

Race, Representation, and Recovery:
Documenting the 2006 New Orleans Mayoral Elections

A Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines the rhetorical and visual manifestations of race as they figured in the months prior to and within the 2006 New Orleans mayoral election discourses, and examines how the Nagin campaign tapped into a strategy that capitalized upon pre-existing racial tensions exacerbated by Katrina in order to win re-election. Much of the research for this thesis emerged from the making of a documentary film that examines the intersection between race and politics within this same election, and draws upon primary source video interviews conducted between February – May, 2006, and secondary source media and communications materials to posit that race rendered all political response to Katrina impotent, and that the reductive discourse of a racialized campaign was founded upon traditional, outmoded, and predictable interpretations of racial differences facilitated by socioeconomic hierarchies that both provided a structure for and allowed the psychological framework for such a strategy to work.

Key Words

Race, representation, recovery, New Orleans, voting rights, race relations, identity politics, Katrina, Ray Nagin, Mitch Landrieu, Mayor's Race, the 2006 New Orleans Election, Green Space, footprint, shrunken footprint, and right to return.

Introduction

There is no issue more wrenching than race in America. The issue of race resides in the deepest and more secretive place in the American soul. Our attitudes about race are not in the open to be thoughtfully examined, but lie within the mind. Similarly, the most devastating manifestation of those racial attitudes does not take place openly, but occurs behind the closed curtain of the voting booth.¹

Upon returning to New Orleans after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the failure of the Federal levees in 2005, a common question that New Orleanians would ask each other, regardless of age, gender, socio-economic group, or race, was “how much water did you have in your house?” Invariably the response was anything from two to ten feet, or about how lucky they were. However, the negative repercussions of the levee failures disproportionately affected African-Americans within Orleans Parish, which is the constituency to comprise New Orleans voters, and this dramatically altered the racial demographics of the city for many months, and had a significant impact upon the course of the 2006 New Orleans mayoral elections.²

Until Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, and since the end of Maurice “Moon” Landrieu’s term in May 1978, New Orleans had seen black leadership in City Hall, but suddenly, this pattern looked set to change. In the run up to the qualifying period for the 2006 mayoral elections, it had become apparent that the 484,674 population had been reduced to perhaps a third of this with citizens displaced all over the United States, and that the pre-Katrina racial demographic percentages of 66.6% African-American and 26.6% white, which had constituted the city’s demographic landscape, had now changed to a more even balance between the races.³ In the 2006 primary election there was a 15.8 percent decline in black registered

¹ A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., Foreword, Voting Hopes or Fears? White Voters, Black Candidates & Racial Politics in America, by Keith Reeves, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) xiii. A. Leon Higginbotham Jr. is Chief Justice Emeritus, U.S. Court of Appeals and Public Service Professor of Jurisprudence at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

² William H Frey, Audrey Singer, and David Park, “Resettling New Orleans: The First Full Picture from the Census.” The Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program. “One year after the storms, the city of New Orleans black population declined by 57 percent, while its white population decreased by 36 percent. Yet the city remained a majority minority community, with blacks making up 58 percent of its population. Meanwhile, as a whole, the seven parishes surrounding New Orleans lost a greater share of their white population.” <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2007/07katrinafreysinger/20070912_katrinafreysinger.pdf>. Last accessed May, 2009. At the time of the election, these numbers were not available, and nobody knew the precise demographics of those who had returned. For further information about the disproportionate affects of Katrina upon African-American communities, see also “In the Wake of the Storm: Environment, Disaster, and Race After Katrina,” (Pastor, Bullard, Boyce, Fothergill, Morello-Frosch, and Wright) Russell Sage Foundation, New York. <http://www.russellsage.org/publications/Reports/index_html/080227.488787>. Last accessed May, 2009.

³ Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC), <http://www.gnocdc.org/def/nbhd_people.html>.

voters since the 2002 mayoral runoff in contrast to a 5.1 percent decline in the number of white registered voters.⁴ Academic studies have shown that in cities where the racial makeup of voters is “racially competitive,” or at more even levels, racially divided or “block voting” is at its most pronounced.⁵ New Orleans mayoral election observers witnessed this factor in 2006, but other dynamics came into play to make this election a little more complex.

Historically, the majority of the highest land in New Orleans had been settled or bought by whites, and due to the unequal nature of New Orleans residential expansion over the decades as well as to advances in the technologies facilitating the draining of swampland, people of color of all socio-economic groups had predominantly come to inhabit areas that had been developed in the lower-lying parts of the city.⁶ In consequence, when eighty percent of Orleans Parish flooded following Hurricane Katrina, the result became the involuntary exodus of the majority of the African-American communities of all socio-economic groups. Majority white communities were devastated by flooding to the east in St. Bernard Parish, and although they were also significantly effected within Orleans Parish, their voting power actually increased during the 2006 New Orleans mayoral elections for several reasons. Firstly, because whites were proportionately less adversely effected than African-American communities, and hence able to return to the city sooner and in greater numbers, and secondly, because the substandard literacy levels and the economic circumstances of a large proportion of African-Americans in New Orleans meant that the absentee ballot process actively discouraged maximum voter participation.⁷

During this period, the Diasporas of the New Orleans population following Hurricane Katrina remained the dominant topic of discussion from inside and outside of the city. The situation made political polling virtually impossible, and the reality was, that accurate statistical information of any kind was difficult to obtain. As the Louisiana official in charge of state attempts at guaranteeing free and fair elections,

⁴ Baodong Liu and James Vanderleeuw. Race Rules: Electoral Politics in New Orleans, 1965-2006. (8).

⁵ *Ibid*, (40).

⁶ For a detailed exploration of the city’s demographic shifts over the centuries, see Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics Before the Storm, Richard Campanella.

⁷ “A 2002 U.S. Department of Education study concluded that 40% of adult New Orleans residents read at “level-one literacy,” which is below 6th grade level, and a disproportionate number of these low-level readers are African-American and poor.” Hill, Lance. “Jim Crow in Fine Print,” Commentaries by Lance Hill, Southern Institute for Education and Research, <<http://www.southerninstitute.info/commentaries/?m=200604&paged=2>>. Last accessed, May 2009.

Secretary of State Al Ater was able to obtain the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) list of those evacuees who had applied for Federal hurricane relief; however, by the time the election period began seven months after Katrina, the shifting fortunes of those relying on the kindness of others for accommodation while in involuntary exile rendered questionable the accuracy of those addresses. Accurate information concerning those who were still displaced was scarce, but the changed racial demographic appearance of New Orleans was as apparent to the naked eye as the devastation revealed by the receding waters, and the implications that resulted from this change were widespread within news coverage of the city during the months following Katrina. As New York Times journalist James Dao observed, "race [had] become a subtext for just about every contentious decision the city face[d]: where to put FEMA trailers; which neighborhoods to rebuild; how the troubled school system should be reorganized; when elections should be held."⁸

A large number of displaced and returned residents thought that a mayoral election should not even take place until enough people could return home, and that holding one at this time violated the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which stated that no practice or procedure could deny or abridge the right to vote on account of race or color, and to these concerned citizens, the election was therefore illegal.⁹ Other factors arose in 2006 that were to draw historical comparisons with those direct disenfranchisement techniques such as the "poll tax" or "literacy tests," that were used in the past by white officials to minimize African-American voter participation in the South. There was also convincing evidence that the lack of sufficient government funding to assist the Secretary of State in reaching out to displaced voters violated the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights.¹⁰ In a historically racially polarized environment made worse by the horrors of Katrina, how would the rhetorical and visual manifestations of *race* factor into these historic elections?

As a result of the Federal levee failures, hundreds of thousands of citizens had become evacuees scattered throughout nearly every state of the Union, and as the re-manned pumping stations drained the water

⁸ James Dao, "In New Orleans, Smaller May Mean Whiter," (New York Times, January 22, 2006).

⁹ "No voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure shall be imposed or applied by any State or political subdivision to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color." Our Documents, <<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=100&page=transcript>>. Last accessed June, 2009.

¹⁰ "A Critical Assessment of the U.S. Commitment To Civil and Political Rights – Toward Securing Equality and Justice For All" (70-71), <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/ngos/lccrul.pdf>> (last visited April 18, 2009).

from within Orleans Parish, Americans witnessed bickering and finger pointing between leaders at city, state, federal, and presidential levels. To add to this, the deplorable situation so many citizens found themselves in during the immediate aftermath of the storm exacerbated an already racially polarized city, opening up old wounds of suspicion and distrust.¹¹ After the evacuation of many flood survivors, New Orleanians were then stranded outside of Louisiana in the hundreds of thousands, many separated from their jobs, identification cards, mailboxes, or permanent addresses.¹² Furthermore, prior to Hurricane Katrina, a vast number of New Orleans citizens had been living well below the national poverty line, which meant that a significant number of evacuees did not have the benefit of a savings account, transportation, e-mail, or internet access, and many slept on air mattresses waiting for FEMA hurricane relief checks in order to secure a rental for themselves and their children, and these citizens were overwhelmingly African-American.

The post-disaster difficulties experienced by those in involuntary exile during the early months following the storm and their struggles in recreating the necessities vital to the recreation of a healthy environment for themselves and their loved ones cannot be overstated. The extensive flooding that resulted from the levee failures had devastated hundreds of thousands of lives and homes, disrupted the basic functions of the city from the rule of law to the normal school day, but it had also destroyed hundreds of polling stations and voting machines, and less than six months after the chaos of the immediate aftermath of the Hurricane, and just over two months following the presentation of a controversial plan advocating the shrinking of the city's geographical footprint, New Orleans entered into the 2006 Mayoral election cycle. Numerous national and international news outlets maintained the correspondents they had put in place following Katrina, and this local election captured national and even international audiences.

Suffering fierce criticism over his less than admirable leadership skills during the aftermath of the storm as well as for the city's lack of hurricane evacuation preparation, like all incumbents during this time, Mayor Ray Nagin had become politically vulnerable. New Orleanians, returned and still displaced, were to witness a close election in which Nagin's top four challengers were white, one of whom, was the Louisiana

¹¹ Arnold H. Hirsch and A. Lee Levert, "The Katrina Conspiracies: The Problem of Trust in Rebuilding an American City," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 207-219 (2009).

¹² See CecilFilm interview with Silas Lee, Ph.D., March 29, 2006. [MR 21](#), 00:16:02:00.

Lieutenant Governor, Mitch Landrieu, the son of the last white mayor who had left office nearly thirty years earlier. As Times-Picayune staff writer Frank Donze wrote in a March 3 article, “Six months ago, incumbent Ray Nagin appeared headed for a problem-free re-election. But the city’s struggle to recover from the catastrophic storm – along with critics attacking Nagin’s performance – has turned conventional wisdom on its ear, leaving him in a fight for his political life.”¹³ However, history was on Nagin’s side, and as John Mercurio pointed out on NPR Weekend, “no mayor in New Orleans in the past sixty years has been turned out of office and no first term mayor in the past eighty years has lost office.”¹⁴

Moon Landrieu’s 1977 departure from City Hall signaled the beginning of the period in which African-Americans would attain a voting majority within New Orleans, and since the early 1980s, elections have involved a variety of cross-racial voting reflecting variations upon the same theme: New Orleans voters have formed trans-racial political coalitions in the election of alternating progressive and reactionary mayors that reflected the mood and tenor of the times, and in 2002, Ray Nagin fit within this moderate to conservative continuum.¹⁵ In these past elections where black and white voting population levels were not at parity, mayoral victories largely constituted a merging of different black and white interests where policy and platform were more in the foreground than race, where white voters co-opted candidates of color in whom they could find representation to their benefit, where distinctive socio-economic and racial groups made compromises to promote their respective agendas, and at times, merely representation without specific agendas. As political scientists Baodong Liu and James Vanderleeuw found in their research, “whites may develop a strategic approach to maximize their own political power while their ideology may or may not remain the same.”¹⁶ Indeed, if politics is the art of strategically applied compromise within the public sphere, then politics involving significant minority populations, in both senses of the word, would need to be more pronounced in the art and application of concession.

