

Recovery in Gulf Coast being politicized

By Ron Walters
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The country has just suffered the most damaging domestic event perhaps in its history and the response of many is the lame and ultimately politically loaded question: "How will we pay for it?" A look at the aftermath of the September 11, attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon reveals that the financial promises made by the Bush administration in the heat of patriotism, ultimately did not materialize. Immediately after the event, the administration and the Congress enacted a \$17.5 billion package and even then, some Republican attempted to block it.

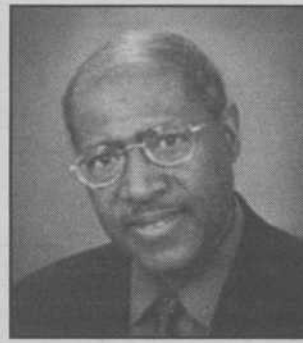
One month later, although New York Governor George Pataki and New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani asked for \$54 billion, after 20 months of wrangling, the administration produced \$8.5 billion more. Patriotism didn't help.

Funding for the Katrina hurricane damage may be somewhat different because, although New York City was not Bush's political base, the South is not only his home, but the White South is his political base. To be sure, Black people took the brunt of the damage in New Orleans, but along the wide expanse of the Gulf Coast, the damage to Whites more than matched the scope of the

Louisiana disaster. Bush knows that given the furious attitude of both Blacks and Whites about the slowness of the administration's response, parts of the South could be in play politically if he doesn't come through. And the mid-term elections in 2006 are too close for comfort.

What this should say to Black leaders is at least two things. First, don't listen to early promises about the extent of the federal response, even though Bush said that he would provide whatever it takes. Conservative Republicans in the Congress haven't said it. They are busy talking about "offsets" in the budget. That is to say, if they give up the \$80 billion requested for Katrina it has to be taken from somewhere else. So, they are prepared to fight the White House about priorities — and what a fight it will be, with Iraq, the highest oil prices in history, and tax cuts all on the table. So, Black leaders can't believe numbers like the \$200 billion total price tag that is being thrown around now.

The second thing is that both Democrats and Republicans are talking "accountability" for the funding that is provided, in a way that



RON WALTERS

they weren't when Bechtel and Haliburton were spending money like crazy in Iraq. In fact, they have already been given no-bid contracts for construction associated with Katrina, skewing the funds and control of the funds away from Black leaders. The inference here is that Blacks, like New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and his people, will not

get control of the really big money involved. Even the Democratic governor will have problems controlling these funds since Republicans in the Louisiana state legislature have the leverage.

Already, there is a feud between Nagin and Admiral Thad Allen, representing the Bush administration, over when and how people can come back to the City of New Orleans. That issue is not just a mild difference of opinion; it is a question of who will control the situation, the reason why Nagin called Allen, "the new crowned federal mayor of New Orleans."

Given that, Blacks — and the people priorities they represent — will likely be cut out of the action, if they don't kick up a real fuss. They should use the opening provided by the

Katrina disaster to heighten the Achilles heel of this catastrophe — the failure of conservatives to deal with the issue of poverty and their shredding of the social and economic safety net over the past two decades.

When the lights of the media showed the Blacks that were tossed, neglected and dispersed by the criminal lack of a response to the hurricane, what came to life was not just their poverty status, but behind them, the failure, deliberate in some sense, to deal with these problems historically. Conservatives have been successful at pushing the complex issues that result in human poverty off of the agenda and out of sight. I say that the failure was deliberate because much of the social policy of the immediate past was designed to punish poor people and to justify it by blaming them for their own plight.

Now that the door of history has been blown open, in a way that few events could have done, it is time for Black leaders, at every level, to lead, to take the floor and tell the story to all Americans of the policy failures that have sustained poverty, homelessness, unemployment, ill-health and other social problems, in states all over the country, not just in Louisiana.

Ron Walters is the director of the African-American Leadership Institute.

CBC

(Continued from Page 1)
age of the Democratic Party," Belafonte said. "We must look through the ravages of the Democratic Party and see if there's anything worth salvaging."

Belafonte continued, "I would hope that while the Black Caucus celebrates this moment, where we have all these wonderful Black leaders and our White progressive associates, that we would get off the rhetoric, get off the redundancy, and dig deep into this country and let George W. Bush, let the Christian right, let a whole bunch of folks that are running away with this nation know that their legs have just been amputated."

He noted that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign was set back with his 1968 assassination in Memphis. Belafonte, a veteran financier of the civil rights movement,

said King, activists Fannie Lou Hamer, Frederick Douglass and A. Philip Randolph were the real advocates for the poor and that poverty has still not been seriously addressed by either political party.

