

BLACK SUFFERING AND WHITE POWER

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The recent Hurricane Katrina crisis has generated a national debate over whether racism played a part in the human tragedy we have witnessed in devastated New Orleans.

By mid-September, 2005, 60 percent of African Americans surveyed in a national poll expressed their belief that "the federal government's delay in helping the victims in New Orleans was because the victims were black." By contrast, only 12 percent of white Americans agreed.

In response, the Bush Administration unleashed its black apologists to deny any racial intent of its policies and actions. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice insisted, "Nobody, especially the President, would have left people unattended." Black conservative ideologue John McWhorter, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, ridiculed the accusations of racism as "nasty, circular, [and] unprovable. . . . It's not a matter of somebody in Washington deciding we don't need to rush [to New Orleans] because they're all poor jungle bunnies anyway."

African Americans were stunned and perplexed by white America's general apathy and denial about the racial implications of the Katrina catastrophe. On a nationally televised fundraiser for the hurricane's victims, rap artist Kanye West sparked a new controversy by denouncing "the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well off as slow as possible."

Blacks were especially infuriated with the descriptions of poor black evacuees as "refugees" by officials and the media. Black Congresswoman Diane Watson protested vigorously, "'Refugee' calls up to mind people that come here from different lands and have to be taken care of. . . . These are American citizens."

But the racial stigmatization of New Orleans's outcasts forced many African Americans to ponder whether their government and white institutions had become incapable of expressing true compassion for the suffering of their people. Prominent Princeton professor Cornel West, at a Columbia University forum sponsored by the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, pondered whether "*black suffering* is required for the preservation of white America."

West's provocative query ought to be explored seriously. The U.S. government and America's entire political economy were constructed on a racial foundation. Blacks were excluded by race from civic participation and voting for

several hundred years; they were segregated into residential ghettos, denied credit and capital by banks, and relegated to the worst jobs for generations.

Over time, popular cultural and social attitudes about black subordination and white superiority were aggressively reinforced by the weight of discriminatory law and public policy. Psychologically, is the specter of black suffering and death in some manner reaffirming the traditional racial hierarchy, the practices of black exclusion and marginalization?

Even before Katrina's racial debate had receded from the media, the question of racial insensitivity was posed again by former Reagan Education Secretary William Bennett's remarks in a national radio broadcast. In early October, 2005, Bennett announced to his radio audience: "I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could – if that were your sole purpose – you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down."

New York Times columnist Bob Herbert interpreted Bennett's remarks as the central aspect of the Republican Party's "bigotry, racially divisive tactics and outright anti-black policies. That someone who's been a stalwart of that outfit might muse publicly about the potential benefits of exterminating blacks is not surprising to me at all . . . Bill Bennett's twisted fantasies are a malignant outgrowth of our polarized past."

Bennett's repugnant statements, combined with most white Americans' blind refusal to recognize a racial tragedy in New Orleans, illustrate how deeply rooted racial injustice remains in America.

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