



*The Interfaith Union<sup>sm</sup>  
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## **The Lessons of Katrina - A Private Fantasy**

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**I** will not restate the obvious about what Katrina will mean to the people of Louisiana and Mississippi, or about what Katrina means to, specifically, the city of New Orleans. So let's, instead, fast-forward six months to March of 2006.

*A Message  
to Members  
vol. 1, no 10.*

The "Katrina Commission" - as it was dubbed by Bill Clinton on September 5, 2005 - has just finalized its report about how we responded to that terrible storm, as well as subsequent hurricanes during what turned out to be a very rough hurricane season. The report contains recriminations, not only of the Bush administration, but of the Clinton administration as well, and the two administrations before them. It points the finger at the state governments of Louisiana and Mississippi for not, ultimately, doing all that could have been done to protect the people of those states. There are discussions of corrupt officials (once winked at and deemed a "charming but mostly harmless" fact about a region of the country) who served themselves at the expense of those they were elected or appointed to protect. There are recommendations to reorganize FEMA and to account for the failure of other federal and state emergency management officials to address the aftermath of the hurricane within the first seventy-two hours of it hitting the Gulf coast, as well as the forty-eight hours before it ever reached land.

The report contains a heading on race and class and under it is the sub-heading, "Did Race and Class Play a Role in the Response?" The nation is fully engaged in public soul searching over that question, with a new discussion of race and class in America under way. There is a renewed focus on poverty, on America's cities, and new leaders have emerged - some from unlikely places. The meanings of terms like "liberal" and "conservative" have become further strained, as political conservatives see their ideology, which often and dogmatically denigrates the usefulness of government, erode further.

In six months, most of those who are displaced (the formerly so-called "refugees") will have been relocated, with many finding jobs as well as training to take them down other career or employment paths, the result of the remorse the country feels for their plights, and for its sins. Many are afforded opportunities to attend college for the first time in their lives. There are stories and documentaries on CNN and the BBC about what so many have lost in the Gulf States region, the desire of many to return there to rebuild, and about the many who have indeed returned, and rebuilt, against all odds - and even, so many still think, against reason. There are stories about

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what it means to lose an entire city, and stories about the powerlessness felt, once again, by the most powerful nation on earth, but this time with no whipping boy on which to take out its more adolescent frustrations.

In six months, after being reminded that nature can take as many lives as any terrorist, and given the needs of so many people touched by so great a natural disaster, Americans have started to look inward - not in the sense of "America First" but in the sense of "Let Us Take Better Care." We have also begun to look inward in another sense, i.e. to look in the mirror, as individuals. There is a growing commitment to redouble our efforts to undo the structural legacies of our racial and class differences, which lock so many people into transgenerational poverty that ultimately, and certainly, causes both literal and social death. There is a great discussion about moving the country in a new direction, about plotting a new course into the future so that we may "achieve our country," as James Baldwin had faith we could. We have concluded that this will require that we leave off the gratuitous claims about a "rising tide lifting all boats" in any substantial sense, and instead rise to the call to first lift those boats as an act of collective will, boats that are barely seaworthy, barely able to remain afloat.

Young Republicans are declaring that "If that means bigger government, then so be it." Progressives are explaining, for the first time in a long time, that big government need not mean stupid or intrusive government, but *moral governance*. For, it is noted on one news show, that it was not the concern of markets to make it so that the poor of New Orleans had the means to flee. The markets, we will recall, paid little attention to the deaths of thousands; they are indifferent, as perhaps they must be. They are but a tool, after all, albeit a vital one. They respond, they do not *act*. We, however, are the toolmakers and may no longer remain indifferent. It is government that reflects our morality - markets must be *constrained* by it, and it is government that must lead the way in response to the moral demands of the people who, in a democracy, control its levers. Government has a role to play in crafting our souls in the direction of our ideals, even though it has little right to coerce our wills, it has been agreed by panelists on talk show after talk show. And right now, if it would be that we achieve our country, we need our government to remind us of those ideals, for it is the most powerful antidote to a culture that has been ruled and dominated, for far too long, by markets and executives. We are a people, a nation. We must rise to tame the beast of our self-interest and greed. The "Katrina Commission" report, though not using that language specifically, has clearly sent that message, and the nation seems ready to hear it.

The report also talks about what other things we have been ignoring, now that we know what *can* happen if you ignore Gulf Coast marsh lands and ignore a city that happens to be full of poor folks - when you ignore "the least of these." And just what other things might we be ignoring?, the commissioners wondered out loud. More hurricane preparedness for one. The need for better responses to crises, yes. And yes, that includes man-made ones. But what about something even bigger. Something like, say, [La Palma](#), in the Canary Islands, which threatens to unleash a tsunami that could affect much of the East Coast of the United States? Is it not time to get some perspective about a few crazy men with weapons and focus instead, or at least

contemporaneously, on the question of why we turn our backs on our duty to protect millions from natural disasters? Is it because, as James Baldwin suggested, too many Americans "don't really believe in death"? And as for those crazy men with weapons, do they really want to kill us, or is there something else they are after?

It is concluded, in a hybrid and paradoxical spirit of resignation, hope, and mission, that perhaps Katrina was one hell of a wake-up call; one horrific and prophetic warning. Perhaps it may be apt to borrow the words of Baldwin one final time: Katrina told America "no more water, the fire next time." That fire may not be literal, but rather take the form of the anguish we may yet feel for our neglect, for our shortsightedness, for our lack of concern for the weakest and most vulnerable among us - here and abroad.

And so the "Katrina Commission" report concludes that we must use the lessons of that hurricane. We must, finally, engage in one more, massive, moral push, so that we may indeed, achieve our country. And in that push, we must look at what we are doing in the world that would cause those who are crushed by their own (self?-)denigration and poverty to take aim at us and visit man-made disasters on our door step - a discussion that our arrogance and fear have silenced, *until now*.

