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THEY SAID IT

“Pluralist society is free society exactly in proportion to its ability to protect as large a domain as possible that is governed by the informal, spontaneous, custom-derived, and tradition-sanctioned habits of the mind rather than by the dictates, however rationalized, of government and judiciary. Law is vital – formal, statute law – but when every relationship in society becomes a potentially legal relationship, expressed in adversary fashion, the very juices of the social bond dry up, the social impulse atrophies. The genius of the English common law lies not only in the social and communal roots of this law, as these are to be seen in the history of England during the Middle Ages, but also in its tacit concern, repeatedly expressed in judicial decision, that as little as possible be transferred from the nonlegal, nonpolitical lives of human beings living in a social order to the necessarily legal and political lives of the same human beings conceived as subjects of the sovereign. Nothing, it would seem, so quickly renders a population easy prey for the Watergate mentality of government as the dissolution of those customs and traditions which are the very stuff of morality and, hence, of resistance to oppression and corruption.

--Robert Nisbet, “The Restoration of Authority,” (chapter 5),
Twilight of Authority, 1975.

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Nighttime On the
City of New Orleans

NIGHTTIME ON THE CITY OF NEW ORLEANS.

Normally in a situation like this, where there is one story that is so big that we cannot help but write about it, I find myself worrying over the difficulty involved in trying to find something to say that hasn't already been said elsewhere, perhaps many times, and quite likely better. But that is not really the case this time. Though there have been hundreds, maybe thousands, of pieces written about Hurricane Katrina over the last several days, none that I've seen has, in my estimation, addressed the issue sufficiently or appropriately.

Most articles have tried in some way to assess blame, laying it at the feet of federal, state, or local officials, depending on the writer's perspective and political proclivities. A handful of others have attempted to deflect blame, rightly noting that the word “natural” in the phrase “natural disaster” denotes man's inability to prevent or even, in some cases, to mitigate such catastrophes. And a very, very tiny number have addressed more fundamental issues, namely the disgraceful behavior of a handful of individuals that greatly exacerbated an already horrific and deadly situation, bringing shame on themselves, their city, and their country.

But as far as I can tell, everything written thus far has focused exclusively on very near-term failures and breakdowns, analyzing the actions or inactions of various individuals or groups over the last week to ten days. While I won't try to pretend that mistakes weren't made or that immediate individual decisions didn't play a critical role in determining which and how many people died, I think all the focus in the last couple of weeks – or even the last couple of years for those whose criticism has included the post-9/11 Department of Homeland Security – obscures the larger point, namely that the factors that aggravated last week's natural disaster, turning it into a national catastrophe, were years, even decades in the making. Moreover, the intense examination of the here-and-now to the exclusion of these longer-term dynamics virtually ensures that very little will be done to address the underlying fundamental problems, thereby ensuring that such cataclysmic destruction can, and likely will, take place again.

While most of the country's elite opinion makers in the mainstream media and various levels of government have decided that blame for the exacerbation of the deadly hurricane lies principally with President Bush, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, and FEMA Director Michael Brown, the federal government's role in the management of the evacuation and immediate post-hurricane relief efforts is, almost by definition, secondary. This is not to say that the President and his aides performed flawlessly or did everything as well as they could have; those are issues that will remain unresolved through many months and investigations. But it is to say that the principal responsibility for protecting the people of New Orleans from flooding, for evacuating them in the event of such flooding, and for attending to their immediate post-storm needs, including protection from criminal elements, lies with the state and local governments. And given that the state and local governments in question here are those of Louisiana and New Orleans, it's hardly surprising that they would have performed so miserably.

For years, Mark and I have written about and discussed the inherent dangers of corruption, though we've rarely been able to point to a solid, concrete

example of why corruption is an issue that should concern the nation and its financial markets or how corruption can, over time, create threats to the health, safety, wealth, and well-being of individuals and the nation as a whole. We have one now.