¹³ Frank Donze, “Mayor’s race gains four candidates,” Times-Picayune, Metro Section, Friday, March 3, 2006.

¹⁴ John Mercurio, Interview with Debbie Elliot, “All Things Considered,” NPR Weekend, April 23, 2006.

¹⁵ By 1980, The New Orleans population had reached 557,515. Of this number 308,149 were African-American (55%). See Campanella, Geographies of New Orleans, (23). Baodong Liu and James M. Vanderleeuw point out that “the last white mayor who did not rely on a majority of the black vote, Victor Schiro, was elected in 1965.” Race Rules: Electoral Politics in New Orleans, 1965-2006, (7). It is significant that this was also the year of the Voting Rights Act. For a more in depth breakdown of the nature of the history of coalitions, see Race, Performance, and Approval of Mayors, Susan E. Howell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

¹⁶ Baodong Liu and James M. Vanderleeuw, Race Rules: Electoral Politics in New Orleans, 1965-2006, (127).

The 1969 and 1973 elections in which Moon Landrieu was voted into office involved concessions of this kind, and in the 1969 runoff, he was elected as a progressive Democrat from a coalition of 90 percent of the black vote and 39 percent of the white vote. Moon Landrieu's legacy came to be defined by his active promotion of African-Americans within his Administration, as department heads and as prominent political participants. After two terms in office, Moon Landrieu was followed by another progressive Democrat and the first African-American mayor of New Orleans, Ernest Nathan "Dutch" Morial in 1977 and again, in 1982. During his first term, Morial had garnered 19 percent of the white vote and 95 percent of the black vote, which saw a union between progressive white voters and African-American voters, and his rise to power signified a new time in city politics, allowing for unprecedented levels of black representation within local political power structures.¹⁷

Greatly contrasting to his rival and predecessor, the more reactionary Sidney Barthelemy pioneered his own brand of racial politics, and in 1986, he pushed a pro-business agenda that appealed to white conservatives, and he was brought to office receiving most of his support from the white community, while Bill Jefferson, his principal opponent in the election, had garnered a much larger majority of the African-American vote. In his first election, Barthelemy had merged conservative middle-income white and black voters, and through this coalition conservative interests again found representation in City Hall. This coalition didn't necessarily include a program for the betterment of all New Orleanians, and as the historian Arnold Hirsch writes of the Barthelemy election, "Morial's progressive biracial coalition had been transformed into a conservative one that knit together whites and a patronage-oriented black leadership that had no agenda beyond its own perpetuation."¹⁸

However, when the white candidate Donald Mintz entered the race in 1990, thinking the incumbent sufficiently unpopular to allow for more crossover voting, Barthelemy switched from being the candidate to receive the most white votes to become the candidate to receive the most black votes, and the contrast of these

¹⁷ Edmund W. Lewis, "Morial family reflects on Dutch's legacy and the challenges facing Barack Obama." Louisiana Weekly, (New Orleans). Monday, Feb. 2, 2009. <<http://www.louisianaweekly.com/news.php?viewStory=906>>.

¹⁸ Arnold Hirsch, "Harold and Dutch: A Comparative Look at the First Black Mayors of Chicago and New Orleans," The Making of Urban America, ed. Mohl, Raymond A. (279). See also, Lyle Kenneth Perkins, "Failing the Race: A Historical Assessment of New Orleans Mayor Sidney Barthelemy, 1986-1994." M.A. Thesis, Louisiana State University, 2002.

two elections illustrated the mutability of the candidate's race as a factor depending upon his or her agenda, his or her primary base of support, and the competition of the opponent in the runoff. Indeed, "Four years later, facing white challenger Donald Mintz, Barthelemy depended on near-universal black support and scant white backing to win."¹⁹ Intriguingly, it is said that Dutch Morial died before a much-anticipated endorsement of Mintz, and that had he done so, this might have significantly altered Barthelemy's ability to garner black votes during his re-election bid. When Marc Morial followed in his father's political footsteps, and entered City Hall in 1994 and again in 1998, the Mayor's office was led back to a more progressive coalition, which saw a union of white progressives, and African-American voters.

The pendulum of moderate progressives to conservative coalitions swung again when Ray Nagin entered into politics in 2002. Nagin had not previously held elected office and came from the private sector. As Vice President of the New Orleans cable company, Cox Communications, he had been a member of the New Orleans Business Council, a majority white organization that represented the top sixty-five businesses in Greater New Orleans. Like Barthelemy, the Republican turned Democrat Ray Nagin came from a pro-business platform and had no agenda for ameliorating the economic opportunities for the majority of African-Americans within Orleans Parish. Nagin was funded largely by a white conservative business elite, and was first elected Mayor of New Orleans with 86 percent of the white vote and 40 percent of the black vote, winning against the popular New Orleans Police Department Superintendent Chief Richard Pennington, whose ties to Marc Morial were seen by the majority of white conservative voters as antithetical to their interests, despite his success in reducing crime rates.²⁰

As a light-skinned and Catholic person of color, Nagin's "Downtown" and often-debated "Creole" credentials drew other interesting parallels to the conservative Barthelemy, a mayor viewed by local black media outlets as having enough links to the "Uptown white power structure" to be controlled by it.²¹ Like

¹⁹ Gordon Russell and Frank Donze, "23 likely battling just to face Nagin in runoff." Times-Picayune, Sunday Metro Edition, Sunday, March 5, 2006.

²⁰ Numerous articles refer to Nagin as a Republican prior to his 2002 run, which is denied by Mayor Nagin in Sally Forman's book Eye of the Storm: Inside City Hall During Katrina (1). Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007. See also, BBC News | Americas | Profile: Ray Nagin, < <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4623922.stm>>. "Mayor emerges as force to be reckoned with: Has not shied away from pointing fingers at state, federal authorities," Richard Foot, CanWest News Service, National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) Canada), Sept. 7, 2005.

²¹ Allen Johnson, "And Now, the Mayor's Race," New Orleans Tribune, November, 1985: 6. Quoted by Baodong Liu and James M. Vanderleew in Race Rules: Electoral Politics in New Orleans, 1965-2006. (62).

Barthelemy, Nagin was seen as a candidate whose interests intersected largely with those of the white community of most socio-economic levels, and although his first Administration was marked by some effort to oust local corruption, Nagin's aim was mainly targeted towards African-Americans and the working-class, most notably tax evaders and unlicensed New Orleans cab drivers. But although the majority of black support went to Pennington, Nagin was also elected to office by middle-income African-American and white voters, and like each of the recent mayors before him, Nagin built a coalition in order to win. Had hurricane Katrina not devastated the city of New Orleans, Nagin would have maintained his more conservative alliance between black and white voters and would have been re-elected to a second term without significant opposition. However, as the 2006 election was to reveal, the city is to a large extent still redefining the nature of these coalitions, and the deterioration of inter-group trust within race relations post-disaster played a prominent role in the election and early recovery period.

In 2006, twenty-nine years after Moon Landrieu had left office, the pattern of coalition building looked as if it might radically change. The 2006 Primary election involved an inordinate number of challengers to Nagin's re-election bid, and these twenty-three challengers reinforced the idea that to many white election observers, this election would be a referendum on the incumbent's leadership skills as tested during hurricane Katrina. However to many African-American election observers and to Nagin's chief campaign manager, the veteran political strategist Jim Carvin, the large number of white candidates running constituted a continuation of a re-assertion of narrow racial interests first signaled by the moneyed class within the white community in the early days following Katrina. Concerning this economically influential group that had backed Nagin in 2002, Carvin said, "They were delusional. They thought that they could recapture City Hall, and I'm really talking about the moneyed class in New Orleans. They felt that Nagin was so crippled that he could not win."²²

²² CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, May 14, 2007. [MR 82](#), 00:11:59:00.

In the months following the storm, numerous articles and essays began to appear on the Internet referencing conspiracies to *whiten* New Orleans, and many attested to these as “real and substantial fears.”²³ National print and online media reported talk of a “new” New Orleans which had begun to surface within conversations amongst the largely white, wealthy, and Uptown populations that had returned to the city for the most part unscathed. Combined with the stark shift in New Orleans demographics, it was therefore little wonder that within the months following the storm locals would also witness the fracturing of a more inclusive rebuilding rhetoric, and this had fundamental implications upon how the 2006 elections played out. These less than inclusive interests at the hands of a hitherto white minority had been voiced in the early days after Hurricane Katrina, within a series of closed-door meetings in Dallas and Houston in which the meetings’ organizers had done little to reach out to prominent African-American officials in exile, and one of these meetings was widely publicized by print and online media outlets after the fact. The most written about example of these sentiments was Christopher Cooper’s Wall Street Journal (WSJ) article titled “Old-Line Families Escape Worst of Flood And Plot the Future,” where Cooper quotes former Nagin supporter and Regional Transit Authority head James Reiss:

The new city must be something very different, Mr. Reiss says, with better services and fewer poor people. "Those who want to see this city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, geographically and politically," he says. "I'm not just speaking for myself here. The way we've been living is not going to happen again, or we're out."²⁴

Reiss was Chairman of the majority white New Orleans Business Council and before moving into the world of money management and real estate he ran a lucrative automation and control systems manufacturer called TANO Corp for thirty years, and is defined by many sources as the archetypal old-line Uptown New Orleanian with downtown business interests; successful, well-connected, influential, and powerful behind the scenes of several mayoral campaigns, including Mayor Nagin’s 2002 election run.

²³ Rudolph Lewis, ‘The Heart & Soul of America Are at Stake --Which Way Now?’ ChickenBones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes, <<http://www.nathanielturner.com/conspiracytowhitenneworleans.htm>>. Last accessed January 2009.

²⁴ Christopher Cooper’s September 8, 2005 Wall Street Journal article fails to come up in WSJ or LexisNexis searches; however, the online version can be found at <<http://www.moralgroup.com/NewsItems/Media/p15.htm>>. Last accessed May, 2009.

