



Compounding Conservative Failure

Hurricane Katrina Two Years Later

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By Robert Gerson and Alex Carter



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“We will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives. And all who question the future of the Crescent City need to know there is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again.”

—President Bush, September 15, 2005 address in Jackson Square¹

When Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, the federal government failed its people. It failed to prepare and failed to rescue. Now it has failed to rebuild.

Behind all the failures is a failed promise. In the wreckage of New Orleans, President Bush seemed to discover the problem of poverty in America. He promised not just to rebuild New Orleans but to address the problems that underlay Hurricane Katrina’s ruins. But after two years, President Bush has failed miserably. The former residents of New Orleans are still scattered across the country. The basic infrastructure of a once-great American city—one of the cultural jewels of our nation—is still in shambles. Fraud, abuse and cronyism infect what little reconstruction has taken place, and the disparity between the haves and have-nots continues to increase not only in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, but across the country.

As we approach the second anniversary of Katrina’s landfall, Americans are asking what has been accomplished. And the answer is: not nearly enough.

I. THE PROMISE

In a prime-time speech from New Orleans’s Jackson Square, 17 days after the hurricane hit on August 29, President Bush made a bold statement about the conditions in New Orleans.

“All of us saw on television, there’s . . . some deep, persistent poverty in this region. That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action.”²

In that same speech, the victims were told not to worry, that this White House would take care of it all:

“Federal funds will cover the great majority of the costs of repairing public infrastructure in the disaster zone—from roads and bridges to schools and water systems. Our goal is to get the work done quickly.”³

Three days earlier, Michael Brown, the former horse-show administrator with the doctored resume who became the poster child for Republican cronyism, had resigned. White House political advisor

Karl Rove was assigned a new role as reconstruction czar. He brought with him a passel of conservative think-tank fellows, GOP lawmakers, and favored state officials to guide the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast and the relocation of the flood victims.⁴ Thus did Bush, by putting his most trusted counselor in charge of the project, take ownership of it.

How did Rove do? Disastrously. Two years later, Katrina has proven the signature failure of conservative governance of our time — proof positive that conservatives can't be trusted to run the government that they scorn.

II. THE FAILURE

Campaign for America's Future noted in its 2006 report, *Hurricane Katrina: Natural Disaster, Human Catastrophe*, that the natural destruction was horrific, but the human element—catastrophic incompetence on top of governmental nonfeasance—multiplied the natural disaster into a human and moral catastrophe. Our report on the one-year anniversary of the Gulf Coast's ravishing shed light on the pre-Katrina and post-Katrina incompetence of leaders on all levels.⁵ Now, the two-year anniversary has demonstrated once again that George Bush's government is still not equal to the task of restoring basic services.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana's poverty rate was the second worst in the nation, 19.4 percent, compared to the national rate of 13 percent. New Orleans was the epicenter of the despair—the epicenter for the televised images that resembled scenes from the Bible. The problem was not merely geographical. It was political—a result of the economic vulnerability and political disenfranchisement of the sixth poorest city in the nation. Census data indicates that more than one in four residents of New Orleans—28 percent—were living in poverty pre-Katrina. Of New Orleans' African-American community of 496,000, 33 percent were living in poverty.⁶

Two-years later, what has happened to better the plight of these African Americans? Practically nothing—as too much economic aid has made its way to contractors and developers instead of the people on the ground who need it most. The federal government immediately allocated \$27 billion in emergency supplemental funding, an amount that has since risen to over \$100 billion.⁷ But some of that money, for instance, has found its way to the builders of luxury condominiums near the University of Alabama football stadium—hundreds of miles inland.⁸

The Missing

In August of 2006, President Bush stated, “I know you love New Orleans and New Orleans needs you. She needs people coming home. She needs people; she needs those saints to come marching back. That's what she needs.”⁹

Two years later there has been minimal effort to repatriate pre-Katrina residents—and the repatriation has too often been sabotaged. “As a practical matter, these poor folks don't have the resources to go back to our city just like they didn't have the resources to get out of our city,” said Joseph Canizaro, a New Orleans developer.¹⁰ But the reconstruction is dominated by the very people, plans for upscale condominiums dancing in their heads, who have a vested interest in *keeping* the poor and the dark-skinned out of the city. A study by the *Greater New Orleans Fair*

Housing Action Center found black people encountered “less favorable treatment” than their white counterparts in 57.5 percent of housing acquisitions.¹¹

Even the best-intentioned programs to bring people back to New Orleans have failed. The state of Louisiana’s “Road Home” program was supposed to be “the largest single housing recovery program in U.S. history.” It has fallen far short, having closed the cases of only 42,000 out of 184,000 applicants, hampered by federal regulations and conflicts between agencies.¹² The population of New Orleans metropolitan area now stands at around 1 million people, 25 percent less than before the storm.¹³

Not surprisingly, the “recovered” New Orleans has a dramatically different makeup than the city that stood there before, according to Census Bureau population estimates. The biggest changes were in Orleans Parish, La., home to New Orleans. The share of white people in Orleans Parish grew from 27 percent in 2005 to 34 percent in 2006, while the share of black people dropped from about 68 percent to 59 percent.¹⁴ Before Hurricane Katrina, over 61,000 African-American students accounted for 93 percent of the city’s student body. As of February 2007, that number had declined to only 23,000 African-American students. The white student population declined by only 1,000 students.¹⁵

This may be intentional. HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson, stated that New Orleans “is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again.” Representative Richard H. Baker, R-La., proclaimed his distain for poor and minority residents of public housing by stating, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”¹⁶ As political scientist Tom Schaller has observed, New Orleans’ African-American population provided a pillar of Democratic support in a key Southern swing state. Reducing that population could help swing Louisiana in the other direction.¹⁷

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Rep. Richard H. Baker (R-La.)

