

"They're Washing Us Away"

Posted by

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The Moscow Times - Chris Floyd - The destruction of New Orleans represents a confluence of many of the most pernicious trends in American politics and culture: poverty, racism, militarism, elitist greed, environmental abuse, public corruption and the decay of democracy at every level. Much of this is embodied in the odd phrasing that even the most circumspect mainstream media sources have been using to describe the hardest-hit victims of the storm and its devastating aftermath: "those who chose to stay behind."

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The Perfect Storm

[New Orleans and the Death of the Common Good](#)

CHRIS FLOYD

The Moscow Times

September 1, 2005

"The river rose all day,
The river rose all night.
Some people got lost in the flood,
Some people got away all right.
The river have busted through clear down to Plaquemine:
Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline.

"Louisiana, Louisiana,
They're trying to wash us away,
They're trying to wash us away."

-- Randy Newman, Louisiana 1927

Instantly, the situation has been framed with language to flatter the prejudices of the comfortable and deny the reality of the most vulnerable.

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It is obvious that the vast majority of those who failed to evacuate are poor: they had nowhere else to go, no way to get there, no means to sustain themselves and their families on strange ground. While there were certainly people who stayed behind by choice, most stayed behind because they had no choice. They were trapped by their poverty - and many have paid the price with their lives.

Yet across the media spectrum, the faint hint of disapproval drips from the affluent observers, the clear implication that the victims were just too lazy and shiftless to get out of harm's way. There is simply no understanding - not even an attempt at understanding - the destitution, the isolation, the immobility of the poor and the sick and the broken among us.

This is from the "respectable" media; the great right-wing echo chamber was even less restrained, of course, leaping straight into giddy convulsions of racism at the first reports of looting in the devastated city. In the pinched-gonad squeals of Rush Limbaugh and his fellow hatemongers, the hard-right media immediately conjured up images of wild-eyed darkies rampaging through the streets in an orgy of violence and thievery.

Not that the mainstreamers ignored the racist angle. There was the already infamous juxtaposition of captions for wire service photos, where depictions of essentially the same scene - desperate people wading through flood waters, clutching plastic bags full of groceries - were given markedly different spins. In one picture, a white couple are described as struggling along after finding bread and soda at a grocery store. But beneath an almost identical photo of a young black man with a bag of groceries, we are told that a "looter" wades through the streets after robbing a grocery store. In the photo I saw, this evil miscreant also had a - gasp! - pack of diapers under his arm.

Almost all of the early "looting" was like this: desperate people - of all colors - stranded by the floodwaters broke into abandoned stores and carried off food, clean water, medicine, clothes. Perhaps they should have left a check on the counter, but then again - what exactly was going to happen to all those perishables and consumer goods, sitting around in fetid, diseased water for weeks on end? (The mayor now says it could be up to 16 weeks before people can return to their homes and businesses.) Obviously, most if not all of it would have been thrown away or written off in any case. Later, of course, there was more organized looting by criminal gangs, the type of lawless element - of every hue, in every society - whose chief victims are, of course, the poor and vulnerable. These criminal operations were quickly conflated with the earlier pilferage to paint a single seamless picture of the American media's favorite horror story: Black Folk Gone Wild.

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But here again another question was left unasked: Where were the resources - the money, manpower, materiel, transport - that could have removed all those forced to stay behind, and given them someplace safe and sustaining to take shelter? Where, indeed, were the resources that could have bolstered the city's defenses and shored up its levees? Where were the National Guard troops that could have secured the streets and directed survivors to food and aid? Where were the public resources - the physical manifestation of the citizenry's commitment to the common good - that could have greatly mitigated the brutal effects of this natural disaster?

"President Coolidge came down here in a railroad train,
With a little fat man with a notebook in his hand.
The president say, "Little fat man, isn't it a shame
What the river has done to this poor cracker's land?"