The sentiments reported by Cooper in the WSJ article were in some shape or form shared by a significant number of prominent white citizens, and whether due to the dramatic alterations in racial demographics resulting from Hurricane Katrina, the outrage felt by vocal white citizens following the ineptitude of early disaster recovery, or as a mark of outright opportunism, the 2006 Mayoral Election involved an unprecedented number of white candidates qualifying, many of whom would not have otherwise run.²⁵ This factor had particularly interesting significance due to a trend noted by political scientists that “the historic pattern among New Orleans mayoral elections [is that] black mayoral candidates receive a majority of the vote cast by whites only in the absence of a viable white contender.”²⁶

Taking little account of the concerns of the predominantly African-American Diaspora, such opinions were first vocalized by prominent men within the white business community, and were then further voiced by the early rebuilding plans of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOBC), a body primarily made up of citizens appointed by Mayor Nagin before it had become apparent that he had lost support from within the white conservative community. Nagin had established the BNOBC following Katrina, and its purpose was to “finalize a master plan to advise, assist and plan the direct funding on the rebuilding of New Orleans.” The BNOBC’s mission statement specified its goal as directed “uniquely for every citizen;” however, the most controversial aspects of the plan did not represent the interests of those who had suffered most during the flooding.²⁷

Therefore, in the months following Hurricane Katrina, there had been enough evidence coming from within New Orleans for many exiled and returned African-Americans to sense a narrow re-assertion of racial interests from amongst the New Orleans white community, and many feared the rolling back of the recent few decades of political progress and representation. As the higher ground Uptown had not suffered during the floods, and white citizens had come to occupy most of this land before homeownership had become a

²⁵ This question was asked of mayoral candidates by a moderator at a debate sponsored by the Urban League, Marriott Hotel, March 31, 2006. See CecilFilm tape MR 23 and MR 24. See also ACORN website, <http://acorn.org/fileadmin/KatrinaRelief/report/One_Year_Katrina_Web.pdf>.

²⁶ Baodong Liu and James M. Vanderleeuw, Race Rules: Electoral Politics in New Orleans, 1965-2006, (125). For a useful exploration of such trends see Voting Hopes or Fears? White Voters, Black Candidates & Racial Politics in America, Keith Reeves. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

²⁷ The BNOBC’s mission statement is: “To finalize a master plan to advise, assist and plan the direct funding on the rebuilding of New Orleans culturally, socially, economically, and uniquely for every citizen.” “Bring New Orleans Back,” <<http://bringneworleansback.org/Agenda/>>. Last accessed July 2, 2009.

possibility for most African-Americans, it was somewhat inevitable that this was the community that was first able to return home, and from which the dialogue about rebuilding emerged, but at the expense of those most devastated communities being left outside of it.

In the absence of coherent governmental information centers for displaced people, many citizens became more resourceful, and networks emerged that emanated from within and catered towards different cultural and social groups: for the Vietnamese community, for students, and for people within specific industries. Evacuees who were able pooled resources to help each other out; however, as the nature of re-grouping with family members post-disaster fell along cultural lines, they also fell along socio-economic and racial lines. Computer literacy became a determining factor for the speed at which evacuees were able to re-group with family members, as well as register for federal hurricane relief. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita had coincided with new information technology capabilities such as Web 2.0, which were gaining more mainstream use, and such user platforms were invaluable for their facilitation of “people finder efforts.”²⁸ However, pre-storm socio-economic and racial inequities meant that some displaced New Orleans communities were more computer literate than others, and the least adept had greater difficulty in realizing the benefits from such new IT developments.

Following the devastation wrought by the failure of the federal levees, talk of a geographical and demographic “shrunk footprint” entered into the public discourse of those who had returned as well as within rebuilding plans such as the one espoused by the BNOBC, which provided little inclusion for the return of flooded neighborhoods that had been predominantly African-American. This term – along with others such as the “right to return,” which referred to every citizens right to come home – became key components of a 2006 New Orleans electoral glossary, and due to the correlation between race and those most affected by the flooding, such terms held dissimilar meanings for different New Orleanians. As it became apparent that many socially and economically-disadvantaged evacuees lacked the means to return – or neighborhoods to return to – a white minority become cognizant of itself as a determining and political force

²⁸ For more on how Information Technology developments facilitated communication between communities in exile see Fred Stutzman’s article “Leveraging Web 2.0 Collaboration for Good,” [AOL Developer Network](http://dev.aol.com/article/2007/web20_for_good), <http://dev.aol.com/article/2007/web20_for_good>. Last accessed May, 2009.

that had not been possible since African-Americans had attained a voting majority. It is significant that the rhetoric that reflected this realization, regardless of the degrees in which it was expressed, conspicuously bypassed the earlier paradigm of coalition building that had been either necessary – or politically expedient – between the races while New Orleans had been a majority African-American city.

As Ray Nagin’s first term drew to a close the recovery discourses continued, and New Orleans headed towards a contentious election. White conservatives’ sentiments concerning a “new” New Orleans, where rebuilding efforts might make use of a now desolate and largely de-populated landscape to pursue opportunities of changing the city, were then amalgamated by more white liberal interests, but still remained exclusionary in nature and were hardly focused on re-populating the city exactly as it had been pre-Katrina. When used in the context of rebuilding efforts, phrases such as a “*new* New Orleans” and words such as “opportunity” became racially charged in a manner not seen before the storm, and many displaced citizens felt somewhat justifiably that at their root lay ulterior motives for reconstructing a city that would exclude them.

White conservatives and white liberals had both rallied behind Nagin as a political newcomer in 2002, and the composition of the BNOBC, which was formed in the months following Katrina, largely reflected the interests of the more business-oriented amongst this support.²⁹ Dr. Lance Hill of the Southern Institute for Education and Research, a non-profit race relations center whose mission statement describes the Institute’s dedication “to improving ethnic relations in the Deep South through tolerance, education, and community training,” spoke of the nature of the BNOBC in relation to Nagin’s original political base, “Nagin appointed the BNOBC when I think that he was politically identified with and beholden to the wealthy white elite, and I think it was reflected by and large in the leadership of the Commission, and the Commission was not a democratic institution.”³⁰ Nagin’s shifting relationship with the BNOBC plan, and his equivocation on

²⁹ In referring to the composition of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, the Wikipedia entry for the BNOBC notes that, “For reference, and because race has been a contentious issue, the race of the members is indicated.” [Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bring_New_Orleans_Back_Commission), <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bring_New_Orleans_Back_Commission>. Last accessed July 10, 2009.

³⁰ CecilFilm interview with Lance Hill, Ph.D. [MR 90](http://www.southerninstitute.info/), 08:37:01:00, April 10, 2009. There were several versions of the BNOBC’s “Action Plan for New Orleans: The New American City,” one of which can be found online at <<http://www.bringneworleansback.org/Portals/BringNewOrleansBack/Resources/Urban%20Planning%20Final%20Report.pdf>>. See also to view the members’ names within the Urban Planning Committee and for the six Sub-committees. For more information on the Southern Institute for Education and Research, see < <http://www.southerninstitute.info/>>.

the rebuilding permit moratorium subsequent to the plan's unveiling in early January 2006 was to prove significant in his ability to hold onto his white conservative electoral base.

Chaired by the Republican Real Estate developer Joe Canizaro, and supported by 2002 Nagin backer, James Reiss, the BNOBC unveiled its first plan, which advocated a reduction of the city's footprint, and questioned the viability of restoring the most flooded neighborhoods, the majority of which had been predominantly African-American. The plan also promoted a moratorium on the issuing of building permits within these neighborhoods for the next four months during which time, still-displaced citizens were asked to gather together to prove the viability of their neighborhoods returning, also factoring in the long-awaited publication of FEMA flood-maps to gauge the necessity of raising the height of their homes.³¹ This most controversial aspect of the BNOBC plan was the now infamous "green space map," which appeared to propose that the most flooded residential areas return to swampland.

Political observer and pollster Dr. Silas Lee, the first African-American graduate of the University of New Orleans doctoral program in Urban Studies, noted the divisive nature of the proposed rebuilding strategy, "green space means elimination, because you're replacing spaces and communities where people live which gave this city some unique character, with some open areas."³² Others more involved in the BNOBC plan also expressed their reservations; Paul Rookwood, a principal of Wallace Roberts & Todd, the Philadelphia-based consulting firm charged with creating the BNOBC action plan for rebuilding the city of New Orleans, was quoted in an online interview:

We heard lots of ideas that didn't stand up to scrutiny. For example: that the deeply flooded areas should be transformed into wetlands. That doesn't make sense. The soil is compacted and contaminated, and you'd have to remove all the infrastructure — roads, buildings, and so on — and then attempt to recreate wetlands below sea level.³³

³¹ Frank Donze and Gordon Russell, '4 Months to Decide, Nagin panel says hardest-hit areas must prove viability' ([Times-Picayune](#), Wednesday, January 11, 2006. New Orleans Edition).

³² CecilFilm interview with Dr. Silas Lee, March 29, 2006. [MR 21](#), 00:06:01:00.

³³ 'On the Ground in New Orleans,' American Planning Association [Planning Magazine](#), April 2006.

<<http://myapa.planning.org/katrina/reader/planning1apr2006.htm>>. Last accessed June 2009. Paul Rookwood declined a request for an interview concerning his 2006 comments published online.

Combined with the BNOBC's advocacy of a moratorium on issuing rebuilding permits in the most devastated areas, both of these issues created an enormous amount of fear and distrust between the communities that were already back, and those that were still attempting to return home.

To add to this, Nagin's white supporters had begun to abandon him between one of the closed-door meetings in Dallas shortly after the storm, and his January equivocation over those BNOBC recommendations that were unfriendly towards the African-American communities most devastated by the flood.³⁴ This timing suggests that Nagin's equivocation sent a final signal to those in the white New Orleans community who were advocating for a "smaller footprint" that he would no longer be representative of their newfound interests. The Mayor's decision not to endorse wholeheartedly these more controversial recommendations of his own commission, while also advocating rebuilding "smartly," reflected his uncertain position in the upcoming election, and this prevarication was further evidence of the political tightrope that he walked post-Katrina.³⁵

Dubbed "Ray Reagan" for his conservative views and largely unpopular with the majority of black voters prior to Katrina, Nagin campaign strategists believed that African-Americans would vote for him, especially within this uncertain post-Katrina political climate, and during this time it is possible to observe a significant shift in Nagin's electoral rhetoric as well as his stance on policies that had begun to be interpreted by the black and white communities along racial lines, such as the footprint issue.³⁶ The most publicized shift in such electoral rhetoric, which was understood as such by both black and white communities, was Nagin's "Chocolate City" speech given on Martin Luther King Day, in which Nagin attempted to reach out to African-American displaced citizens by calling for New Orleans to remain a majority-black town.³⁷

Another Republican turned Democrat but white Uptown contender in the form of Audubon Nature Institute Chief Executive Ron Forman came to replace Ray Nagin as the conservatives' candidate of choice shortly after the unveiling of the BNOBC plan and before the 2006 mayoral election period began. Although

³⁴ "The first campaign finance reports of next month's mayor's race are out, and one of the juiciest tidbits is that Reiss has donated \$5,000 to Audubon Nature Institute CEO Ron Forman. Reiss' wife gave another \$5,000." "Nagin appointee puts money on rival," Stephanie Grace. Times-Picayune, Sunday, March 26, 2006. Metro Editorial.

³⁵ See CecilFilm interview with Dr. Lance Hill of the Southern Institute for Education and Research, April 10, 2009. CecilFilm MR 90A.

³⁶ For more on interpretations of the footprint issue, see CecilFilm interviews with Dr. Silas Lee, and with LaToya Cantrell of the Broadmoor Improvement Association.

³⁷ For a full transcript of Nagin's speech, see Times-Picayune online <http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/news/t-p/stories/011706_nagin_transcript.html>. Last accessed July, 2009.

Nagin held their support prior to Katrina, the situation seemed to be altering, and those political scientists' observations about white voters supporting black candidates only in the absence of a viable white contender seemed to be playing out. In New Orleans, the term "Uptown" is largely interpreted as synonymous for white and more affluent, and alluding to the old-line and almost exclusively white carnival krewes drawing members from this area of the city, white Tulane political scientist Dr. Thomas Langston noted a correlation between the "flags of *Mardi Gras* royalty" alongside the "Vote for Ron Forman" signs, as well as that Forman was the son of a Jewish welder, which was significant due to the prevalent anti-Semitism within white, old-line, *Mardi Gras* krewes, country clubs, and dining societies in New Orleans.³⁸ But as well as running the Audubon Nature Institute, Forman hosted the annual "Zoo-to-Do," a benefit event on the calendars of New Orleans white society in support of the Audubon Nature Institute, and as a result, was a well-known figure in Uptown New Orleans.