The state government of Louisiana and the municipal government of New Orleans are, and have been for decades, among the most corrupt political entities in the nation, if not the entire developed world. Payoffs, kickbacks, bribes, theft, fraud, and a host of other crimes are shockingly commonplace in Louisiana and New Orleans and always have been. State and local police departments there are corrupt or at least have large corrupt elements, and the same holds true for the rest of the public bureaucracy, covering everything from health and social services to public safety.

In 1949, political scientist V.O. Keys published his renowned study on southern politics (fittingly enough entitled *Southern Politics*), in which he noted Louisiana's less-than-sterling reputation with regard to "good government," writing that "Few would contest the proposition that among its professional politicians of the past two decades, Louisiana has had more men who have been in jail or who should have been, than any other American state." In a speech last year, Lou Reigel, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's New Orleans Crime Commission, confirmed that the reputation noted by Keys remains well earned. Reigel called "public corruption" in Louisiana "epidemic, endemic, and entrenched" and declared that "no branch of government is exempt." The following, which appears in Tyler Bridges' 2001 book *Bad Bet on the Bayou*, gives just a taste of the recent history of corruption in the state.

Louisiana is rich in outrageous stories and colorful characters. It is notably poor in the realm of political ethics. As Richard Leche, governor during the late 1930s, put it, "When I took the oath of office, I didn't take a vow of poverty." Leche's approach to governance landed him in jail, convicted of bribery charges.

Over the past thirty years, Louisiana has seen a parade of elected officials convicted of crimes. The list includes a governor, an attorney general, an elections commissioner, an agriculture commissioner, three successive insurance commissioners, a congressman, a federal judge, a State Senate president, six other state legislators, and a host of appointed officials, local sheriffs, city councilmen, and parish police jurors (who are the equivalent of county commissioners). Of the eight men and women elected to statewide office in 1991, three – Governor Edwin Edwards, elections commissioner Jerry Fowler, and insurance commissioner Jim Brown – were later convicted of crimes. The FBI said more people – sixty-six – were indicted on public-corruption charges in Louisiana in 1999 than in any other state. Public corruption was the Louisiana FBI's top priority, and would remain so for the foreseeable future.

As for New Orleans itself, its reputation for public corruption is equally legendary. The town they call “The Big Sleazy” has a history of corruption that is virtually unmatched and extends to all aspects of local government, including most importantly, the city’s police department. The sleaze in the New Orleans police force is so notorious that the department often serves as a “case study” for how not to run a department in seminars and courses on public vice and is acknowledged even by the FBI to have a “long-standing reputation for corruption.”

Last week, Nicole Gelinas of *City Journal* noted that the city, with the help of the federal government, tried to clean up its historically corrupt police force during the last decade, weeding “out the worst of the police force (including two murderers).” But it is important to note that that purge, which the feds codenamed “Operation Shattered Shield,” was carried out under the political direction of then-New Orleans mayor Marc Morial, who himself has been tied to widespread corruption. Just last month, *The Gambit Weekly*, an “alternative” newspaper in New Orleans reported on the growing cloud around the former mayor. To wit:

In New Orleans, ongoing federal investigations of city government have shone a spotlight on family members and associates of former Mayor Marc Morial. Morial’s uncle Glenn Haydel, a former manager of the Regional Transit Authority, is accused of diverting \$550,000 in RTA funds into his personal accounts. Haydel denies any wrongdoing.

In another federal case, 10 people have been charged in an alleged scheme to skim hundreds of thousands of dollars from an \$81 million energy management contract that Morial signed with Johnson Controls of Milwaukee while in office. Among the indicted are Morial associates Stan “Pampy” Barre, a restaurateur, and Kerry DeCay, who served as Morial’s property management director.