Infrastructure still not in place

We can understand why many people cannot move back. The city’s infrastructure cannot support a large population. The federal government still has a long way to go to fulfill President Bush’s commitment of “an unprecedented response to an unprecedented crisis.”

Infrastructure reconstruction is lagging in all vital areas—schools and libraries, hospitals and childcare facilities, police department, sewer and water lines, affordable housing, and transportation. Without these public investments, private individuals cannot return and will not return.

Schools and Libraries

Even before Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans school system—serving an area where 38 percent of children lived in poverty in 2004, according to the Census Bureau—was troubled. Nearly three-quarters (73.5 percent) of the schools in the district had received an academic warning or were rated academically unacceptable in the 2003-2004 school year by the state. Thirty-five percent of the schools did not make adequate yearly progress in 2005 according to the terms of No Child Left Behind, and the school district faced an insurmountable \$25 to \$30 million deficit for 2005–2006.¹⁹

After the hurricane, matters grew appreciably worse. In the spring and summer of 2005, 61 percent of fourth graders and 64 percent of eighth graders passed Louisiana’s high stakes “LEAP” test. The following year, only 49 percent of fourth graders and 43 percent of eighth graders did so.²⁰

There are many reasons for this. One of the most preventable is lack of reconstruction of school facilities. Pre-Katrina New Orleans had 128 public schools. Now, New Orleans has 83. What’s more, the city once had 13 operational libraries. Now, there are only nine.²¹

Families won’t come back until there are schools for the children. This is an opportunity to rebuild and renew a troubled system. But the opportunity must be seized, and resources are scarce.

Hospitals and Child Care Facilities

With only 13 of the 23 pre-Katrina state-licensed hospitals providing acute care, psychiatric treatment, and long-term disability and rehabilitation, access to care is a constant problem.²²

Meanwhile, while the city works to rebuild its workforce and invites people to return, it still lacks one of the most valuable components of that effort, childcare facilities. Only 36 percent of the city’s 276 original childcare facilities are back in place.²³ This inability to reopen quality and much needed health and childcare facilities in New Orleans reinforces the challenges faced particularly by working families seeking to return to their homes.

Police Department

The police force in New Orleans continues to suffer, and its citizens suffer as a result. Since 2006, 5,100 suspects arrested were released due to the NOPD’s inability to gather witnesses or evidence to charge the suspects formally within 60 days of their arrest as required by statute.²⁴ The murder rate in New Orleans has increased since Hurricane Katrina and arrests are being made at a record rate, now averaging over 1,300 a week.²⁵ However, the infrastructure that supports evidence-gathering and examination and criminal proceedings has not been restored. The NOPD has only one fingerprint examiner and only one expert firearm examiner.²⁶ These integral examiners’ inability to collect evidence on suspects has contributed to New Orleans being rated the most dangerous city in America. The small size of the NOPD’s evidence examination staff is compounded by a lack of

facilities to hold and examine evidence—criminal evidence is kept in the back of an 18-wheel truck and the city’s crime lab just recently reopened.²⁷

Sewers and Water Lines

After Katrina hit, 80 percent of the city was left under water. The storm surge caused major damage to New Orleans’ sewer and water lines. Today, citizens continue to live in fear of polluted drinking water because of leaks and other threats to the integrity of the city’s 32,000-mile water and sewage network. Says Joe Becker, Deputy General Superintendent of Sewerage and Water Board, “At this point now, we’re out of options. We’re struggling to meet costs for chemicals, struggling to meet costs to pay employees. We’re putting off maintenance activities that are needed. It’s a matter of time before that lack of maintenance will result in failures, and we don’t have the equipment to back that up.”²⁸

At least 50 million gallons of water a day are now being lost to leaks, or 2½ times pre-Katrina levels, and officials estimate that rebuilding and improving the water, sewer and drainage systems will cost \$5.7 billion over 25 years—money the agency doesn’t have. FEMA has set aside about \$150 million so far and expects to commit tens of millions of dollars more—well under the billions needed to repair the system.²⁹

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Deputy General Superintendent of Sewerage and Water Board Joe Becker³⁰

