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THOUGHTS ON AFTER KATRINA: Diaspora and the Second Reconstruction

America faces two gigantic tasks in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina:

- helping 1 million refugees (especially the black and white poor) rebuild meaningful and productive lives; and
- helping rebuild the New Orleans and Gulf Coast regions.

The two tasks overlap *but are not synonymous*.

Diaspora

Though many have objected to applying the term “refugees” to the million persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina, “refugees” more accurately describes Katrina’s victims than a term like “evacuees.” Like international refugees, Katrina’s refugees have been suddenly and violently uprooted from their previous lives, scattered to distant places, and many have neither homes, nor jobs, nor communities to return to.

Moreover, for many, the best course would be *not* to return to their devastated communities. Mississippi and Louisiana are the second and third poorest states (after West Virginia). The New Orleans-Gulf Coast-Mississippi Delta area is the USA’s third poorest region after the Mexico border regions (Yuma, AZ to Brownsville, TX) and the coal-mining regions of Appalachia.¹ As my recent statistical analysis of the New Orleans region

¹ As measured by family poverty rates (to eliminate the disproportionate impact of student “poverty” in smaller metro areas that are “college towns”), in Census 2000 the New Orleans MSA (a 14.8% family poverty rate) was the 18th poorest metro area (out of 331). It was surrounded by the following metro areas: Lafayette, LA (8th poorest); Alexandria, LA (13th); Monroe, LA (15th); Shreveport, LA (17th); Houma, LA (21st); Beaumont-Port Arthur, TX (37th); La Charles, LA (40th); Baton Rouge, LA (50th); and Biloxi-Gulfport-Pascagoula, MS (70th).

summarized,² “high poverty, slow economic growth, and minimal racial progress are the hallmarks of the New Orleans region.”

Many of the Katrina’s evacuees had little prospects of bettering their lives before the hurricane; their post-hurricane prospects are worse. Preliminary estimates are that 400,000 jobs have been lost for any foreseeable future. Federal and private insurance will only replace a fraction of the value of property lost. (Most private policies exempted “flood damage” from coverage.) Many families have lost whatever financial margin they had. (Poor families, of course, had no margin.) Of the tens of billions projected in federal aid for rebuilding, most will be concentrated on rebuilding infrastructure just to get basic systems back to where they were. Certainly, there will be several tens of thousands of construction jobs created, but a large amount of the corporate profits will flow to outside firms, and many of the jobs will be filled by imported workers (especially those with highly specialized skills).

Many of the evacuees have a clearer grasp of their alternatives than many public policy wonks. A Washington *Post* survey found that 44% of the evacuees temporarily housed in Houston’s Astrodome, Reliant Center, and other emergency shelters were not planning to return to New Orleans.³ (And most evacuee centers held the poorest of the poor.) “According to the poll, most of those who did not plan to go back to New Orleans are already living in their new hometown. Fully two in three of the 44 percent who will not return said they plan to permanently relocate in the Houston area, the city that now is home to about 125,000 New Orleans evacuees.” That story is being repeated in communities around the country that have received evacuees – both from emergency centers and through news stories reporting on the plight of those temporarily housed with friends and relatives.

There is also the issue that some areas may be so environmentally polluted that they will be uninhabitable for a long time.⁴ Such news reports have focused on many New Orleans neighborhoods and St. Bernard Parish (the latter may have been hardest hit of all – from both flooding and a major

² “Measuring Regional Equity in the New Orleans Area: an Unsentimental Assessment” (September 15, 2005)

³ “Some of the Uprooted Won’t Go Home,” September 15, 2005, p. A1.

⁴ The issue was graphically dramatized for me during a National Public Radio interview with a former federal EPA official who explained that “for starters, just think of everything that is under anyone’s kitchen sink now being part of the water supply” ... plus, from every flooded automobile, gas station, medicine cabinet, etc.

oil spill from a local refinery), but I suspect that serious pollution occurred wherever flooding happened (as contrasted with “just” storm damage).

In short, it may be realistic to project that one-third to one-half of Katrina’s evacuees will never return home, but seek better futures elsewhere. Helping them succeed requires a nationwide refugee program.

I have never studied international refugee programs. Over the past half century, the flow of refugees into this country has never been as massive nor quite as sudden (Southeast Asians, Ethiopians and Somalis, Bosnians, etc.) It seems to me that the basic elements would be

1) a central coordinating authority, possibly the federal Health and Human Services Department with its network of state-county welfare and public health agencies. In regions with substantial numbers of evacuees, application and processing for all federal and state services (e.g. Labor Department, HUD, SBA, etc.) should be centralized in well-publicized evacuee resettlement centers; in all other communities, there ought to be a well-established protocol for centralized application and processing at a designated federal-state office;

2) a substantial package of resettlement benefits. The amount President Bush announced in his speech Friday from Jackson Square (\$5,000 per family) is pitifully inadequate. To cite one example of what would be required, Bruce Katz of The Brookings Institution is advocating an increase of 100,000 federal housing vouchers earmarked for Katrina evacuees; at \$500 per month of rental assistance, housing assistance alone would be \$6,000 per year per family. Furthermore, all such benefits must be “portable” – that is, they must follow the evacuees wherever they go; and

3) federal financial assistance to state and local governments receiving Katrina evacuees for some transitional period along the lines of subsidies to local school systems in communities “impacted” by non-property taxpaying federal installations (the former “Impact Aid” program).