In 1974, the percentage of Black families living below the poverty level was about 32 percent; for White families, it was 8 percent, according to the U. S. Census Bureau.

Currently, the percentage of Black families living below the poverty line has dropped to about 27 percent, while the percentage of White families in poverty has remained virtually unchanged.

The poverty line is defined as \$9,573 or less for an individual or \$18,660 for a family of four with two children.

With approximately half of the Blacks in New Orleans

living below the poverty level, it was mostly poor African-Americans who could not make it out of the flood because many had no transportation.

"We've had the capacity to eradicate poverty, but we've never used it," said Congresswoman Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-Texas), a conference co-chair. "Why did we hold ourselves from eradicating poverty when we had the capacity? Why did we wait so long?"

Open-ended questions such as Jackson-Lee's begged for answers that were rare during the town hall meeting. Lively with questions and debate, the meeting presented few answers except the need for voters to support or oppose legislation, make demands and hold public officials accountable.

"A powerless people are a hopeless people," said Jackson-Lee. "I hope that at

this meeting we are provoked and incensed. Nothing will happen in Washington unless you make us do it."

Bush is already feeling the pressure. His approval rating plummeted from 90 percent after the terrorist attacks in Sept. 2001 to 45 percent before Katrina to 40 percent after the botched Katrina rescues, according to a USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll.

Even so, Democrats admit the tragedy goes far deeper than one man. It exposes an American culture, says Rep. Danny K. Davis (D-Ill), who co-chaired the conference.

"Colonization, slavery, racism, prejudice, notions of superiority and inferiority, a strong desire for oppressors to stay on top of the oppressed, and a strong desire of those who have to keep what they have — even if it means to pimp off of others, and to the extent that those who are pimped allowed it to

happen," Davis said to the applause of the overflow crowd packed into the ballroom of the Washington, D.C. Convention Center.

The serious tone of the town hall event was indicative of discussions across America as many homes are now overflowing with guests — some strangers and some extended family members — left homeless by the New Orleans and Mississippi floods.

"It awakened people to the fact that it could happen to them if it could happen to people who looked like us and if it happened to people that we know," said Actress Alfre Woodard. "Hopefully, more people will step up...with a consciousness long after we've cleaned up the damaged areas."

Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill) agrees.

"Some are to blame, but all are responsible," he said.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with holding people accountable when they mess up. But even when we hold those accountable, we are all complicit in the long-time poverty that continues in our society."

Accountability won't happen if legislators don't do their part in discovering whether race or poverty played a part in the botched rescue, said Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.).

"I don't have enough information to say what went wrong or how we could have done better, but we must renew confidence in our government," said Clinton, who had proposed a special commission to investigate the tragedy.

Harvard Law School Professor Charles Ogletree, the moderator of the town hall discussion said, "I have fears that we will soon forget and become complacent."

Fletcher

(Continued from Page 11)
wrong side of history. The time has come for African-Americans to lead people of conscience in building a Katrina movement. This movement must support the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast not in the image of the Bush administration, but drawing from the imagination of the survivors themselves. They — the survivors — must be involved in every phase of the reconstruction, and this means, among other things, that the federal government needs to create a jobs program for rebuilding.

The extent of the disaster must be matched by the breath of a progressive response.

Bill Fletcher Jr. is president of TransAfrica Forum, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit educational and organizing center.

Gays

(Continued from Page 5)

sweep under the rug. That's why we're here," Cooper said.

Quinton Harper, a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student and L.I.F.E. AIDS representative, explained why some issues are hushed in the young Black community.

"You don't want your business put out in the streets," said 20-year-old Harper, a former Black AIDS Institute intern. "Black people are often very judgmental. And they will frown upon you because you are viewed as promiscuous or you are viewed as being a homosexual; these things are very taboo in the Black community."

Phill Wilson is the founder and the executive director of the Black AIDS Institute, based in Los Angeles. He said that the disease is often referred to as a "White gay issue," but "the truth of the matter is, in 2005, AIDS in America is a Black disease."

"No one wants to say that," Wilson said. "Black people

don't want to say that because it's a stigma; traditional AIDS organizations don't want to say that because they don't want a redistribution of the money; and the government doesn't want to say that because by saying that, they will have to do more than just provide a sound bite or a media opportunity in response to the epidemic."

The Black AIDS Institute is a training and mobilization center whose mission is to stop the AIDS pandemic in Black communities.

"AIDS has fallen off of the front page; it's fallen off of the back burner," Wilson said last Thursday morning media conference. "We need to make sure that young people have every arsenal to fight this disease. Just like it is wrong to send soldiers to Iraq without armor, it is wrong to prevent young people from having the information that they need to protect themselves from HIV. Knowledge is a valuable tool in fighting this disease."