Affordable Housing

With livable housing scarce, the prices for available units continue to climb, making the city unaffordable for many former residents. When Katrina struck, more than 5,000 families were living in New Orleans public housing. An additional 8,250 names were on the waiting list—a vast majority of them African American.³¹ In December 2006, the Department of Housing and Urban Development announced that they would demolish more than 4,500 remaining low-income housing units, even those that could be rehabilitated.³² More than half of the 77,000 low-income rental units destroyed by Katrina were for people earning less than 80 percent of the area median income—and hardly any of the rental units have been rebuilt.³³

As of late May there were still more than 30,000 families displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita spread across the country in apartments paid for by FEMA, or mobile home parks.³⁴ But rental aid was cut off at the end of 2006.³⁵ Then thousands had to be moved out of their trailers after the trailers were shown to be contaminated by formaldehyde, a known carcinogen. FEMA knew about the formaldehyde concerns for a year, *The Washington Post* reported, but was “slow to react.”³⁶

Later, it was discovered that some of the discarded contaminated FEMA trailers had been sold on the open market.³⁷ Ultimately, the local and federal governments have done almost nothing to make it possible for low-income renters to return home.

Public Transportation and Commercial Aviation

Public transportation is one of the most vital needs of a major metropolitan area—especially for its low-income residents. The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities estimated more half of the poor households in New Orleans— 54 percent — did not have an automobile in 2000. Among the elderly, the number was 65 percent.³⁸ Most Americans now know that this kept the poor from evacuating before the storm.. What many don't know is how lack of private transportation now hobbles the New Orleans poor more than ever, since New Orleans' former 368 operational buses covering 62 routes have been cut down to 69 buses on 31 routes.³⁹

Another roadblock to economic recovery is the decline in commercial aviation. In June of 2005, 438,607 domestic passengers and 2,833 international passengers traveled on flights in and out of Louis Armstrong Airport. This past June only 317,731 domestic passengers were served there—and there was not a single international flight.⁴⁰

III. THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF DEMOCRACY

With Karl Rove as recovery czar, no one should be surprised that one piece of his reconstruction plan for the majority African American, overwhelmingly Democratic New Orleans was the effective disenfranchisement of thousands of voters. The region's electoral capabilities were destroyed in the hurricane. The conservative 109th Congress and Bush's administration hampered the region's ability to hold elections by legislating against repairing voting machines and hampering the effort to provide satellite voting stations for the dispersed New Orleans population in several states.⁴¹

Dan Froomkin of the *Washington Post* laid out the motive: Rove's leadership role suggests quite strikingly that any and all White House decisions and pronouncements regarding the recovery from the storm are being made with their political consequences as the primary consideration. More specifically: With an eye toward increasing the likelihood of Republican political victories in the future, pursuing long-cherished conservative goals, and bolstering Bush's image.⁴²

The Rev. Jesse Jackson described the result: Louisiana and the Bush administration have refused to provide satellite voting places for those dispersed. They have refused to provide an absentee ballot to every displaced registered voter. They held an election with a secret voting roll in New Orleans."⁴³ Ironically, the Bush administration worked tirelessly to obtain satellite voting for the millions of Mexicans living in the United States to vote in the Mexican election and Iraqis living in the U.S. to vote in the Iraqi elections.⁴⁴ The administration may not be able to govern, but it does know how to count votes.

And although Karl Roves dreams of a permanent Republican majority have been shattered, in one respect he seems to have succeeded: With a third of New Orleans' residents still living elsewhere, the diaspora is poised to turn the South's one swing state red. "Along with Florida, Louisiana had been different, a state where multiracial coalitions propelled Clinton, Landrieu, and Blanco to victories," political scientist Tom Schaller has written. "The post-Katrina question is whether the

black population will remain large enough for Democrats to continue building such coalitions.... Now, without the tipping-point power of the New Orleans Parish black electorate, Louisiana may well become the new Mississippi, which has two Republican senators and a Republican governor and hasn't given its electoral votes to a Democrat since Jimmy Carter."⁴⁵

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Tom Schaller⁴⁶

IV. CONCLUSION

Katrina was a natural disaster. The failure of rescue, reconstruction and recovery is a conservative failure.

Conservatives tried to use the hurricane disaster to prove their theories and consolidate their power. They even bragged about it at the time. Jack Kemp called it a “golden opportunity” to force right-wing nostrums down the Gulf Coast’s throat.⁴⁷ Any policies that might have put money in the pockets of the working class were turned aside—in favor of ones that lined the pockets of the rich. Davis-Bacon, the law requiring federal construction projects to pay the locally prevailing wage, was suspended. Affirmative action rules were suspended, too—as Republicans worked on legislation that would limit victims’ right to sue, offer private school vouchers for displaced school children, lift environment restrictions on new refineries, and create tax-advantaged enterprise zones to maximize private-sector participation in recovery and reconstruction.⁴⁸ The same combination that crippled the reconstruction in Iraq – lack of planning, crony capitalism, no-bid contracts, scorn for public infrastructure – undermined reconstruction in New Orleans.

The conservative formula of cronyism, contempt for government, and incompetence added up. We’re still seeing the results today. The leading conservative ideologist and organizer Grover Norquist once fantasized, “My goal is to cut government in half in 25 years, to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub.”⁴⁹ They drowned a city instead.

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