyes of those who still weep here."

"To dry the eyes of those who still weep" – that is the challenge we all must accept today.

Thank you.

[Note: Julian Bond is a Professor in the Department of History at the University of Virginia and has been Chairman of the NAACP since 1998.]

2 *The Nation*, at 17 (Jan. 2, 2006).


4 Brinkley, *id* at 34.


8 Brinkley, *id* at 627.


12 *id*.


14 *id*.

15 *id*.


17 *id*.

18 *id*.


21 *id* at 240.


Monthly Review, _id._, at 8.


_Baton Rouge Advocate_ (Oct. 17, 2005).


Brinkley at 21.

_Nossiter, id._

"The Race to Rebuild," _id._ at 8.

50 Id. at 18
51 Id. at 16.
52 Id. at 12., p. 394.
52 Baton Rouge Advocate (Oct. 17, 2005).
52 Id.
52 Brinkley at 21.
52 Id. at 21-22.
52 Nossiter, id.
52 "The Race to Rebuild," id. at 8.
52 Id. at 18
52 Id. at 16.
52 Id. at 12.