Racism Played a Part in America’s Response to Katrina

DeWayne Wickham

DeWayne Wickham writes a weekly column for USA Today.

Televised images of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina revealed that many of the victims stranded in the flooded city were both poor and black. For many people this raised the question of what role their poverty versus their skin color played in their plight. Both race and class played a role in the fate of poor blacks victimized by Hurricane Katrina and the government’s poor response. However, racism was a more dominant factor. While the disaster overwhelmingly affected the poor, in New Orleans the poor are mostly black people who have been forced into poverty by a racist society.

It wasn’t long after the tortured images of thousands of black men, women and children holed up in the Louisiana Superdome and Morial Convention Center started appearing on TV newscasts that talk of an old conundrum surfaced.

Was it the color of their skin or their place in society that made the suffering among that city’s blacks so great? The race or class question pits those who believe that racism is the root cause of much that ails blacks against those who say it is their economic and social condition that is the problem.

More often than not, the answer splits along predictable fault lines. Many liberals—especially blacks—see racism as the culprit. Conservatives, by and large, think it’s the lifestyle choices of poor blacks that lock them into the underclass.

I think it’s a combination of both. But as with most mixtures, one is more dominant than the other.

Actions of Survival

Anyone who saw the television footage of black looters hauling away appliances and TV sets is right to believe that the criminal behavior of some blacks has more to do with the hand life deals them than does the color of their skin.

But to view the mindless acts of a few thugs in the same way as the taking of food and drink by the larger body of blacks misses an important distinction. The vast majority of blacks were simply trying to survive—a struggle that was impacted more by race than by class.

"Blacks lived in neighborhoods that were hardest hit by the flooding."

Before Hurricane Katrina struck, New Orleans’ population was 67% black, but a whopping 84% of the city’s poor were black. Many whites lived in neighborhoods at the highest elevations. Most blacks lived in the lower-lying areas of the city. According to The New York Times, 35% of black households in New Orleans didn’t own a car. In other words, blacks lived in neighborhoods that were hardest hit by the flooding—and were less likely to have an automobile to escape.

In New Orleans, as in much of the rest of this country, race defines class. It was the poor in New Orleans who had the most difficulty evacuating. It was the poor who were forced to resort to looting to feed themselves and their families while being left stranded by the incompetence of government officials. It was the poor who made up the bulk of those who were housed for days in the Superdome and convention center without much food, water, medical help or police protection. And most of the poor in New Orleans are black.

Poverty is the new Jim Crow. It is a subtler—but no less hurtful form of racism. Last year [2004], a quarter of all blacks in this country lived below the poverty level, compared with less than
9% of whites. The South, where the majority of blacks live, is the nation's poorest region. That's not a chance relationship.

**Reasons for Poverty**

"For a variety of well-documented reasons, poverty is disproportionately experienced among minorities," writes Michael Stoll, a UCLA professor for Public Policy, in a paper he will present... at a "Colors of Poverty" conference sponsored by the University of Michigan.

Stoll says there is a relationship between where people live and their level of poverty. Poverty is higher in central cities than in suburbs. "Location," he says, influences the access people have to "good schools, decent housing, crime-free neighborhoods, productive contacts and other benefits that help shape, determine or constrain access to opportunity."

If that sounds as if Stoll thinks "class" is to blame for what happened to poor blacks in New Orleans, you're wrong. "If you press me, I have to say that race played more of a role in how fast" the government came to the aid of that city's blacks, he told me.

I couldn't agree more.

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Racism Is Not Evident in America's Response to Katrina

John Leo

*John Leo is a columnist for U.S. News & World Report.*

Claims that racism had something to do with problems in the government's response to Hurricane Katrina are wrong. Those who argue otherwise are painting a false picture of a racist America. The media, by recycling such arguments, is harming the nation. Government problems following Katrina are best explained by simple incompetence that hurt white victims as well as black.

A letter to the editor of the *Oregonian*, in Portland, Ore., said of Katrina: "I am deeply disturbed and angered by the number of reports claiming racism has something to do with the delay in the relief effort. These claims are unsubstantiated and a complete lie. To even suggest that our government would allow people to die simply because of the color of their skin is despicable. . . . In a time of national crisis, another media-driven race war is the last thing this country needs."