Acting as though the only task at hand is to rebuild the hurricane-devastated regions is just another example of focusing solely on in-place programs (the “Inside Game”) writ large. For many of the region’s displaced (but particularly for many of the poor), their best chance lies in getting out of there (the “Outside Game”).

The Second Reconstruction

I choose to label rebuilding the New Orleans-Gulf Coast region as “the *Second* Reconstruction” because the standard by which it must be measured must be advancing racial and economic justice and environmental sustainability. From the perspectives of the 21st century, there was nothing radical about Radical Reconstruction (the *First* Reconstruction). Its goal of assuring basic civil rights (including voting rights) and economic opportunity for freed slaves in the rebellious states was frustrated by a cynical compact: re-imposition of a retooled system of economic and social subjugation (sharecropping and Jim Crow laws) by the Southern oligarchy and a century’s deliberate neglect of securing greater racial and economic justice both *by* the North and *in* the North.

The (black) mayor of New Orleans, the (white) governors of Louisiana and Mississippi, other elected officials (black and white), and a legion of community groups have all raised the cry that “we, not outsiders, must be in charge.” Yet spending tens of billions of dollars of federal taxpayers dollars (or borrowed dollars borrowed, magnifying the indebtedness of our grandchildren and great grandchildren) must not be accompanied by the crony capitalism, environmental degradation, and tolerance for racial and economic inequality that have characterized the region (and that also characterize the Dixiecrat-dominated Congress and Administration).⁵

The Second Reconstruction can only succeed on the basis of three fundamental attitudinal changes locally and nationally:

- 1) on the threshold of our *fifth century* building this nation together (the first African Americans arrived – as slaves – to English America in 1619), we can no longer tolerate vast racial disparities. To our shame, before the eyes of the world (and to the surprised eyes of some Americans), Katrina ripped the scab off of our festering –and substantially still neglected – racial and economic divides. A primary goal of the Second Reconstruction must be to build an *inclusionary* society;

⁵ Let’s not forget that the very fact of having a black mayor of New Orleans (and of Baton Rouge and many other black elected officials in Louisiana and Mississippi) is because of the very assertion of federal law and federal power, spurred tardily to action by the grassroots mobilization of the civil right movement.

- 2) “It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature,” as the memorable TV ad of a generation ago stated. My 1999 report on the New Orleans region focused on the issue of regional land use planning (of which there is hardly a shadow). As in many parts of the United States, a potent brew of “property rights” and “home rule” has fomented both building where Mother Nature doesn’t want us to build and stripping away the natural protection (wetlands, barrier islands, etc.) that would have blunted Katrina’s impact. The Second Reconstruction must require federally-mandated and federally-monitored, state-implemented comprehensive land use planning that is both environmentally sustainable and socially equitable. (In the New Orleans area, 40 years of unfettered suburban sprawl destroyed 56% of the real value of all property within the City of New Orleans – a toll that probably exceeds Katrina’s 40 hours of fury.)
- 3) Katrina’s bill must be paid now – pay-as-we-go – and not passed on to future generations through adding \$200-\$300 billion to our national debt. Katrina reaped what the Radical Right has sown for 25 years. A majority of voters have, first, endorsed systematically shrinking governmental responsibility for providing basic infrastructure and an adequate social safety net, and, second, tolerated key public agencies staffed with ideologues that denigrate the agency mission, often have no relevant experience, and drive off experienced professional civil servants. Can we then really be surprised by the catastrophic failure of the federal government in Katrina’s aftermath. The Congress should immediately shelve any consideration of further tax cuts and repeal the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy.⁶

⁶ Unfortunately, it appears to be (Big) Business as usual in Washington. At his press conference the day after his Jackson Square speech, President Bush stated that Katrina’s bill would be paid not by raising taxes but by borrowing [inescapably from the Japanese, Chinese, and South Koreans] and cutting existing federal programs. White House aides immediately targeted federal education and health spending. Tens of millions of dollars in no-bid contracts are already being awarded to the same favored firms carrying out reconstruction activities in Iraq (such as Halliburton-KBR) and the Administration has suspended the Davis-Bacon Act (requiring prevailing wages be paid) for Katrina-related construction work.

The scope of the federal effort to rebuild physically the New Orleans-Gulf Coast regions requires greater centralization of federal authority than just appointing a high level federal “czar” (both former New Orleans mayor-National Urban League chief Marc Morial and General Colin Powell have been journalistically nominated). A better model would be the Tennessee Valley Authority that offers a 70-year precedent of both managing major infrastructure development and interacting with state and local officials.

Federal “returnee assistance” could be provided by the federal central coordinating authority that was proposed to serve refugees in the Diaspora. Certainly, centralized offices for all federal-state assistance should be established throughout the New Orleans and Gulf Coast areas.

How does one assure participation in reconstruction planning by and accountability for performance to the residents of these regions, particularly poor residents whose voices have too often been ignored (if not unheard) in the past? There are certainly existing networks of community-based organizations in the New Orleans area and, I assume, in the Gulf Coast region. Providing long-term financial support and technical expertise to these organizations is probably the most important contribution that private philanthropy can make. The few millions that private foundations can provide to the Second Reconstruction should be focused on helping local residents assure that the many billions being spent are achieving the goals of an economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and socially just New Orleans-Gulf Coast region.