Like Nagin, Forman had not previously held political office, which his supporters saw as a strength, and he had exhibited business and organizational skills in the private sector that they wished to see applied to the running of city government, and significantly, with the racial demographic shifts post-hurricane, his campaign managers disregarded the prior necessity of coalition building that had been essential to ensure victory within recent history. Also like Nagin, through his social and business connections, Forman had ties to the white economic powerbrokers within the business community, and he was to promote a platform that highlighted economic development over equity, downplayed social justice issues, and largely ignored the sentiments expressed by a new post-Katrina phrase gathering momentum within the African-American communities, the "right to return," which referenced every citizen's right to return home, regardless of which neighborhood he or she had lived in prior to Katrina.³⁹

³⁸ CecilFilm interview with Thomas Langston, Ph.D., Department of Political-Science, Tulane University. [MR 22](#), 00:22:24:00. "The anti-Semitism of much of New Orleans society had long been a dirty secret. Even though the original mystic societies had Jewish members, by the twentieth century most of the so-called elite krewes excluded them." [All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival](#), Reid Mitchell. http://books.google.com/books?id=dz1SUIbn3MAC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_navlinks_s.

³⁹ The term may have derived from "right of return," which was first used in the context of Israel, Palestine, and the occupied territories, and refers to paragraph 11 of Resolution 194, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, which resolved that 'refugees wishing to return to their homes should be permitted to do so and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return.' [Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XVIII Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964-67](#).

Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu, a more progressive Democrat and son of the last white mayor, was the incumbent's main viable opponent, and he emerged to Nagin's political left. Appearing more capable of garnering significant support from the center, Landrieu entered into the race as the candidate with stronger Democratic credentials than either Forman or Nagin, which was an advantage in a hitherto distinctly Democratic city. Landrieu had spent two terms as a State Representative for the 89th District before becoming Lieutenant Governor in 2003. A few commentators and voters chose not to credit Landrieu's years in the State House of Representatives as effective political experience, with some pundits noting rather pointedly that his position as Lieutenant Governor only qualified him to deal with culture and tourism, an industry the city's dependence upon which had placed it in a vulnerable position, and subject to the whims of the leisure economy as well as to hurricanes. New Orleanians were to notice such negative repercussions upon the local economy following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and again after Katrina in 2005, both of which deterred tourists from visiting the city for many months to come.⁴⁰

In the 2006 election, white media outlets as well as many white political commentators largely expected Landrieu to benefit politically from the fame of the Landrieu name, which they also anticipated would aid him in drawing a certain amount of crossover voter support from within the African-American community, albeit few white conservative votes. As mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu's father Moon had placed African-Americans in unprecedented positions of visibility and authority as department heads and members of his Administration, and was thus credited by many with beginning the "integration" of City Hall; however Moon was also blamed by some old-line white conservatives for the demise of white control within city politics, and both factors were to play into his son Mitch's 2006 candidacy under the term "legacy," which, although decades old, held very different meanings for various constituents. To many African-American voters of different political persuasions, as well as to some white liberals, this legacy was now thirty years old, and it was generally felt that no debt of gratitude remained towards the Landrieu family on

<http://nasser.bibalex.org/Data/USDocWeb/HTML/XVIII-Arab-Israeli%20Dispute-1964-1967/www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xviii/c.html>. Many New Orleanians displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita objected to the term 'refugee,' used by many media and news organizations, and which implied that they were not US citizens.
⁴⁰ "Nobody harbors [...] illusions about the lieutenant governor's powers beyond his choice of scissors for ribbon cutting." John Maginnis, Business Report, December, 6, 2005. <<http://www.businessreport.com/news/2005/dec/06/landrieu-sets-his-course/>>.

this specific point, and of course, that Moon Landrieu had only instigated what should have begun years earlier.

But as New Orleans looked whiter in 2006 than it had since Moon had been in office, what became a prevailing undercurrent to this mayoral election was that City Hall could “go white” for the first time since Moon Landrieu had left office nearly thirty years earlier; that without the pre-storm African-American population levels, the city might have lost its majority black population of all socio-economic groups for the foreseeable future, and that a racial group that had not produced a winning mayoral candidate for many decades might now have an occasion to do so. That such speculation dominated political discussions within the white communities did little to prove the falsity of another related subject equally prevalent within black communities; that the Secretary of State’s efforts to guarantee maximum participation on the part of displaced voters, the majority of whom were African-American, had been sufficient. Indeed, the large number of white candidates entering into the field seemed to have the joint effect of simultaneously confirming black candidates’ reservations about white voter support in the absence of a black majority, while also testing this racial voting balance of coalition-building that had guided New Orleans politics since the federal safeguards of the modern Civil Rights era had begun to take effect. Furthermore, the dearth of viable black candidates as alternative challengers to the incumbent’s re-election bid compounded an emerging fear amongst African-American communities of losing political representation.

Using primary source video interviews largely conducted between February and May of 2006 and secondary source media and communications materials, this thesis examines the rhetorical and visual manifestations of race as they figured in the months leading up to and within 2006 New Orleans Mayoral election discourses, and shows how the Nagin campaign tapped into a strategy that capitalized upon pre-existing racial tensions exacerbated by Katrina in order to win re-election. The thesis examines a glossary of terms peculiar to the election and delineates a set of factors that conspired in the vote’s outcome: the failure of early recovery rhetoric – employed by many returned residents as well as by urban planners, politicians, and local news media – to acknowledge or make allowances for ameliorating the disproportionate suffering of African-American voters in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina; the exclusionary tone of this rhetoric; the

difficulties of holding an election or even taking accurate polls in the months that followed the storm; the widespread uncertainty about the incumbent's agenda; the still more widespread shock over the racial inequities exposed by the storm, inequities which were mirrored topographically in the varying elevations and vulnerability to water around the city, which, in turn, not only informed but radically intensified disagreements about the city's possible "shrunk footprint," and, finally, the rhetorical moves the candidates themselves made as they navigated these tensions: Nagin's performance at the mostly white Dallas meeting versus his "Chocolate City" speech, the electorate's continued association of Landrieu with issues concerning "legacy" and "dynasty," and Landrieu's decision, which may have cost him the election, to neither "go negative" nor gain momentum within a discourse that transcended race.

It will also explore whether, given that race came to dominate campaign rhetoric, the incumbent did actually fuse an unlikely coalition of African-Americans and Republicans in order to win re-election, while also examining whether Landrieu could have entered into another dialogue that challenged the incumbent in a more assertive manner bypassing the old paradigm and bringing New Orleanians together outside of the limiting lens of a racialized electoral campaign. This thesis posits that the reductive discourse of a racialized campaign was founded upon traditional, outmoded, and predictable interpretations of racial differences facilitated by socioeconomic hierarchies that both provided a structure for this fear as well as allowed a psychological framework for such a strategy to work and suggests that a series of inter-related factors not only determined the outcome of the election before it began, but that the Nagin campaign's manipulation of pre-existing tensions restricted inter-group dialogue, thwarted debate, and set a narrow framework for recovery, the negative ramifications of which New Orleanians are still witnessing, three years later.

Chapter 1: Early Days

The Difficulties of Holding an Election: Voting Rights

In early 2006 the population of New Orleans was unknown, but the most optimistic of estimates put it at around 150,000, one third of what it had been six months earlier, and with the rest of its citizens displaced indefinitely. New Orleanians whose homes were on high ground had largely returned, but many of them still struggled within an environment that looked like and in a sense, *was* a post-conflict zone; they negotiated the post-Katrina landscape with endless difficulties, from finding open grocery stores to functioning schools for their children to attend or jobs to return to. Life was difficult for those fortunate enough to have come back, but these citizens had access to news from local television stations and didn't suffer the disconnect that comes with "root shock," from being ripped away from home soil for an extended period of time, and planted in an alien environment with few resources or friends in similar circumstances nearby.⁴¹ Mainstream as well as fringe discussions regarding the organizing of the upcoming elections occurred against this backdrop, but were more complicated still.

How could the city hold an election considering the displacement of so many of its citizens? How could the Secretary of State ensure that the provisions enshrined in the Voting Rights Act of 1965 would be upheld when voting machines had been flooded, whole neighborhoods had been laid to waste, and citizens were still scattered across the nation in hotels, churches, and in the homes of friends, distant cousins, and strangers? With access to the ballot restricted by geography and culture and access to information about the candidates largely absent outside of the city, the exiled peoples of New Orleans found themselves in a unique situation. The logistics of how to ensure the democratic process could occur effectively were fraught with problems; as well as how to guarantee the displaced equal access to the ballot as those citizens who had returned, how would the Louisiana Secretary of State address practical concerns such as the consolidation of voting precincts or the replacement of flooded polling stations and voting machines?

⁴¹ Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It*. (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2004).

Then Louisiana Secretary of State Alan Ray Ater was charged with guaranteeing that the elections would run smoothly, and that they would be as accessible to as many as possible. Ater had stepped into the office following the premature death of W. Fox McKeithen, who had fallen in his Baton Rouge garage, become paralyzed, and then developed an infection before resigning a month prior to Katrina, and only a few hours before his death. Ater had been First Deputy Secretary of State, and stood in to finish part of McKeithen's term, until the special election could be held in September 2006. To many who had lost their homes and their jobs in New Orleans, and who were still spread across the country, the current dilemmas of then Secretary of State were a distant concern and largely unrelated to their newfound surroundings, and many were navigating complicated logistics of their own in their attempt to return home.

In recent history, New Orleans had been a predominantly Democratic and African-American city within a largely white Republican state, and discussions surrounding the holding or delay of the elections predictably fell along partisan as well as racial lines. However, there were also numerous legal factors to hinder the more practical facilitation of elections on home soil. Louisiana law specified that citizens who wanted to register to vote by mail must have voted at least once in person before being able to cast an absentee ballot.⁴² Ater feared that if Louisiana legislators failed to change this law, federal courts would find the state in violation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and then take over the New Orleans elections. Ater said, "I could see the headlines across America right now [...] They'll say it's another thing that Louisiana can't handle on its own."⁴³ Proponents of a speedy election as well as some detractors advocated the consolidation of precincts damaged beyond repair into what would become "Super Sites," and neighboring Jefferson Parish Clerk of Court John Gegenheimer suggested the shipping of resources from the predominantly white and unscathed Jefferson Parish, "over the invisible line that separates it from Orleans."⁴⁴ However, under Louisiana's Election code, it was also against the law to bring in out-of-parish poll workers and commissioners, both of which there was a significant shortage because so many citizens remained displaced.

⁴² Marsha Shuler, "Courts may take over the election if law unchanged, official warns" (The Advocate, Capitol news bureau, 2theadvocate.com | News | Feb. 3, 2006).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Christopher Tidmore, "Election delay violates law, say critics" (Louisiana Weekly, December 19, 2005).