Amen to that. The usual racemongers played their usual role. Jesse Jackson said the scene in New Orleans "looked like Africans in the hull of a slave ship." Carol Moseley Braun, the former Democratic senator from Illinois, said the scene in New Orleans was similar to the fatal neglect of blacks after Reconstruction. Morning show hosts at a New York City rap station
detected "genocide" in New Orleans. On a slightly more respectable level, black members of Congress, judges, and activists stoked racial polarization. "This is a racial story," said an attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. A black judge in Arkansas said Katrina revealed the "ugly, stinking, pus-filled sores" of racism.

"The hard-hit mostly white parishes around New Orleans waited just as long as the poorest wards of the city did for help."

A common charge was that aid would have come more quickly if New Orleans had been predominantly white. There is no evidence for this at all. Across-the-board incompetence at every level of government is a far more compelling explanation than racist intent or behavior. The hard-hit mostly white parishes around New Orleans waited just as long as the poorest wards of the city did for help.

**Double Standard**

Evidence-free assertion of racism seemed everywhere. Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville said Katrina "disclosed our racism in multiple ways," none of which he bothered to mention. The most poisonous statements were the ones linking failure in New Orleans to racist violence of the past. "You'd have to go back to slavery, or the burning of black towns, to find a comparable event that has affected black people this way," said University of California-Los Angeles sociologist and African-American studies Prof. Darnell Hunt, thus positioning the disaster in New Orleans as similar to some of the worst racism in history. This kind of rhetoric has an effect. Two thirds of blacks polled say they see racism as a cause of the failures to cope quickly with Katrina.

The mainstream media played a role, too. Several TV anchors and interviewers prodded or invited black officials to say they spotted heavy racism in New Orleans. Comedian Nancy Giles, on CBS Sunday Morning, announced that Katrina victims went without food and water for days simply because they were black.

Racial charges were endlessly recycled. Rapper Kanye West's claim that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" has been published more than 400,000 times, according to a Google search. Almost as famous are the captions of similar photos of a white man "finding food" in New Orleans and a black man "looting." The captions were taken everywhere as evidence of racism. An editor in Kenya thought they were.

The looting caption may have been unfair, but the constant citing of it merely reflects resentment of racism without presenting any real evidence of racist behavior.

The Washington Post ran a Page 1 story, "To Me, It Just Seems Like Black People Are Marked." The story was basically harmless, but the headline probably did some damage, confirming for many readers that blacks have been singled out for unfair treatment.

An essay on Katrina in the Post Style section used campus diversity jargon referring to blacks as "the Other," saying, "Mainstream America too often demonizes the Other because, well, we've been conditioned to do so." No explanation of why mainstream America, so woefully conditioned and addicted to demonizing, has donated over $750 million to mostly black hurricane victims.

**Two Visions of America**

Heather MacDonald writes on the City Journal website, "That people are giving so feverishly in spite of the competing images of looting by the flood victims and the reports of murder and rape is even stronger proof that racism has lost its grip on the American mind: The givers are refusing the bigot's reaction of impugning the whole race by the loathsome behavior of a few."

The media have been reporting on two tracks. One stresses the empathy and generosity of mainstream America, as reflected in the astonishing donations, the thousands of volunteers who poured into the area, the collection and shipping of tons of food and clothing, and the extraordinary efforts made by rescuers, often at the risk of their own lives. The other features the usual bitter denunciations of racist America. Which do you suppose is a better indication of where the nation wants to go?
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Hurricane Katrina Offers America an Opportunity to End Its Racial Divide

Carol Moseley Braun

Carol Moseley Braun served as a U.S. senator from Illinois from 1993 to 1999. She later served as a U.S. ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa.

America has a long history of racism against black people, and racism may have played a part in the slow response to Hurricane Katrina. But open racism is no longer acceptable, and most Americans are sympathetic to hurricane victims regardless of race. These changing attitudes may enable Hurricane Katrina to be a catalyst for a renewed national effort against poverty and homelessness and a turning point in healing America’s ongoing racial divisions.

