

Can This Be Conservatism?

First, the good news. The country approves of John Roberts. After that, it was the vacation from hell for George W. Bush. Every road trip out of Crawford for a

fundraiser or church forced him to drive by Camp Casey and Cindy Sheehan. At summer's end came the most devastating hurricane since Andrew helped make Poppy a one-term.

The day the 17th Street levee busted and New Orleans was flooded, Bush was fiddling with a guitar given him by country-music singer Mark Wills. The next morning, he did a flyover of the Gulf Coast. Not until five days after Katrina came to visit did the 82nd Airborne occupy a city whose police could not cope with its roving gangs of shooters, looters, and rapists.

With commentators and civil-rights leaders castigating Bush for cold indifference to New Orleans's black poor, two out of three African-Americans believe the charge. White America rejects it three to one. And just whose fault is it that, 40 years after the civil-rights revolution and the launch of the Great Society, 40 percent of New Orleans's black population is poor and 80 percent of black children are born to single women?

Over two generations, \$6 trillion has been sunk in the War on Poverty. What have we accomplished? The black community in our cities has suffered a societal collapse, but we have provisioned a permanent army of poverty workers who can be relied upon to mimic Jesse Jackson and slander the president and white America for their lack of compassion.

Already, \$62 billion has been voted by Congress to rebuild the Gulf Coast. For southern scalawags and northern

carpetbaggers, it is going to be Mardi Gras every night in the French Quarter.

But Bush's troubles only begin on the Gulf. In the latest ABC-*Washington Post* poll, 54 percent think he mishandled Katrina, 57 percent disapprove of his job performance, 62 percent believe he is failing in Iraq, and 72 percent think he is doing a lousy job holding down gas prices.

"The Bush Era is over," chortles E.J. Dionne. He may be right. But if Bush's end of the dinghy sinks, America's is probably not going to stay afloat, for Bush, the Lord willing and the water don't rise again, is going to be our president until 2009.

It is hard to see the sun breaking through anywhere.

Afghanistan is becoming a narco-democracy, U.S. casualties have begun creeping up, the old players—Iran, Russia, Pakistan—are putting down bets on their indigenous cronies and awaiting the day the easily distracted Americans tire of the nation-building and go home.

Bush says we will stay in Iraq until we complete our mission: to create a democratic government of a united Iraq that is capable of coping with an insurgency our best and bravest have been unable to defeat. But even before Katrina, most Americans believed it was time to start pulling out.

The fear that inhibits many who opposed this war is that, if we pull out too rapidly, the regime could collapse and a civil war ensue, with Shi'ites supported by Iran moving toward independ-

ence, Kurds doing the same, and Baghdad and the Sunni Triangle sinking into anarchy. Turkey will not tolerate a Kurdistan, and Sunni Arabs are likely to aid their co-religionists in a Sunni-Shia war. Any such civil war could make us pine for the days of \$70-a-barrel oil.

As for a U.S. attack on Iran to smash its nuclear facilities, the neocon fantasy, the response would likely be an Iranian oil embargo and use of Iranian irregulars and Shias to blow up Iraqi and Saudi pipelines, leading to global depression. Then we could all get used to mass transit. With Katrina spending projected at \$100 billion, the deficit will soon be back over \$400 billion, as we yet await the first Bush veto. The trade deficit should be coming in at around \$800 billion.

As for the Bush agenda, ending death taxes appears itself dead and Social Security reform appears off the table. The Bush amnesty for illegal aliens would dynamite the GOP coalition, though that will be redundant if he heeds the siren song of the media establishment—"Be a uniter, not a divider"—and names a centrist to replace Sandra Day O'Connor.

But if the news from Iraq and Afghanistan is bleak, and the deficits are rising, and America is dividing anew over race and war, as in the '60s, and Bush has lost the confidence of the country, what does our brain-dead Democratic Party offer? Snarling nastiness as it hopes to exploit crises, domestic and foreign, without having to offer or defend an idea of its own.

The Weekly Standard, celebrating its 10th birthday, has long trumpeted something called "National Greatness" conservatism. If this is it, "Give me that old time religion, it's good enough for me." ■

[storm warnings]

Fire and Rain

Katrina washed up the urban dreams of conservatives and liberals alike.

By Kara Hopkins

WITH NATURE'S FURY spent over New Orleans, the state of nature moved in. Mayhem reigned and law receded as roving gangs pulled drivers from their cars, stripped stores even of their fixtures, and traded shots with stolen weapons. Random fires lit the night, while holdouts hunkered down in their gutted homes, fearful that any sign of life would draw the riot to their doors. They could expect no aid because the cops had ceded the streets: in one day, 12 chose to turn in their badges rather than face down the mob.

At the Superdome, where some 30,000 fled to escape the floodwaters, one National Guardsman reported 53 deaths in two days—mostly murders. Fights left the losers bleeding in fetid corridors littered with crack vials. At the nearby Convention Center, a seven-year-old boy was found raped and killed, his body stuffed in a freezer. Told of the assaults, Police Chief Eddie Compass sent in a squad of 88 officers—only to have them retreat from the crush of the crowd.

Wyatt Earp has since returned to town. The buses departed, the Superdome drained, there is little left to steal. The Crescent City will be long recovering—if ever. But the torrent took more than centuries of history and so many lives. It washed away a social gloss, revealing rot beneath.

Political profiteers were quick to name it and claim it. Jesse Jackson said, "Today I saw 5,000 African-Americans

desperate, perishing, dehydrated, babies dying. It looked like Africans in the hull of a slave ship." "Is this what the pioneers of the civil rights movement fought to achieve, a society where many black people are as trapped and isolated by their poverty as they were by segregation laws?" asked Fordham professor Mark Naison. Commentator Randall Robinson went further: "New Orleans marks the end of the America I strove for. I am angry against my country for doing nothing when it mattered."

The images of frantic black faces, packed in close body contact, will endure longer in the American memory than footage of Biloxi's leveled casinos. We have wanted to believe the platitudes about the best of all worlds swirling together to create, if not quite an identity, something exotic and equalizing. But as this great American city descended into the Third World, diversity couldn't keep its promises.

During the first 24 hours of coverage, most reporters avoided mentioning the refugees' obvious common denominator, perhaps for fear of making a career-ending generalization. But as the days dragged on and Fox couldn't continue to run the same loop of a lone Hispanic looter and single white lawbreaker, observers were forced to note the racial angle, which has since grown to be as significant a story as the natural destruction.

Sixty-seven percent of New Orleans's population is black. Twenty-eight per-

cent live below the poverty line and account for 88 percent of the city's unemployment. Many were waiting for government checks due Sept. 1—four days after the storm struck. They didn't have cars to leave in, cash to pay for an impromptu vacation, or insurance to cover property they weren't home to protect. But neither did they have a sense that their survival depended on their own initiative—something for which white America might feel more guilty than fleeing the scene in their SUVs.

Decrying the sluggish relief effort, Pastor I.V. Hilliard thundered from the pulpit of his Houston megachurch, "I can't help but think that race has something to do with it"—a sentiment still playing out wherever the Congressional Black Caucus finds a camera.

Katrina lent new context, but the message is familiar: someone should have done something more for victimized black America. One warehouse wall on the lower edge of town read, "Them bitches flood us. F— Bush."

Refugees enraged that their rescue didn't come more swiftly and looters robbing the city's grave shared a common sense of entitlement. "To be honest with you," New Orleans resident Mike Franklin told the Associated Press as he watched the looters, "people who are oppressed all their lives, man, it's an opportunity to get back at society."

A decent society should be able to evacuate its weakest from a disaster