As of this writing, the feds have taken no action against Morial’s brother, Jacques Morial, since crashing through his front door with a battering ram more than a year ago. Jacques Morial, who assumed the chair of the LIFE political organization from his brother late last year, has not been accused of any wrongdoing. The former mayor, now national president of the National Urban League, has declined comment on the ongoing investigations, which also include the Orleans Parish School Board and Traffic Court.

Local U.S. Attorney Jim Letten says the investigations are far from over.

Why does all of this matter? Well, you start with a state government that is notoriously corrupt, add a local government that is notoriously corrupt, and then add an antiquated and slipshod levee system that is, by virtue of the state constitution, managed by a series of small, independent governing boards, each of which has complete authority over its own little levee fiefdom, and then you place this entire mess in a soup bowl that is below sea level and surrounded by water,

and you have what amounts to a recipe for disaster. And given that the city was flooded not because the levees themselves were flooded over, but because two of them actually broke, it's not hard to see how one might come to the conclusion this recipe did indeed have all the right ingredients. If anything, it's a miracle that such a flood of monumental proportion had never happened before.

The idea that a government so disjointed and so addled with corruption would be able to preserve its city or would be able to handle an evacuation with speed and precision or would even be able to follow its own *publicly available evacuation plan* is absurd. Indeed, the only thing that would be more absurd would be expecting that a police force that is likely the most corrupt and disreputable organization in a corrupt and disreputable city, that is scandalously distrusted by the citizens it is charged with "protecting and serving," and that is woefully understaffed (with roughly 3.14 officers per 1000 residents – half the rate of Washington, D.C. – and at least 500 fewer officers than experts say would be merely adequate) would be able to maintain order while the rest of city and state bureaucracy collapses around it.

In short, anyone who was even remotely surprised by reports that New Orleans police officers participated in the looting, or by the video footage of NOPD officers breaking into the DVD cases at Wal-mart so that they and their fellow New Orleanians could help themselves, or by armed gangs controlling the streets and raiding hospitals in open defiance of law enforcement officials, or by NOPD officers turning in their badges and walking away from their jobs by the dozens, is a fool.

I won't waste my breath here trying to defend President Bush and his response team, but the psychologists have a name for the vitriol directed at the White House by the likes of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, and Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu. It's called projection.

The fact of the matter is that the state and local governments and the local police force failed the people of New Orleans and failed them badly. And saying so does not necessarily mean that blame for the disaster should be laid at the feet of anyone at the state or local level. This failure was decades in the making and will almost certainly be at least as long in rectifying. Corruption is, in most cases, subtle, plodding, and sometimes quite captivating. But it is always destructive, as the people of New Orleans learned this past week.

Of course, corruption alone – no matter how pervasive and insidious – could not account for the destruction unleashed in the aftermath of last week's hurricane. That level of destruction required a total breakdown of civil society and of civic institutions as well.

Of the civic institutions to have failed New Orleans, undoubtedly the most important of these is the family. The traditional family has, of course, been under attack for several decades in this country, and the urban centers have been particularly hard hit. Today, the city of New Orleans is among the national "leaders" in out-of-wedlock births, with something in the neighborhood of 63-65% of all children born in the city born to single mothers, nearly 50% higher than the national average.

Given the number of children born out of wedlock and the statistically demonstrable correlations between single-parent households and both poverty and predisposition toward criminality, it should be unsurprising that New Orleans is also among the nation's "leading" cities with regard to both child poverty and crime rates. In fact, New Orleans is, year-in and year-out, among the two or three most violent and most crime-ridden cities in the country.

This volatile mix of poverty, disintegrated family structure, and the aforementioned corrupt and ineffective police force makes New Orleans an exceptionally dangerous city, even when things are functioning normally. As Nicole Gerinas noted in her *City Journal* piece, "New Orleans' murder rate [is]

several multiples above the national average in normal times. (New Orleans, without Katrina, would have likely ended 2005 with 330 or so murders—compared to about 65 in Boston, a city roughly the same in size.)” And while crime overall and violent crime in particular have been falling nationwide over the last decade, both rates have actually been on the increase in New Orleans. With the traditional family in shambles, the city itself has been in shambles for several years, and the hurricane served both to exacerbate this problem and to focus the national spotlight on it.