The city was ill prepared to hold elections, and Secretary of State Al Ater was quoted in the Times-Picayune saying that, “it was impossible to prepare polling places and track down voters so soon after Katrina.”⁴⁵ Recognizing the unprecedented difficulties of holding an election as scheduled, in December 2005 Governor Kathleen Blanco issued Executive Order KBB-2005-96, which postponed the February 4th elections indefinitely due to the unprecedented damage to the city and the vast numbers unable to return. In doing so, she had extended Mayor Nagin’s mandate and bypassed the criteria set out within the City’s Home Rule Charter.⁴⁶ Voting Rights advocates were understandably in favor of this delay, and needed time to ensure that more displaced voters would be able to return home, and that facilities might be put in place to guarantee sufficient voter access and avoid the disenfranchisement of a large portion of the pre-Katrina electorate. But conservative critics cried partisan motives, and one “Good Government” advocate was quoted as saying, “They’re worried their voters might be gone for good.”⁴⁷ Two lawsuits were filed charging that Blanco’s Executive Order violated the State Elections code and the City’s Home Rule Charter, one of which was filed by New Orleans attorney and 2006 New Orleans Republican Mayoral candidate, Rob Couhig, who certainly stood to benefit from fewer African-American voters within Orleans Parish, and the developer Pres Kabacoff, Chief Executive of HRI Properties.⁴⁸

The motivations behind those wanting a speedy election and those wanting a further delay were debated in newspapers, on blogs, and around kitchen tables. Was this a partisan effort on behalf of Democrats, the manifestation of a fear that a large proportion of their voting base was gone forever? Or was this a genuine effort to provide more time to gather the tools needed to ensure as healthy an election turnout as possible? Calls for a speedy election also witnessed the joining of white conservatives with some prominent white liberal voices; Clancy DuBos, editor of the Gambit Weekly “somerberly warned on local news Channel 6 that New Orleans would look like a third world country if [it] didn’t hold the election as scheduled.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Bruce Egler, “List of polls gets further revision.” Times-Picayune, Wednesday, January 18, 2006.

⁴⁶ Christopher Tidmore, “Election delay violates law, say critic.” Louisiana Weekly, December 19, 2005.

⁴⁷ C.B. Forgotston, ‘Election delay violates law, say critics.’ Christopher Tidmore, Louisiana Weekly, December 19, 2005.

⁴⁸ Beverly S. McKenna, ‘Publisher’s Notes,’ New Orleans Tribune, Volume 22, Number 2, April/May 2006.

⁴⁹ Beverly S. McKenna, “Publisher’s Notes,” New Orleans Tribune, Volume 22, Number 2, April/May 2006.

Federal Judge Ivan Lemelle had threatened that if the election was not held by the end of April, that he would intervene and set the date. Secretary of State Al Ater spoke to a crowd of journalists and one documentary filmmaker at a press conference in Baton Rouge with Civil Rights leaders the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, and then president of the NAACP, Bruce Gordon. Ater said, “And quite candidly, Judge Lemelle told me on January 1st, “Mr. Ater, if you don’t set this date in April, I’m going to do it for you.”⁵⁰ Black media outlets and voting rights groups noted that African-Americans would be disproportionately affected by an election continuing as scheduled, and the publisher of the local publication the New Orleans Tribune noted that this “was the first of several rulings sent down by the judge [...] that were not in the interests of the majority of African-American voters.”⁵¹

New Orleans mayoral elections adhere to the open primary system where candidates of both Democratic and Republican persuasions – as well as independents – jockey to gain more than 50 percent of the votes cast; should any candidate fail to achieve which, a secondary provision then comes into effect with the top two candidates entering into a deciding runoff election. By January, 2006, opposition to the election continuing as scheduled had failed to gain momentum, and the date was set for April 22, with a possible runoff May 20, and New Orleans City Council approved of the creation of six Super Sites, which consolidated many of the Katrina flooded precincts.⁵² The failure of subsequent lawsuits advocating further delay until more displaced citizens could return home continued to generate significant attention from the national Civil Rights leadership as well as from local voting rights advocates. Without any significant African-American candidates challenging Nagin’s re-election bid, the situation pointed towards an interesting electoral phenomenon emerging in the months ahead, which was developing a distinctly racialized tone. Certainly this election had unprecedented voting rights ramifications, and as state and city officials busied themselves in preparation for the election, local as well as national Civil Rights organizations such as the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) began to pay more attention.

⁵⁰ See CecilFilm Tape MR 19, 00:15:10:00, Baton Rouge press conference.

⁵¹ Beverly S. McKenna, “Publisher’s Notes,” New Orleans Tribune, Volume 22, Number 2, April/May 2006.

⁵² WWL-TV, January 5, 2006, <http://www.wwltv.com/cgi-bin/bi/gold_print.cgi>. Last accessed April 2009.

On Wednesday March 9th, 2006, the Rev. Jesse Jackson held a press conference at the Israelite Baptist Church in the predominantly black neighborhood of Central City, in which he made public opponents' objections to the April 22 date, and announced the decision to take this objection to the U.S. Department of Justice, which had maintained Louisiana as one of the Southern states under the watch of their voting rights division since the modern Civil Rights era. Louisiana State Senator Cleo Fields had written a letter detailing the complaints he and many others viewed as countering the protections stated in the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Fields was quoted in the Times-Picayune:

The state's proposed changes in precinct location as well as voting practices and procedures will lead to dilution in minority strength, retrogression in minority citizens' ability to legitimately win municipal office, and complete disenfranchisement among many of the city's displaced citizens, largely because of a lack of information and utter confusion.⁵³

To exacerbate an increasingly widening divide between white and black New Orleans communities post-Katrina, many white media outlets and voters alike recognized *race* as a factor in the election, but failed to acknowledge the voting rights infringement complaints that were circulating within African-American communities. Dr. Lance Hill, a commentator sensitive to reducing the growing racial divide, wrote that, "most of the city's white population, which made it back months ago, can't understand what all the fuss is about: why don't displaced blacks simply register and vote absentee?"⁵⁴ Keith Schmidt, a white voter interviewed in Mid City lamented over the situation, "I think race is important, because some people feel slighted, even though they may not be, but some people definitely feel slighted." Schmidt recognized the prevalence of race as an influence upon the election, adding, "It is about race, but it's sad that it is [...] Everything is about race." He continued, "I just think that the black people feel that they were slighted, that they took the brunt of the damage, and they feel like they were the ones who evacuated [...] that they can't vote, but they can vote if they want to."⁵⁵ Kimberly Guidry, another white voter who said she had "lost everything during the storm" was especially unsympathetic to those still displaced, and thought that the election should not have been

⁵³ Jeff Duncan, "Lawmaker says election violates voter rights," Times-Picayune, March 9, 2006.

⁵⁴ Lance Hill, "Jim Crow in the Fine Print." "Commentaries by Lance Hill, Southern Institute for Education and Research, Thursday April 20, 2006 (First published in BayouBuzz.com, <<http://www.southerninstitute.info/commentaries/?m=200604&paged=2>>. Last accessed June 2009.

⁵⁵ CecilFilm interview with Keith Schmidt, April 15, 2006. MR 41A, 02:15:15:00.

postponed at all. In making a direct analogy of their situation in relation to her own in returning to the city, Guidry said:

I have two children—an infant and a five-year-old. I'm living in a travel trailer, but I made it back. I made it back, but I'm here. I have nothing to my name, but I'm here. And if I can make it back with no money, anybody else can make it back here with no money. And if they can't make it back here with no money, they don't need to be voting.

Guidry viewed the voters whom Civil Rights advocates sought to bring into the election in economic terms that would be detrimental to her own personal situation and complained, “And I don't want them sitting in a hotel room with me footing the bill; waiting and complaining about how they can't vote. I'm sorry—If you're not here, you can't vote.”⁵⁶ Exhibiting less than ideal democratic sentiments that proved to be largely inaccurate, many white voters also questioned whether that many of the people who were displaced would have voted in the New Orleans mayoral election anyway. Jeff Crouere, a conservative political commentator who has held positions within the Louisiana Republican Party and hosts the Louisiana political television show “Ringside Politics” said:

Here's the deal. New Orleans had a population of 462,000 before Katrina. Of that, there were 259,000 registered voters – so you had a large number, about 200,000 people who were not registered voters so you think about the people who were not registered voters. A lot of those were poor; a lot of those were not plugged in, those effected by Katrina. So all of the people that were displaced by Katrina were people that were not registered voters.⁵⁷

However little attention was paid by any of the white media outlets to the prevalent suspicion in African-American communities concerning the transparency and integrity of the absentee ballot process as a whole, and of a widespread distrust in the system itself, which many felt was rigged against the maximum participation of minorities. The very silence of white media outlets and political commentators on these issues was in itself a form of speech, and sent signals that they were not pressing concerns. Certainly there were numerous historical precedents of election fraud in New Orleans and Louisiana to justify distrust in the electoral process, but more recently the chaos surrounding Florida ballots within the U.S. Presidential election

⁵⁶ CecilFilm interview with Kimberly Guidry, April 15, 2006. [MR 41A](#) 02:21:17:00.

⁵⁷ CecilFilm interview with Jeff Crouere, March 3, 2006. [MR 18](#), 01:10.28:19.

in 2000 was a topic that interviewees raised repeatedly, and also due to the Supreme Court's subsequent ruling in favor of the Republican candidate George Bush over the Democrat Al Gore, which was to have a disproportionately negative impact upon low-income communities.⁵⁸ Karen Carvin Shachat, a Nagin campaign advisor and daughter of veteran campaign strategist Jim Carvin, directly linked widespread African-American distrust of the 2006 New Orleans electoral system with the Florida situation:

Because of the historic, literally government imposed sanctions against black voters for so many years, where they felt that their votes would not going to be counted correctly. And I think even going back as far as the presidential election in Florida, where people had a sense, especially in the black community, that Al Gore's votes were not counted properly, and that sort of thing, that this election could be stolen.⁵⁹

Political commentator Dr. Silas Lee was one of many academics to note the practical concerns surrounding the absentee ballot process, especially for the more socially and economically disadvantaged who remained in involuntary exile. Lee spoke of the cumbersome paperwork, more arduous for those lacking the benefits of a good education, and he spoke of the shortage of information or the availability of Internet access for many of the displaced. But he also spoke of cultural traditions more prominent amongst the elderly within the black community that went unnoticed by many white political observers; the tendencies of wanting to do things in person and over the counter, actions such as paying an electricity bill or visiting a bank teller that would provide the customer with a stamped receipt, rather than mailing an envelope or using an ATM. Many of these cultural traditions had historical roots that incorporated a justified and healthy distrust of white organized systems that had for many generations not only treated people of color as second-class citizens, but which had also maintained procedures that prevented African-Americans from integrating into white society. Furthermore, the benefits of mainstream consumer culture had developed during the early part of the century during the Jim Crow era of institutionalized segregation, which all too often excluded African-Americans.

In order to qualify for in-state and federal assistance and not diminishing their desire to return home to Louisiana, many New Orleans evacuees had been advised to obtain driver's licenses from the state in

⁵⁸ See CecilFilm interviews with Dr. Silas Lee and with Jim Carvin.

⁵⁹ CecilFilm Interview with Jim Carvin and Karen Carvin Shachat, MR 82, 00:39:08:00.

which they found themselves after Katrina. However, this resulted in much confusion about their electoral residency running up to the New Orleans election, and rendered questions on absentee ballot application forms even more intimidating. The historian Lance Hill obtained a copy of “Louisiana’s Mail Voter Registration Form,” and noted its foreboding language concerning the applicant’s status as a resident of Louisiana, and that it contained vocabulary “which include[d] Latin as well as English, [that] would challenge most college educated readers.”⁶⁰ Reminding us that “40% of adult New Orleans residents read at “level one literacy,” Hill goes on to describe having to consult an attorney to explain the meaning of legal phrases such as “full or limited interdiction,” and draws attention to threatening warnings of high fines or imprisonment should the applicant have included false information.

