



Opinion

Race and Hurricane Katrina

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A half century ago, right-wing zealots could see a communist behind every bush.

Today, self-congratulatory liberals envision a racist at the wheel of every pick-up truck.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina unleashed a torrent of neo-McCarthy-ist racialism that has welled up in the liberal imagination for decades, since the morally authoritative civil rights movement of the mid-20th century ended government institutionalized racism.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the news rooms of America, where a couple of generations of journalists have been indoctrinated with a received wisdom that has led them to embrace racial or other identity group status as a paradigm for revealing most political, economic, social and even personal health experience.

The outcome of a 100-year natural catastrophe, occurring on a piece of geography ideally suited for death-by-drowning, is now being explained as a function of racism. I can hear the drunken demagogue from Wisconsin now: "I have a list of 200 racists in my pocket responsible for herding all those poor black people into the Superdome."

Well, not exactly "explained," of course, just insinuated - just as Joseph McCarthy and his followers, with no fact-base for their broad-brush tarring of liberals in the 1950s, merely suggested that we "lost China" because of the pink-ish fellow-travelers in the State Department or that proposals for social welfare programs were part of a vast internal Marxist conspiracy.

Never mind that Katrina was nearly biblical in proportion, that the mayor of New Orleans is black, that the police chief is black and that city and state governments have primary responsibility for first-response protection of their people. No, don't let those facts get between us and our TV anchors, who rush to provide us with their own thinly disguised McCarthy-like insinuations of racism in their "tough" questions of politicians. Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour had it just about right when, responding to one of those "questions," he replied: "Is this an interview or an argument?"

I'd take a back seat to no one in believing our present president was tone-deaf and tongue-tied in his own first responses to Katrina and that his terrorism-obsessed Department-of-Homeland-Homeland-Uber-Alles-Security has messed up any efficient and effective federal response to natural disasters. But those are failures of political leadership and bureaucratic mismanagement, not racism.

Who do these late-30s and early-40s TV "news" anchors think is providing the hundreds of millions of dollars to the Red Cross and other disaster relief agencies - just good white liberals?

Their liberal racism isn't just socially divisive. Hurt most are the poor black underclass, partly held in poverty because white liberals and self-styled black leaders in America continue to preach that their biggest problem is racism and that the solution is greedy white people who need to pay reparations for the legacy of slavery in the form of a spoils system of entitlements, euphemistically referred to as "affirmative action."

How could you find a better formula for disempowering and re-enslaving black Americans than leading them to believe their economic and social well-being is in the hands of a white over-class?

The principle reasons so many poor and black New Orleans residents didn't have cars or credit cards that afforded them shelter from this storm are the same reasons poor underclass white people fail.

They include deficits of education and job skills and broken or non-existent families - all of which government may have some role in addressing, but which mostly require individual responsibility and initiative, re-enforced by community leaders willing to challenge people to make their own way in life, rather than blame external forces for failure.

That prescription, of course, evokes a loud whining of "blame the victim!" from the white and black racialists - who'd rather pander than challenge.

Terry Michael founded and directs the Washington Center for Politics & Journalism.