The marauding gangs of armed thugs who ruled New Orleans for the better part of last week were almost certainly the “superpredators” that folks like James Q. Wilson and John DiIulio warned us about last decade. They were not mere looters, but showed a complete and total disregard for all human life and for all norms of decency. They attacked hospitals, stealing food, water, and medicine from the sick and dying. They attacked city authorities, killing at least one New Orleans police officer. And they even attacked the military and civilian personnel sent into the city to “rescue” them and the others left behind and to begin the city’s rehabilitation. Clearly, these were no ordinary petty thieves. They were young men who had absorbed almost none of the benefits of civic society and were completely shut out of the traditional civilizing civic institutions, most notably the family.

Unfortunately, allowing the city’s streets to return to “primitiveness” and become thoroughly ungovernable was not the only way in which the traditional civic institutions failed and exacerbated the plight of New Orleanians. The very fact that so many of the city’s residents failed to heed the mandatory evacuation speaks volumes about the lack of traditional institutions that would and should have been prepared to take care of those unable to flee on their own accord.

Here again, the breakdown of the family is the crucial element. It is estimated that some 130,000+ residents of the city had no means of transportation to use in compliance with the evacuation order. Under such

circumstances one would expect family to take care of its own, but that didn’t happen here, for a variety of reasons. While there is no question that part of the problem was that the families of many of those unable to leave were themselves unable to leave, that was not the case universally. Many of those who stayed behind were simply abandoned in the collapsing city, while a great many others actually chose to stay, having nowhere to go and no one to go to.

One of the most important though least often mentioned compounding factors in this mess is the reliance of the people of New Orleans – and predominantly its underclass – on government. Over decades, people in this country, the poor in particular, have been conditioned to rely on the government to take care of them and solve their problems. And while a little reliance on government isn’t such a bad thing in a situation such as a natural disaster, relying on government *exclusively* is all but guaranteed to make any such disaster more disastrous.

The spokesman for know-nothing chattering class, *New York Times* columnist and Princeton economics professor Paul Krugman, declared yesterday that the reason so many people in New Orleans were left to fend for themselves was because President Bush and conservatives bear a “general hostility to government as a force for good.” Krugman has, over the last few years, written some pretty stupid lines, but that is probably the dumbest (and that’s really saying something).

The fact of the matter is that precisely the opposite is true. The reason so many were abandoned is because they simply trusted that “government” would take care of them and would come to their rescue if things got too bad. They believed, as Krugman appears to believe, that not only is government always and everywhere a force for good, but that it is omnipotent as well. And that belief cost many of them their lives.

The irony here is that even “the government” in question knew that it would be unable to do anything at all for most of these people who were depending on it the most. Though this may come as a total

surprise to simple-minded Bush bashers like Krugman, the government of New Orleans actually planned to warn residents of the city that in the event of a major hurricane, they'd be on their own. As *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported in July:

City, state and federal emergency officials are preparing to give the poorest of New Orleans' poor a historically blunt message: In the event of a major hurricane, you're on your own. In scripted appearances being recorded now, officials such as Mayor Ray Nagin, local Red Cross Executive Director Kay Wilkins and City Council President Oliver Thomas drive home the word that the city does not have the resources to move out of harm's way an estimated 134,000 people without transportation.

In the video, made by the anti-poverty agency Total Community Action, they urge those people to make arrangements now by finding their own ways to leave the city in the event of an evacuation. "You're responsible for your safety, and you should be responsible for the person next to you," Wilkins said in an interview. "If you have some room to get that person out of town, the Red Cross will have a space for that person outside the area. We can help you. "But we don't have the transportation."