Like many New Orleans voters, many candidates qualifying for the mayor’s race had also lost their homes due to the flooding, and certain other New Orleans election pre-requisites had to be adapted to the post-Katrina landscape, such as the necessity of political candidates listing a New Orleans address as part of their candidacy. In this election, eight of the 23 challengers listed addresses outside of the city, with one, Roderick Dean, including an address as far away as Louisville, Kentucky.⁶¹ Arrangements for satellite polling stations were made for various locations around the state of Louisiana, but significantly and despite prolonged protests from Louisiana citizens, none was made for locations out of state, in cities such as in Houston or Atlanta, which between them were believed to have become temporary homes for over 100,000 New Orleanians.

Due to these factors, local leaders contesting the elections made persuasive arguments that Iraq had fairer elections; if the American government had facilitated the voting process to enable an Iraqi to vote in New York for an election occurring in Baghdad, then with all of the advances in modern technology, how could a displaced American citizen not vote in Houston, which was within the same country? Bureaucratic difficulties surrounding the absentee ballot initiation process combined with the realities of maximizing minority voting power led to numerous accusations from Voting Rights advocates that the upcoming election

⁶⁰ Lance Hill, “Jim Crow in the Fine Print,” Commentaries by Lance Hill. April 11, 2006. First published in Bayoubuzz.com. <<http://www.southerninstitute.info/commentaries/?m=200604&paged=2>>. Last accessed June 2009.

⁶¹ Frank Donze and Gordon Russell, “Ballot jammed for N.O. primary.” Times-Picayune, Saturday, March 4, 2006.

would place hindrances upon voters that effectively rendered the process akin to those notoriously applied by those seeking to disenfranchise minority votes during the Jim Crow era, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, all of which Lance Hill’s testimony would seem to prove.



Illustration1: “Iraq Has Fairer Elections,” The New Orleans Crescent City Bridge March, April 1, 2006. CecilFilm video footage still, MR 27, 04:32:22:11.

On April 1, 2006, National Civil Rights leaders the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton joined former Louisiana State Representative and Senator Cleo Fields, U.S. Representative William Jefferson, D-LA, and a broad array of politicians from around the country in an important and significant gathering. Then President of the NAACP Bruce Gordon, former New Orleans Mayor and President of the Urban League Marc Morial, and international celebrity comedian Bill Cosby were among a host of recognizable faces who joined displaced and returned African-American New Orleanians who gathered together at the foot of the Orleans Parish side of the Crescent City Connection for one of the largest Civil Rights Protests held with the city’s recent memory.

In undertaking the march, participants sought to highlight troublesome voting rights issues at stake in the 2006 New Orleans election, and symbolically, they replicated an infamous crossing taken on foot by Katrina evacuees who had sought to flee the devastation of New Orleans in the wake of the 2005 flooding. In the original journey, predominantly African-American flood survivors were met at the other side not by – largely unscathed – Jefferson Parish residents with open arms, but instead by hostile and predominantly white Gretna Police officers and Jefferson Parish officials, who, having observed the disorder broadcast by national media outlets from Canal Street in Downtown New Orleans, feared unloosed mayhem, and more specifically, unloosed black mayhem. Instead of offering flood survivors relief from their already traumatic experiences,

these law enforcement officers blocked a public highway and proceeded to drive Orleans Parish residents back into the chaos that they were attempting to escape.

The 2006 Bridge March garnered a significant amount of national attention, but went largely unnoticed by the more conservative leaning white mayoral candidates, and it was attended by very few people from within the New Orleans white community. The manner in which the majority of white mayoral candidates responded to the Bridge March would ultimately work to reveal their disconnect from the mood of the African-American electorate, and combined with the voting rights issues that were raised in the many speeches before the procession, the large number of Bridge March participants provided an interesting foreshadowing of the course of election itself. In an interview after a political debate, Ron Forman's campaign manager Tim Phillips said that he didn't know anything about the upcoming march, but that he had heard about it on the news. Elaborating a little further, he said, "It's extraneous to what we're doing; we're conducting ourselves to win this election and what people are doing to postpone it is really outside our peripheral and we're really not paying much attention to it."⁶²

The association of the march with the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton and their perception from within the white community was likely an influencing factor on Forman's decision not to attend; undoubtedly there was a certain amount of distrust of people perceived as "outsiders," from both the white and black New Orleans communities; however, negative sentiments about Sharpton and Jackson were significantly more pronounced from within the white community. Reflecting back upon this time, Nagin's principal campaign strategist Jim Carvin spoke of them in a manner that reflected the views of a significant portion of the white community, "I would say that if you look at all major disasters Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, are always there like the vultures hovering around the disaster and exploiting it for their own purposes."⁶³ Other factors may have also been relevant.

Cleo Fields had been a principal organizer of the Bridge March, and since 1997 when FBI surveillance video had captured him accepting a large amount of cash from former Louisiana Governor Edwin

⁶² CecilFilm interview with Tim Phillips, March 27, 2006. [MR18](#), 01:07:41:25.

⁶³ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, May 14, 2007 [MR 82](#) 00:59:31:00.

Edwards, many within the white community have held Fields in disregard – not simply as a “corrupt politician,” but a “corrupt, black politician.” Fields had been prominent in advocating for the voting rights of the displaced, and referring to him as the local link in bringing about the meeting of two very different kinds of men, historian Douglas Brinkley said, “Jackson acted on the behest of Cleo Fields who became the chief organizer for Ray Nagin of bringing out the African-American vote.”⁶⁴ Brinkley noticed the significance of Nagin’s appearance at the March, and reflecting upon his well-known unpopularity within the African-American community prior to Katrina, Brinkley saw this as a defining moment in his campaign. That day, Nagin had appeared on stage with a number of prominent African-American leaders such as Marc Morial and others who were well-known to have not supported either his 2002 candidacy or the platforms he espoused throughout his first term, and yet together his wife, the Mayor was part of the front row alongside Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton as they made their way across the Mississippi River.



Illustration 2: “Medium Wide Shot,” the Crescent City Bridge March, April 1, 2006. Still from CecilFilm video footage, [MR 27](#), 04:45:15:25.

Illustration 3: “Shaking Hands,” the Crescent City Bridge March, April 1, 2006. Still from CecilFilm video footage, [MR 27](#), 04:56:27:17.

Brinkley suggested that it was as though Nagin was being publicly endorsed by Marc Morial – and other prominent leaders at the March such as Jackson and Sharpton – over Landrieu, whose family he referred to as “almost Civil Rights royalty,” a term which contrasts greatly with Nagin’s more damning epithets, such as “Ray Reagan.” In light of the close friendship between the Morial and Landrieu families, Brinkley found this especially pertinent, and speaking of Marc Morial’s mother, Brinkley said, “Cybil Morial is very close to

⁶⁴ CecilFilm interview with Douglas Brinkley, May 22, 2006. [MR 69](#), 01:25:45:17.

Moon Landrieu's and they are almost one and the same; so when Jesse Jackson showed up in the election and started showing up shaking hands with Ray Nagin, that was a very powerful statement that Jesse Jackson was making."⁶⁵

Regardless of a candidate's views of Jackson, Sharpton, or Fields, there were numerous other less controversial prominent officials present that day, as well as important voting rights concerns that were highlighted, and in the same manner that silence on certain electoral issues in itself became a form of speech, a candidate's attendance at such an event also sent a message in a non-verbal form of communication, and it was significant that both Mayor Nagin as well as Mitch Landrieu were present, and equally significant that Landrieu did not march. The Forman campaign's reticence over their candidate attending was unsurprising; at this point, it was unlikely that Forman would gain significant African-American support. Forman had garnered few endorsements from prominent African-Americans, and with the exception of NewOrleansBlack.com founder Anthony Patton, whose online marketing firm was focused towards urban professionals and who was rumored to have benefited from business associations with Forman, the majority of New Orleans African-Americans viewed him as unrepresentative of their interests, and his campaign was focused upon a more conservative and white base.

In contrast, Mitch Landrieu had reached out to a diverse group of voters, and he needed a significant number of crossover votes from within the African-American community in order to win election. Landrieu's dilemma was how to show himself as sympathetic to voting rights concerns but without appearing too strategic; he appeared before the Bridge March began, exchanged pleasantries with those in the crowd he knew and many with those he did not, and gave several media interviews attesting to the important present-day Civil Rights concerns that the event sought to highlight. But to anyone observing Landrieu closely that day, it was easy to notice a cautious reserve absent from the African-American political office holders who were there. It was certainly not his place to divert attention from the event itself, and Landrieu was undoubtedly aware of potential accusations that he was seeking to use the occasion for his own political benefit.

⁶⁵ CecilFilm interview with Douglas Brinkley, May 22, 2006. [MR 69](#), 01:24.47:18.

However, a quieter moment seemed more revealing, in which Landrieu joined African-American leaders on a small raised area to the right of the main stage that enabled the media throng to view their subjects better. Almost like the realization of the situation as it was evolving and in a moment of near-transparent honesty, quite suddenly Landrieu looked around him as if too conscious of his whiteness, and stepped down from the platform.⁶⁶ This quite different quiet moment of non-verbal communication from that conveyed by his presence there most probably went unnoticed by the majority of the marchers, and yet it was symbolic of Landrieu's overall dilemma throughout his 2006 mayoral campaign. It is difficult to believe that he would have been concerned about any white conservative voters' thoughts as to his attending the Bridge March; he was not going to get the majority of their votes. Moreover, Landrieu would need significant support from within the black community in order to enter into the Runoff, and yet, considering Landrieu's often repeated desire that New Orleans and his candidacy sought to "get beyond race," how could he run a unifying "post-racial" campaign while he was so conscious of his own?

⁶⁶ CecilFilm footage, April 1, 2006. [MR 25](#).

Early Days: Qualifying and the Realignment of Interests

Following the controversies surrounding the dates of the first election post-Katrina, the 2006 New Orleans primary was scheduled for April 22, with a runoff, if necessary, set for May 20. The mood of the each election was distinctly different, and both involved voters casting their ballots for very different reasons. In the primaries, the crowded field of mayoral candidates included local political office holders, New Orleans personalities, community activists, lawyers, and more business oriented candidates from the private sector. In this election, much of the early campaign rhetoric to dominate the public discourse held different significance depending on the voter, and an already traumatized electorate was especially sensitive to the subject of race. Furthermore, it was generally predicted that the runoff was to consist of an unlikely battle pitching a hitherto conservative African-American incumbent against a white progressive Democrat, and provide African-American voters anxious about losing political representation with a difficult choice: allow City Hall to go white for the first time in nearly thirty years, or re-elect an incumbent about whom many had mixed feelings.

In early March 2006, the Associated Press revealed further Katrina leadership failures at the presidential level in a leaked video in which, prior to Katrina making landfall, experts warned George W. Bush that the Federal levees might fail, and that this could potentially lead to catastrophic loss of life. Viewers saw their Commander in Chief asking no questions of the high powered group with which he was linked via video conference, and also witnessed their president reassuring scientists and telling his FEMA chief to inform Louisiana leaders that they were “fully prepared.” Considering Bush’s earlier statement “I don’t think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees” in the light of the delayed Federal response to Hurricane Katrina and the deaths of over 1,500 people, such news compounded the anger of New Orleans citizens, and contributed to the unreal quality of living in the city during this time.⁶⁷ It also set the stage for a strong debate about the nature of effective leadership and hurricane preparation at a local level. During these first days of qualifying for the 2006 mayoral election, news reports of a different nature compounded this unreality.