Years ago, I was “adopted” by the Rhodes family of New Orleans following a fateful boat ride on the Mississippi River shared with Joan and Sandra Rhodes and Mary Landrieu, now a senator from Louisiana. Mr. Rhodes, the patriarch of a sprawling, active family would joke with me that Chicago, my hometown, was “New Orleans’ backyard” and that the connection between our cities was more than just a railroad, but was a spiritual, tribal one.

My own family had long ago left the city and taken the fabled ride on the train they called the City of New Orleans, arriving in Chicago at the turn of the last century, determined to escape the crushing racism that even the gaiety of the French Quarter could not disguise.

The Rhodes’ family businesses started even earlier, during the backlash against Reconstruction, when rampaging whites pillaged, lynched and raped any unfortunate black they might encounter. The history books are vague about how many people died, but the riots were of such ferocity that blacks from the surrounding parishes fled for safety to New Orleans. Bodies of the victims piled up, and as there had been no mortuary service for blacks, the first DuPlain Rhodes collected them in his buggy and gave them a proper burial—no small feat in a city built below sea level. And so began the Rhodes Funeral Company that is still in business today.

Racism and Hurricane Katrina

The Rhodes’ business has to operate at capacity now, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the stunning failure of government to provide for the welfare of the people. No one knows yet how many people have died in Louisiana or Mississippi, but everyone knows that the death toll is tragic and horrendous. Those who survive will have stories no less chilling than the stories passed down the generations from survivors who fled the night riders in the late 1800s. The failure this time of the government to respond will be seen as symptomatic of the same kind of fatal neglect that made post-Reconstruction a time of infamy in U.S. history.

"No rational person sincerely believes our government would have had such a laissez-faire attitude if the majority of the population had not been poor and black.”

The common denominator between tragedies may almost certainly be found in the nuances and realities of race, class and poverty. Assumptions were made in government that can only be explained in context of the demographics most affected by the hurricane. No rational person sincerely believes our government would have had such a laissez-faire attitude if the majority of the population had not been poor and black. No pro-
visions were made to avert disaster. No thought was given to how people without cars or money could leave.

Our response to this tragedy could herald the healing of the racial divide.

Ironically, race, racism and racial attitudes will also figure prominently in what happens now. The Republican speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, suggests that New Orleans should not be rebuilt and that a new city be put in a location less vulnerable to the elements. In spite of the howls about the obvious insensitivity of his remarks, he has expressed a view held by many, from architects to environmentalists. Those of us who cherish the romance and history of New Orleans will fight to rebuild it where it was, only better, and will work to assure that the destitute who are now homeless will have a chance to save their communities and own their own homes.

Tackling America's Original Sin

And so, once again, we are presented with a chance to tackle America's original sin—racism—in the aftermath of what can only be either stunning governmental incompetence or shocking discrimination. The difference, this time, is that the heart of the people has been touched by this tragedy in ways unknown a century ago. Not even the most rabid right-wing talk show hosts dare express anything other than sympathy for the suffering, the dead and dying. This generation of Americans is ashamed of racism, and in this we are of one mind: The people of New Orleans are Americans who deserved better.

The whole country is invested in creating a new New Orleans. It will never be the same again, but neither will we. Our response to this tragedy could herald the healing of the racial divide, the ending of homelessness and the beginning of a genuine effort to eradicate poverty in this country, the richest in the world.

The neglect of our homeland, the pandering to selfishness, the antipathy toward community that has dominated our national conversation has just given us a harvest no one wants to claim.

A Chance to Improve New Orleans and America

America need not have the poverty, the slums, the disease, the desperation that we have allowed to fester. Out of this tragedy could come policy initiatives to give the working poor a stake in the economy, and housing assistance that will give families a chance to own a home. The physical reconstruction can give the children schools with electrical systems that will support computer technology, with roofs and windows that are up to the challenge of the southern climate. New Orleans, one of our country's oldest cities, can be the city on a hill that invigorates the rebuilding of America.

The breakdown of government in the face of this disaster has given us all a glimpse of what could happen anywhere in America. The people in New Orleans' backyard pray for its speedy recovery, but also for the rest of our country. May we never again suffer so ugly a tear in our national fabric.