Well, we all know what happened to those vital resources. They had been cut back, stripped down, gutted, pilfered - looted - to pay for a war of aggression, to pay for a tax cut for the wealthiest, safest, most protected Americans, to gorge the coffers of a small number of private and corporate fortunes, while letting the public sector - the common good - wither and die on the vine. These were all specific actions of the Bush Administration - including the devastating budget cuts on projects specifically designed to bolster New Orleans' defenses against a catastrophic hurricane. Bush even cut money for strengthening the very levees that broke and delivered the deathblow to the city. All this, in the face of specific warnings of what would happen if these measures were neglected: the city would go down "under 20 feet of water," one expert predicted just a few weeks ago.

But Bush said there was no money for this kind of folderol anymore. The federal budget had been busted by his tax cuts and his war. And this was a deliberate policy: as Bush's mentor Grover Norquist famously put it, the whole Bushist ethos was to starve the federal government of funds, shrinking it down so "we can drown it in the bathtub." As it turned out, the bathtub wasn't quite big enough -- so they drowned it in the streets of New Orleans instead.

But as culpable, criminal and loathsome as the Bush Administration is, it is only the apotheosis of an overarching trend in American society that has been gathering force for decades: the destruction of the idea of a common good, a public sector whose benefits and responsibilities are shared by all, and directed by the consent of the governed. For more than 30 years, the corporate Right has waged a relentless and highly focused campaign against the common

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good, seeking to atomize individuals into isolated "consumer units" whose political energies - kept deliberately underinformed by the ubiquitous corporate media - can be diverted into emotionalized "hot button" issues (gay marriage, school prayer, intelligent design, flag burning, welfare queens, drugs, porn, abortion, teen sex, commie subversion, terrorist threats, etc., etc.) that never threaten Big Money's bottom line.

Again deliberately, with smear, spin and sham, they have sought - and succeeded - in poisoning the well of the democratic process, turning it into a tabloid melee where only "character counts" while the rapacious policies of Big Money's bought-and-sold candidates are completely ignored. As Big Money solidified its ascendancy over government, pouring billions - over and under the table - into campaign coffers, politicians could ignore larger and larger swathes of the people. If you can't hook yourself up to a well-funded, coffer-filling interest group, if you can't hire a big-time Beltway player to lobby your cause and get you "a seat at the table," then your voice goes unheard, your concerns are shunted aside. (Apart from a few cynical gestures around election-time, of course.) The poor, the sick, the weak, the vulnerable have become invisible - in the media, in the corporate boardroom, "at the table" of the power players in national, state and local governments. The increasingly marginalized and unstable middle class is also fading from the consciousness of the rulers, whose servicing of the elite goes more brazen and frantic all the time.

When unbridled commercial development of delicately balanced environments like the Mississippi Delta is bruited "at the table," whose voice is heard? Not the poor, who, as we have seen this week, will overwhelmingly bear the brunt of the overstressed environment. And not the middle class, who might opt for the security of safer, saner development policies to protect their hard-won homes and businesses. No, the only voice that matters is that of the developers themselves, and the elite investors who stand behind them.

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The destruction of New Orleans was a work of nature - but a nature that has been worked upon by human hands and human policies. As global climate change continues its deadly symbiosis with unbridled commercial development for elite profit, we will see more such destruction, far more, on an even more devastating scale. As the harsh, aggressive militarism and brutal corporate ethos that Bush has injected into the mainstream of American society continues to spread its poison, we will see fewer and fewer resources available to nurture the common good. As the political process becomes more and more corrupt, ever more a creation of elite puppetmasters and their craven bagmen, we will see the poor and the weak and even the

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middle class driven further and further into the low ground of society, where every passing storm - economic, political, natural - will threaten their homes, their livelihoods, their very existence.

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Chris Floyd is a columnist for The Moscow Times and regular contributor to CounterPunch. A new, upgraded version of his blog, "Empire Burlesque," can be found at www.chris-floyd.com