⁶⁷ “Video shows Bush Katrina warning.” BBC News, Thursday March 2, 2006.

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4765058.stm>>.

Joe Warrick, “White House Got Early Warning on Katrina.” The Washington Post, Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2006.

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/23/AR2006012301711.html>>. Last accessed May 2009.

An arrest warrant had been issued for the Clerk of Criminal District Court Kimberly Williamson Butler, who was nominally in charge of the logistics of the upcoming New Orleans elections, for an unrelated matter. Claiming fears that her office was being taken over, Butler had ignored a court order and refused to allow Judge Ed Lombard to manage her office's FEMA application and to oversee the cleaning of the court's flooded evidence room. She had now disappeared to "an undisclosed location." Referring to the upcoming mayoral race, Chief Judge Calvin Johnson was quoted as saying, "We've got a major thing happening with people qualifying for public office, and the official who's ultimately in charge isn't around? That's a little troublesome."⁶⁸ Before the doors were locked on qualifying and astonishing political observers, the absconding Clerk of New Orleans Criminal District Court then surrendered herself to Calvin Johnson, the judge enraged at her defiance of court orders, and announced before television cameras her intention to run for mayor.⁶⁹

By the Friday March 3 deadline, an unprecedented number of candidates, 23 challengers to the incumbent, and 24 including Ray Nagin, had qualified.⁷⁰ Returned New Orleanians homeowners were still trying to navigate insurance claims, chart a clear course through Louisiana Recovery Authority bureaucracy, and adapt to life in an altered landscape. Many returned and still displaced citizens were still angry with leadership failures at all levels and were not in a mood to appreciate the foibles of Williamson Butler. In the vein of World War I poets using satire in the trenches to maintain their own sanity, a few local comedians incorporated the Clerk of Court's escapades into their comedy sketches; however, a starker refrain that was to become increasingly audible was that such antics – like the many other humorous vignettes featuring distinctive Louisiana politicians – were no longer funny, that the stakes were higher, and that the world was watching.⁷¹

All things considered, the controversial first post-Katrina *Mardi Gras* had been deemed a critical success, qualifying for the upcoming mayor's race had begun, and although Times-Picayune staff writers

⁶⁸ Brian Thevenot, "Clerk is still on the lam." Times-Picayune, Thursday, March 2, 2006.

⁶⁹ Brian Thevenot, "Clerk of court comes out of hiding." Times-Picayune, March 4, 2006.

⁷⁰ Frank Donze and Gordon Russell, "Ballot jammed for N.O. primary." Times-Picayune, Saturday, March 4, 2006.

⁷¹ New Orleans comedian Chris Champagne provided light relief for many returned citizens during an uncertain time. For an example of World War One gallows humor, see the line in R.C. Sherriff's play Journey's End, "War is bad enough already, but war without pepper — it's bloody awful."

wrote of the growing number of candidates on the ballot “guaranteeing that the city’s first post-Katrina election will be one of the wildest and hardest to predict in recent history,” they also anticipated the necessity of a runoff election with near certainty.⁷² The impossibility of gathering accurate polling data was one of the most prominent and interesting features of the 2006 electoral landscape. While taking wholly inadequate account of the views of displaced citizens still spread across the nation, polls were interesting weather vanes signaling the political mood of those who had returned. The Times-Picayune published the results of a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll of 804 returned residents, which revealed that Landrieu might be able to attract enough African-American voters to win election, and the numbers illustrated the vulnerability of Ray Nagin’s re-election bid.

As with the majority of polls during this time, this poll excluded still displaced citizens, and its participants included 88 more whites than African-Americans.⁷³ It is only in the thirteenth paragraph that Times-Picayune staff writer Bruce Egger acknowledges the potential unreliability of the poll, considering that “more than half the city’s population is missing and no one knows what the relative participation rates among returned and still-displaced voters will be.”⁷⁴ Landrieu was expected to garner the majority of white liberal votes; however, the survey was one of the many early signals to his camp that there was a possibility of him going after a coalition of black and white voters, noting that 45% of those polled “might consider voting for” Mitch Landrieu, and only 31% answering the same question concerning incumbent Ray Nagin. Egger noted that the 31% figure was the same for the number of African-Americans polled who said that they would definitely vote for Nagin, against only 9% of white voters.⁷⁵ Unpopular within white conservative circles, Landrieu needed significant support from within African-American communities to get into the runoff, and the Landrieu campaign actively courted crossover votes as well as the white political center ground.

⁷² Frank Donze, “10 file papers to run for mayor.” Times-Picayune, Thursday, Mar. 2, 2006. Donze, Frank. “Mayor’s race gains four candidates.” Times-Picayune, Friday March 3, 2006.

⁷³ Bruce Egger, “Poll has mixed news for N.O. mayor.” Times-Picayune, Thursday, March 2, 2006.

⁷⁴ Frank Donze and Gordon Russell, “Ballot jammed for N.O. primary.” Times-Picayune, Saturday, March 4, 2006.

⁷⁵ Bruce Egger, “Poll has mixed news for N.O. mayor.” Times-Picayune, Thursday, March 2, 2006.

The influence of newspapers' reporting upon the course of elections is almost impossible to calculate, but certainly the media reflects the concerns of some citizens, while also guiding opinion to a certain extent. Since the disappearance of a broader range of daily newspapers in New Orleans, and more recently, after the merging of the State's Item into the Times-Picayune in 1980, only this one daily is tasked with reflecting concerns that are representative of the community as a whole, the New Orleans Tribune and the Louisiana Weekly going to press on a less frequent basis. Despite efforts to diversify the focus and the opinions within the only newspaper, local accusations that it had for some time consistently failed to reflect views more commonly held within African-American communities can find some justification. In the 2006 elections, Times-Picayune staff writers acknowledged that the pre-Katrina majority African-American city had disappeared, noting that '[now] black and white residents are thought to be in relative parity,' but all too often the Times-Picayune reported rosier information that heralded the achievements of the Secretary of State in charge of the election as an incredible feat, considering the post-Katrina circumstances.⁷⁶

An unprecedented number of mayoral candidates that qualified in 2006 were white, and Times-Picayune staff writers Frank Donze and Gordon Russell noted that the changed demographics of the city "certainly encouraged the entry of 10 white candidates [...] into the mayor's race," before noting that it would be a mistake to attribute the "crowded ballot completely to opportunism driven by demographics," and compared the mayor's race to another election on the same ballot, that of City Council, District A, the whitest of New Orleans districts, that had attracted seven candidates qualifying to challenge its incumbent.⁷⁷ But, such an analogy seems spurious when considering the city as a whole, and that since New Orleans had seen African-American mayors, never had the city witnessed such a large number of white challengers to the Mayor's office. During an interview at City Hall in early April 2006 concerning this issue, Mayor Nagin said:

Several of the candidates came in thinking that the demographics of the city had changed. And they had convinced a lot of people that it was a city that was no longer gonna [*sic*] be predominantly black. It was fourteen candidates came up, and I was the only African-American, and the last day of qualifying they figured out that wasn't a

⁷⁶ Frank Donze and Gordon Russell, "Ballot jammed for N.O. primary." Times-Picayune, Saturday, March 4, 2006.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

smart play, so, you know, several African-Americans put their money up and they're in the race.⁷⁸

Similarly, the Times-Picayune's reporting of the early voting period at the eleven satellite voting stations around the state deemed the process very successful in reaching out to African-American voters in particular. However, as Lance Hill noted in a commentary article for the Southern Institute for Education and Research, the newspaper failed to acknowledge important factors that would shed a more negative light on the story it was reporting. Hill writes, "What was reported under the subheading "Large Black Turnout," was Louisiana Secretary of State Al Ater's estimate that 70% of the 10,585 people who cast ballots were black, which translates into 7,409 black votes. That sounds like a lot of votes unless you include what the Times-Picayune omitted: that these were 7,409 voters out of a total of 188,166 eligible black registered voters."⁷⁹ Hill observes that the real story was that "96% of the eligible black voters did not show up to the satellite polls and will have to vote absentee or in person."

All in the Same Boat: Landrieu's "Post-racial" Strategy

The media generally acknowledged the top tier candidates as consisting of the incumbent Ray Nagin, Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu, and Audubon Nature Institute CEO Ron Forman, and as early as March 5, University of New Orleans political-scientist Susan Howell predicted the almost inevitable runoff would pit a white candidate against an African-American candidate, that is, the incumbent Ray Nagin, against either Ron Forman or Mitch Landrieu.⁸⁰ Candidates deemed second tier included businessman and Republican candidate Rob Couhig, who would draw white conservative support from Ron Forman during the primaries; the more liberal lawyer Virginia Boulet; former City Council member and outspoken Republican Peggy Wilson; and the Rev. Tom Watson, of Watson Memorial Teaching Ministries, an uptown minister who had been one of several black pastors sharply critical of Mayor Nagin during his first administration. As an uptown minister, Rev. Watson's presence in the election was an interesting contrast to Nagin's downtown and

⁷⁸ CecilFilm interview with Mayor Nagin, April 4, 2006. MR 32, 00:48:55:00.

⁷⁹ Lance Hill, "My Day of (trying to) Absentee Voting" Commentaries by Lance Hill, April 18, 2006. <<http://www.southerninstitute.info/commentaries/?m=200604&paged=1>>.

⁸⁰ Gordon Russell and Frank Donze, "23 likely battling just to face Nagin in the runoff." Times-Picayune, March 5, 2006.

Catholic heritage, and as such, the distinction between the two men was emblematic of a historical divide between uptown and downtown African-American communities.⁸¹

The second and third tier candidates' lack of funding or name recognition precluded them from garnering much media or voter interest; however, their significance in the primary elections lay in each candidate's ability to draw attention to first tier candidates' points of weakness. Early on, Times-Picayune political writers thought that Rev. Watson might draw upon the discontent "shared by many of the displaced, a group that is disproportionately black."⁸² There were potential grounds for a split of the black vote along cultural, geographical, and socio-economic lines; due to the dearth of affordable housing in the months following Katrina, and as most renters lacked renters' insurance, many of these citizens were in a very different situation from the New Orleans homeowners who were negotiating with insurance companies.

Although Watson failed to draw many votes from Nagin, as the only other African-American candidate within the top two tiers, his importance in the election cannot be overstated, and as an African-American, Watson's race enabled him to tread where white candidates did not dare, either for fear of alienating African-American voters or of exacerbating trans-racial tensions heightened since the inequities exposed by Hurricane Katrina. In doing so, Watson was to prove the fiercest of Nagin's critics, even accusing him in one debate of being personally responsible for the drowning of 1,200 people. As well as providing an interesting contrast to racially polarizing comments made by second-tier white candidates, most noticeably from white Republican candidate Peggy Wilson, Rev. Watson's early outspoken criticism of Mayor Nagin was some of the most vehement of the entire campaign. After the primary, his subsequent endorsement of Nagin was to emphasize in part the success of the Nagin campaign's strategy of appealing to voters along race lines, but also it was to reveal the significant fear in large parts of the African-American community concerning the connotations of lost black political representation at City Hall.