Two years ago, when elderly Frenchmen were roasting to death by the thousands during an unusual heat wave that had the unmitigated gall to strike at the height of vacation season, pundits like the inimitable Mark Steyn and yours truly lamented the fact that this was one of the inevitable consequences of "big government." As Steyn put it, "Big Government inevitably diminishes its citizens' capacity to take responsibility, to the point where even your dead mum is just one more inconvenience the state should do something about." What happened in New Orleans last week is part and parcel of the same phenomenon. No one was responsible for any of those who had no way out of the city, since the government was responsible. Only government wasn't responsible. And so they died.

Before closing, there's one more issue that I think needs to be addressed here, and that's the principal reason why none of the aggravating factors detailed above are unlikely to change, at least not in the foreseeable future. While corruption, the disintegration of traditional civic institutions, and a vast helping of incompetence (primarily, as I understand it, on the part of Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco) were by and large responsible for exacerbating the effects of the massive hurricane, the collapse of the political culture almost certainly ensures that such a disaster will be repeated.

The reaction of both the mainstream press and President Bush's political opponents to the Katrina disaster suggests that there is a real crisis afoot in the American political culture, a crisis that has been disheartening and annoying at times, but which has also exposed serious vulnerabilities in the American political system and ensured that those vulnerabilities will remain exposed going forward.

Generally speaking, this crisis can be divided into two principal components. The first and most prominent of these is a condition about which we've written at least a dozen times over the past couple of years, namely the collapse of the American left. That the far left in this country has degenerated into absurdity is hardly a surprise, but the depth of this collapse, the sheer revolt against rationality, has caught even me by surprise in the wake of this hurricane.

The far left has, for all intents, degenerated into a quasi-religious sect whose fundamental belief system is based largely on falsehoods, prejudices, and superstitions and which has fashioned a bipolar worldview where Republicans in general and President Bush in particular represent evil. For starters, last week the nation witnessed the spectacle of the scion of the Democratic Party's most celebrated and prominent family (Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.) leading the charge against President Bush and his Republican "cronies" (most notably Mississippi Governor and former Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour), claiming not only that President Bush was responsible for Hurricane Katrina but that Bush

and Barbour had brought down the wrath of God or Gaia or Mother Nature or some other unnamed aggrieved supreme being upon Mississippi in particular because of their opposition to the Kyoto treaty. And the far left's criticism of the President only grew more bizarre, hate-filled, and devoid of rationality from there.

As we have written many times, this far left wing is comprised of only a small percentage of Democrats but is wildly and disproportionately powerful given its size. Much of the money and all of the energy in the Democratic Party can be found among the denizens of the far left wing, as can the current leadership of the party's national committee. For the adherents of this strange and hateful religion, the causes of Hurricane Katrina are obvious and indisputable, and no reasoned, careful, scientifically based counterarguments will ever be able to convince them otherwise.

The problem here (or at least the specific problem in this case) is that this denial of reality virtually ensures that the most powerful and currently ascendant members of the Democratic Party will be unsatisfied with any examination of the hurricane response that doesn't blame George W. Bush and the Republican Party exclusively and absolutely. They will reject any conclusions about the response that don't address their specific, pre-determined, irrational, and illogical conclusions, thereby making it much less likely that the real, critical problems with the local, state, and federal responses will be addressed.

The second component of the political crisis is one which is considerably more sensitive and therefore rarely discussed in politics today but which will undoubtedly prove critical in any examination of this disaster. Naturally, I refer here to race.

Though some on the right have tried their best to downplay the issue of race in this catastrophe, there is little doubt that the storm disproportionately affected black people, who will almost certainly comprise the overwhelming majority of the estimated 10,000-plus

dead. The question here isn't whether this storm affected blacks unduly; that much is obvious. The question is why.

