

Hurricane Katrina, The Political Fallout

Phil Brick – 8 September 2005

I was asked to address the political dimensions of this disaster, which my colleagues have amply demonstrated is both natural and man-made.

I have two themes to share with you tonight: some thoughts about accountability and governance, and second, some hopeful comments about how this disaster has the potential to restructure public discourses about race and economic inequality in this country.

This week President Bush is insisting that now is not the time for playing the blame game, and that everyone should focus on the task at hand, saving lives in the Gulf States. For once let me agree with Mr. Bush: Stick to the task at hand. No doubt your administration is too incompetent to do two things at once.

Please let me be clear: I think far too much attention has been focused on Mr. Bush's lackluster and perhaps clueless response to this disaster. No doubt, Mr. Bush has had one of the worst weeks of his political life, right up there with the week he was picked up for drunk driving, or the week the abuses at Abu Ghraib could no longer be concealed or denied. The political dimensions of this disaster go far beyond Mr. Bush, whatever his political fortunes are from this day forward.

The most politically salient aspect of this disaster is not the search for someone to blame, but rather the recognition of our collective shame.

Governmental response to this disaster violated our fundamental sense of social order and decency. In a crisis, you're supposed to take care of those most in need, first. That didn't happen. Somehow, 700 guests from the storm-damaged Hilton could be evacuated relatively quickly, while thousands of poor and black residents were left to fend for themselves or perhaps even worse, sent to a leaky mega-shelter without proper security, food, water, basic sanitation, or even someone with a megaphone.

After 9/11, there was a spectacular surge of public confidence in this country. We had images of firefighters and policemen marching up the stairs of the twin towers in heroic self-sacrifice. We had a great surge of patriotism and national pride.

But this disaster is nothing short of a national humiliation. Think about the images that flashed around the world: pictures of desperately poor people, neglected by their own government, with nowhere to go, terrorized by thugs and surrounded by the nameless, floating dead. Americans were forced to confront the fact that the wretched of the earth live and toil not on some distant shore, but in our own communities, and we are all deeply implicated.

Where will the shame of this humiliation take us? I hope it will take us in two directions.

First, I hope this disaster will inspire new conversations about governance and public accountability at all levels. For decades, the political right has been hammering home the message that government is the problem, not the solution. The public has largely internalized this message, and its corollary: that private enterprise and private virtue are inherently superior to public administration and public virtue.

The result is that we have a political culture that would rather focus its moral energy on debates about Terry Shaivo and abortion rights than on helping the neediest or investing in the

mundane mechanics of basic public health and safety. The images of chaos and mayhem in Baghdad and in New Orleans share this common thread. There's little glamour in the fundamentals of government, so there is little incentive to attend to them. That needs to change.

I am also hoping that our collective sense of shame will direct us toward a new spirit of public efficacy and accountability. Whatever one's political persuasion, this disaster shows us how much the private depends on the public, not the other way around. When public officials fail us, moreover, we must insist they be held accountable.

Second, I see this moment of national shame to be an extraordinary moment of opportunity. Natural disasters have the potential to re-shape political landscapes just as surely as they transform physical landscapes. Examples might include the Johnstown Flood of 1897 and the great Mississippi Flood of 1927. Both these events brought the great differences between rich and poor into critical relief, and both events presaged major political efforts to address poverty: the progressive movement of early 20th century, and the New Deal.

Perhaps our shame will help us re-articulate a sense of national purpose that is worthy of us as a people. Up until this point, the most we have been asked to do in times of crisis is to continue our lives as if nothing has happened. We are told to keep spending money, as if private consumption is a public virtue.

Since 9/11, I have had the sense that Americans are ready to do much more than this, if we only had leaders with the courage to sound the charge. Now is the time for such courage.

I am hoping that our sense of shame will help us ask soul-searching questions about poverty and inequality in this country.

This week Congress was scheduled to debate yet another series of tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. That debate has been postponed, and hopefully we use this time to reflect on another set of figures: the number of households living below the poverty line has risen every year for the past four years. Infant mortality rates in this country rose last year for the first time since 1958, and 30% of children nationwide have no health insurance of any kind.

What's most striking about these statistics is that they are hardly news. We know them. Claiming that we don't is about as convincing as claims that no one could have predicted the damage a hurricane could wreak on New Orleans.

We have a poverty problem, indeed. It is a poverty of ideas, of genuine debate, and of political courage when it comes to confronting the reality of the underclass in America.

Already the debate is breaking down along familiar lines: those on the right are blaming the victims, while the left is blaming a stingy federal government.

Surely we can do better. This disaster has finally shifted national attention to the real work of domestic security: seeking creative ways to help those most in need, not last, but first. When we are sure that our most vulnerable citizens are taken care of, I submit, we will all feel much more secure, and our sense of national purpose will again be something we can be proud of.