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Obama's Debt to New Orleans

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AP Images

Milvertha Hendricks, 84, center waits in the rain with other flood victims outside the convention center in New Orleans, Sept.

When New Orleans flooded in August 2005, the Democratic Party was a shambles, locked out of the White House, the Senate and the House of Representatives. For nearly a decade the

Democrats played defense against a Republican onslaught initiated by Newt Gingrich's Contract With America. After September 11, Democrats had joined with Republicans in giving President Bush unprecedented executive authority, thereby helping to erode civil liberties at home and authorize ill-advised aggression overseas. In 2004 Democrats were keenly aware that a solid majority of Americans believed it was unpatriotic to protest the Iraq War. So instead of articulating a clear alternative to Bush's militarism, they nominated John Kerry on the strength of his record as a soldier. Even so, they found it impossible to outmaneuver the existing commander in chief.

In August 2005 the Democratic Party had no clear leader, no identifiable platform, no winning national coalition and little political courage.

Then the force of Hurricane Katrina devastated the inadequate levees surrounding New Orleans. Americans watched as the city flooded, the power went out, and food and water became scarce. They watched as emergency shelters became centers of disease, starvation, agony and death. The nation watched in horror, but no mass evacuation began and Air Force One did not land. As the crisis wore on, the public became increasingly confused by and angry about the lack of coordinated response to alleviate human suffering and evacuate trapped citizens. As the waters rose, President Bush's approval sank.

In the midst of this crisis the Democratic Party found its voice. The suffering in New Orleans allowed it the first sustained and successful opportunity to criticize the Bush administration. Along with the newly emboldened mainstream media, Democrats asked: how can a government that is unable to get water to an American city for three days be trusted to prosecute a foreign war? The Democrats' 2006 midterm win, widely understood as a referendum on the war, was also made possible by the images of New Orleanians trapped on the roofs of their homes.

New Orleans's inadequate levees revealed how crony capitalism reduced border defense to profit motivation rather than government priority. Not even the Gulf Coast's critical oil industry was sufficient to make levee maintenance, repair and reinforcement a national spending priority. Michael Brown's incompetent leadership of FEMA revealed the Bush administration's utter disregard for citizen safety compared to personal patronage. The choices that made New Orleans unsafe meant that the entire country was vulnerable.

Not only did the Bush administration's bureaucratic failures in response to Katrina give Democrats a way to effectively critique Iraq but the racial politics of Katrina temporarily and jarringly reawakened America to the painful realities of racial inequality.

Those who were left behind in New Orleans were vastly disproportionately black. As the images of racialized suffering poured into American living rooms, the country confronted the possibility that racial bias might have delayed the federal government's response. Many Americans were ashamed of what they were seeing on their televisions. The disaster allowed ordinary Americans to witness stark racial poverty and entrenched residential segregation, which normally remain hidden. Even President Bush was forced to acknowledge the legacy of American racism during his speech in Jackson Square.

A yearning to soothe this national shame and heal the gaping racial wound that was reopened by Katrina is partly responsible for America's enthusiastic embrace of Barack Obama. American willingness to confront racial injustice dissipated as quickly as Bush's promises to rebuild the city, but Katrina had awakened a deep desire to prove that America is not a nation marred by racism. Barack Obama's personal narrative of interracial understanding and ascension from the working class to the White House was a balm for America's aching racial scar. Though he was a relative newcomer to national politics, his biography and political commitments to racial healing were appealing to a country still reeling in the aftermath of Katrina. Obama did not need to directly propose race-based policies; he could embody American hopes for racial healing in his very person.

The televised suffering in New Orleans set the stage for the Democratic win in 2006 and Obama's victory in 2008 as surely as the televised brutality against civil rights demonstrators in Selma set the stage for passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

African-American voters whose social conservatism led them to flirt with the GOP in 2004 were cemented once again to Democrats after Katrina. White heartland voters who rallied behind Bush's war effort were shaken enough to consider Democrats after watching Republicans utterly fail to respond to Katrina. Americans of good conscience responded with tremendous charity to the survivors of the storm, but they did more than that: they readjusted their political lens.

Katrina is the wedge that opened the door for Democrats, and this new Democratic administration and Congress owe a particular debt to the people of the Gulf Coast. President Obama and his party must repay that debt.

They can begin by passing the **Gulf Coast Civic Works Act** (HR 4048). This bill uses job creation and infrastructure investment to promote economic growth along the Gulf Coast. Democrats can then address housing because little pre-Katrina affordable housing has been replaced. Recognizing that there are few job opportunities to pay for increased housing costs, Democrats have already extended the Disaster Housing Assistance Program, which was set to end in March, but they need to confront long-term solutions to the continuing housing crisis in the city.

Negotiating with FEMA has been one of the most difficult aspects of the recovery process for elected officials. FEMA, acting as a government insurer, is in part responsible for the cost of repairing New Orleans's storm-damaged infrastructure. However, the agency has consistently low-balled repair costs, leaving the city's infrastructure broken and incomplete. The Obama administration can send a strong signal by ending the haggling and forcing FEMA to immediately allocate fair payments to cover infrastructure repair costs.

It was the failure of inadequate federal levees that flooded New Orleans. The Obama administration has a special responsibility to ensure that these levees are repaired to a higher standard. As the Obama administration rebuilds American infrastructure, Gulf Coast levees deserve high priority.

Scientists have consistently found that a core cause of the recent increase in hurricane damage in Louisiana is coastal erosion along the southernmost section of the state. Some estimate that the state loses the equivalent of a football field every **38 minutes**. The administration should agree to a long-term program to rebuild America's Gulf coastline. There is no better place to begin the work of a new green economy than in New Orleans.

Consistent with his emphasis on accountability and transparency, President Obama should review all disaster-related Community Development Block Grant expenditures by Gulf Coast states to ensure that funding is properly allocated to recovery efforts. And because it will take at least a decade for the Gulf Coast to recover, Congress should agree to revisit and re-evaluate the federal recovery effort on an annual basis every year that Obama is president.

Delivered on Mardi Gras night, President Obama's first address to a joint session of Congress promised that the United States was poised for rebuilding and recovery. These are words with concrete meaning to the people of New Orleans. So it was ironic that Louisiana's Governor Bobby Jindal offered the official Republican response. Even as he was prepared to turn back millions in federal aid to his state, Jindal invoked Hurricane Katrina in his rebuttal of the president's economic recovery plan, suggesting that private enterprise is sufficient for tackling the massive and continuing work in New Orleans.

President Obama and Congressional Democrats cannot allow this appalling revision of history. In 2005 Katrina effectively ended the Bush administration's control of public discourse. The failures of the Bush administration in the aftermath of the storm ended GOP dominance and allowed Democrats an opportunity to govern. Democratic victory was possible because the people of New Orleans suffered. This is a debt Democrats must repay.

About Melissa Harris-Lacewell

Melissa Harris-Lacewell, an associate professor of politics and African-American studies at Princeton University, is completing her latest book, *Sister Citizen: A Text for Colored Girls Who've Considered Politics When Being Strong Isn't Enough*. [more...](#)

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