To hear the "civil rights establishment" and other activist-types tell the story, blacks suffered the brunt of this storm because of racism, presumably on the part of President Bush and the Republican Party. As is usually the case, the "Reverend" Jesse Jackson was among the first to cry racism, when he declared last week that President Bush was unconcerned about the plight of black people in the wake of the hurricane and insisted that the absence of blacks among the ranks of disaster relief coordinators was incontrovertible proof of this racially motivated lack of concern.

Jackson was, naturally, followed in due course by the "Reverend" Al Sharpton, who accused the media of portraying the innocent "taxpayers" of New Orleans as violent thugs; by Randall Robinson, who declared that America is a fraud and that this fraudulence had forced black people, in the wake of the disaster, to resort to cannibalism; by rapper Kayne West who declared on network television that Bush "doesn't care about black people,"; and by CBS news contributor Nancy Giles, who declared (again on network television) that "If the majority of the hardest hit victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans were white people, they would not have gone for days without food and water, forcing many to steal for mere survival. Their bodies would not have been left to float in putrid water. They would have been rescued and relocated a hell of a lot faster than this. Period."

As I said, there is no question that blacks were disproportionately affected by Hurricane Katrina, but the reasons for this have nothing to do with President Bush and some sort of latent conservative racism and everything to do with the likes of Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and the type of wild, accusatory excuse-making detailed above. The fact of the matter is that the reason blacks suffered disproportionately from Katrina is because they suffer disproportionately from the factors I've mentioned that exacerbated

the hurricane, namely corruption, the breakdown of social institutions like the family, and over-reliance on government.

Certainly race was a crucial variable in determining one's chances of surviving Hurricane Katrina, but *it was not a causative variable*. Those who died and suffered unduly in the aftermath of this storm did so principally because they were poor, not because they were black. Of course, it just so happens that most of the poor were black, but here again, race was not the determinative variable. What precipitates poverty, particularly in cities like New Orleans, Detroit, Washington, D.C., and East St. Louis, is corruption, the breakdown of the family, and what has become known as "the culture of dependency." And what precipitates those factors is the civil rights and liberal establishments' tolerance for such things, their absolute and steadfast refusal to acknowledge that there are problems plaguing the black community that are entirely unrelated to white racism.

President Bush has a phrase that many conservatives detest which he uses in conjunction with his education policies, "the soft bigotry of low expectations." This phrase more than any other captures the liberal establishment's attitudes toward predominantly black cities in this country. For reasons I can't even begin to imagine or understand, the liberal and civil rights establishments are willing to tolerate conditions in predominately black municipalities that they would not tolerate elsewhere, *despite the fact that the people who suffer most from of these conditions are themselves black*.

By Mayor Nagin's own estimation, anywhere from a third to just under half (33%-44%) of New Orleans residents over the age of 16 are functionally illiterate. This as much as anything that happened in the last

week is a disgrace and represents a serious and unqualified threat to the city's black population. But instead of worrying about how this utter failure of the city's public school system contributes to the creation of a permanent underclass, or how it almost certainly contributed to the failure of many residents to heed the evacuation orders, folks like Jackson and Sharpton are out caterwauling about the lack of quotas at FEMA and making excuses for violent armed thugs who terrorized the city for the better part of a week.

Moreover, anyone who questions the accepted orthodoxy on these issues is immediately branded a racist, which means that no one of any standing will even think about doing so. And so it will remain the case that the state of America's biggest and most predominantly black cities is the predominant threat to the health, well-being, and economic prospects of its black residents.

What happened in New Orleans last week was, sadly, utterly predictable. Though there have been a few unfortunate souls who have spent time over the last few years warning about the dangers posed by corruption, the breakdown of social institutions, and the culture of dependency, such people are usually dismissed as "moralist scolds," or are fired from their jobs at big-time Wall Street brokerage houses because the views of the firm do not reflect the views expressed in the work product – or some such blather.

In any case, the factors that exacerbated the impact of Hurricane Katrina last week are obvious to anyone who is willing to assess the situation honestly. Unfortunately, given the state of the political culture, "honesty" is likely to be in short supply.

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