⁸¹ "Still, the ethnocultural divide within New Orleans' black community could be detected in the second Reconstruction as well as the first. There remained an uptown versus downtown, American versus creole split that stamped an indelible mark on twentieth-century racial and political relationships." "Franco-Africans and African-Americans," Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992, (197).

⁸² Gordon Russell and Frank Donze, "23 likely battling just to face Nagin in the runoff." Times-Picayune, Mar. 5, 2006.

Noticeably, almost all of Nagin's main white challengers steered clear of any direct criticism of the Mayor's leadership skills during Katrina, which rendered the campaigns rather similar. It is arguable – and somewhat ironic – that had race not been a significant factor, the 2006 New Orleans elections would have involved much fiercer criticism amongst the candidates. Perhaps placing too much credence in white voter outrage at Nagin's insensitive "Chocolate City" remarks made shortly before the election period began, Landrieu gauged that the white community did not want to hear electoral rhetoric targeted at specific communities, which at the same time seemed to preclude any vocal recognition on his part of the disproportionate suffering of African-Americans during the Katrina.

However, Landrieu's fear of addressing race as a factor within the post-Katrina landscape also prevented him from garnering the trust of those African-American voters who remembered all too painfully that not only were there different hurricane experiences between blacks and whites, but that there were different evacuation routes out of New Orleans after Katrina, and also that the media's depiction of the plight of African-Americans attempting to leave the flood-ravaged city were very different from their white counterparts. Websites that highlighted discrepancies in media coverage noted the manners in which local and national journalists revealed racial bias, citing newspaper photographs bearing captions of white New Orleanians clutching a few dry possessions described as "hurricane victims" while all too often African-Americans were labeled "looters."⁸³ As race had been such a dominant factor within the early days after Katrina, it seemed almost inevitable that it would be present within the election, and how Landrieu would negotiate it would determine the success of his electoral bid.

At the start of his campaign, Landrieu gave a speech that seemed to suggest he would run a strong and decisive operation, that he would place himself in the role of truth teller and clear-thinking leader, and that he would build a campaign persona that voters might contrast with Nagin's less than decisive moments during and after the storms. Indeed, Landrieu's forceful campaign kick-off speech contained some strikingly

⁸³ "How did resources get allocated in such a way that dying people were left to die while city, state, federal, and military resources were being used to evacuate healthy but uncomfortable people (who happened to be white)?" For information on the "white evacuation" from Algiers, see Lance Hill posting, the [Hurricane Digital Memory Bank](http://hurricanearchive.org/object/27789), <<http://hurricanearchive.org/object/27789>>. Last accessed July 15, 2009. [Salon.com](http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2005/09/01/photo_controversy/index.html), <http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2005/09/01/photo_controversy/index.html>. Last accessed April 2009. "Hurricane Katrina and the "Two-Photo Controversy." [Media Awareness Network](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teachable_moments/katrina_2_photo.cfm). <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teachable_moments/katrina_2_photo.cfm>. Last accessed April 2009.

poetic moments that met the mood of the electorate to which he spoke and set a fast pace for the campaign ahead. However, during the course of the next three months, Landrieu failed to replicate its more resonating moments within other speeches, did little to make voters think he would have done anything different from Mayor Nagin during the dark days of Katrina, and botched any attempt at generating momentum during his campaign. The speech provided some interesting hints to the post-racial strategy that he would pursue, but one that could not have contrasted more greatly either with Nagin's off the cuff and impromptu race-specific remarks, or with the more official strategic approach as orchestrated by his campaign managers and advisors Jim Carvin, David White, and Bill Rouselle.

In the speech, Landrieu spoke of the correlation between race and poverty in New Orleans, and of what had been learned by Katrina. At the time he seemed unafraid to tackle these desperate truths, and alluding to the reluctance of New Orleanians to acknowledge the obvious correlation between race and poverty, Landrieu broached the subject decisively, telling the crowd of people gathered by the edge of the Mississippi River, "Katrina put a magnifying glass on who we were. It made us see ourselves more clearly [...] The things that were okay before the storm are not okay now."⁸⁴ Certainly, when Hurricane Katrina made landfall, generations of half-hearted attempts at Federal integration policies were revealed as failures to the world, and what had been repeatedly brushed under the carpet was dramatically laid bare for white America to acknowledge at last, black poverty in its harshest and most dehumanizing form.⁸⁵ The majority of those who remained within the city limits to face the hurricane were either too infirm or too poor to leave, and as Katrina hit towards the end of the month, many also lacked the savings required to even allow for an evacuation.

Television viewers around the world had watched images of American citizens sheltering from the hurricane at the Louisiana Superdome, and then in the following five days, also baking at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center as many suffered from dehydration, heat exhaustion, lack of provisions or medical attention, and with no relief in sight. Many of these visuals and language reinforce each other, and following

⁸⁴ Mitch Landrieu, Campaign kickoff speech, Feb. 22, 2006. CecilFilm footage, MR 01, 00:08:58:21.

⁸⁵ CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer, "you simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals [...] almost all of them that we see are so poor and they are so black, and this is going to raise lots of questions for people who are watching this story unfold." 00:20 – August 31, 2005. <<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-439033096735003491>>. Last accessed April 2009.

Katrina, the entrenched poverty to which so many in New Orleans had been exposed for generations was revealed to the world at large, with images hitherto associated with developing countries now shown on home soil; suffering faces, especially black faces, from a famed city in the southern part of the most powerful country in the world were broadcast via countless national and foreign news outlets, and into every living room in the country. Landrieu alluded to some of these themes in this speech, to what the city needed to take from its recent past, and what it needed to leave behind; however, he chose to concentrate on the more unifying idea of Katrina devastating African-Americans and whites alike, and to present the less controversial face of strength in adversity over the inclusion of any uglier truths.



Illustration 4: Landrieu's campaign kick-off speech, February 22, 2006. CecilFilm mayoral video footage still photo, [MR 01](#).

Holding up a well-publicized Katrina photograph of an elderly wheelchair-bound white woman whose hand is held by a young African-American girl, the image well known to his audience, Landrieu recalls the lesser-publicized memories of the storm from within the media, of blacks and whites helping each other through the Katrina waters, rescuing each other with boats, and sharing food and provisions. As he addressed his audience with his wife Cheryl and his five children at his side, Landrieu said:

I want you to look at this picture because this is the real picture of New Orleans and Louisiana, America. This is old helping young, this is African-American helping white, this is people not caring what the color of your skin is but focusing on your need and this is the spirit that is going to change New Orleans and Louisiana for the rest of this nation.⁸⁶

In contrast, Nagin's campaign was more targeted towards specific voters, and Jim Carvin, his veteran campaign manager, was unrivaled in his field. Carvin had orchestrated nine successful mayoral campaigns

⁸⁶ Mitch Landrieu, CecilFilm footage, Feb. 22, 2006. [MR 01](#). 00:18:32:17.

over the course of 37 years; both of Moon Landrieu's, both of Dutch Morial's, both of Sidney Barthelemy's, both of Marc Morial's, and Nagin's first election campaign, among a host of others. In short, he had been the strategic force behind every successful mayor's race since Moon Landrieu first ran in 1969, and now he faced Moon's son for the second time across the campaign trenches. Born in New York, Jim Carvin's parents moved back to Britain during the Depression, where his father worked for Rolls Royce. They lived in London until the falling German bombs of the Blitz made it too unsafe at which point Carvin's father moved his family to Glasgow, where young Carvin went to school. Growing up in a Scottish port city best known for its tough working-class grit might explain a certain wryness and honesty about human nature within Carvin's approach to political campaigning. He viewed each campaign as rather like a strategic game of golf, where the most important thing was to plan your game without worrying too much about what the other candidate is up to, and then just to play it out.

Jim Carvin thought there was nothing personal about negative campaign tactics; they were merely a part of winning, and he was the best in the business. During this first mayoral race post-Katrina, there was an ample choice of ammunition from which a more unscrupulous candidate might choose to use against Nagin during his re-election bid, and revealing his unchallenged expertise in the field, Carvin had prepared himself for the worst. Able to shoot a commercial in less than twenty-four hours, he had envisaged what punches he might employ to counter hard and negative ads from the Landrieu camp well before Landrieu himself announced. Working alongside his daughter, Karen Carvin Shachat, they were ready to respond to the sorts of attack ads that might have depicted the drowned bodies of flood victims with an absent and complacent incumbent Mayor at the city's helm. However, the ads never came, and Karen Carvin Shachat identified Mitch Landrieu's campaign restraint specifically in racial terms:

I think that part of Landrieu's political strategy was to try to unite the races and try to unite the city, and that to attack Ray Nagin would be in conflict with that strategy. So he was sort of hamstrung, I think, because I think in order to win he had to attack Nagin, but to attack Nagin would have put him in the position perhaps of being perceived as anti-black or attacking the black community. And so it was a little bit of a Catch 22 for him.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin and Karen Carvin Shachat, May 14, 2007. [MR 82](#), 00:16:39:00.

Former New Orleans journalist Warren Bell', one of the first African-American primetime television news anchors in the nation, added to this, "Landrieu was afraid of being perceived as the white candidate attacking the black mayor on the grounds of incompetence because that is a white man criticizing a black man for not being up to the job."⁸⁸ Bell understood Landrieu's concern, but added, "it created a scenario where people said *gee*, he agrees with most of what the mayor says."

Within Landrieu's campaign kickoff speech, his talk of the city's leadership deficiencies was certainly coordinated, streamlined, and functional, but it failed to mention Nagin's name directly. At the very beginning of the speech, Landrieu asked his audience to commend Mayor Nagin, he talked of what a good man he was, of the sacrifices he had made for the city, and that Nagin did the best that he could have done during Katrina in the circumstances. In beginning thus, perhaps Landrieu and his speechwriters expected to free his campaign persona for stronger criticism directed at Nagin later in the speech. However, without directly tying Nagin to Katrina, Landrieu merely presented the Mayor as someone who might not have been up for the challenges of a leader within a time of crisis, and he used more amorphous rhetorical phrases that lacked force or clarity, such as, that, "sometimes the world changes in unexpected ways, and so it did with Katrina and Rita."⁸⁹

In taking up an abstract discussion of leadership at the head of his speech, some critics might have thought that Landrieu could allude to deficiencies in local leadership during the storm without appearing too negative; Landrieu said:

... what we need is leadership that can restore our credibility, nationally and internationally. What we need today is leadership that can work with every individual in New Orleans, the neighborhood groups, who can work with, and coordinate with and communicate with the city council, work with and coordinate with individuals in the state legislature.

However, Landrieu's use of the passive-voice and the heavy veil with which he cloaked any direct criticism also diluted the strength of its impact. Referencing the much publicized rifts between Governor Blanco and

⁸⁸ CecilFilm interview with Warren Bell, May 25, 2006. [MR 70](#), 00:21:28:00.

⁸⁹ Mitch Landrieu, CecilFilm footage, Feb. 22, 2006. [MR 01](#), 00:08:58:21.

Mayor Nagin that had shifted the focus from those most suffering during the storm to local squabbles, he spoke of the necessity for leaders to be able to work with a diverse range of different people on all levels, before citing examples of leaders that reflected the diversity of city and state officials, such as State Representative Karen Carter, State Senator Ann Duplessis, and Mayor Melvin “Kip” Holden of Baton Rouge.

It was no accident that two of the three people to introduce Landrieu were respected New Orleans community figures, and African-Americans too; through his ministry, the Reverend Marshall Truehill had dedicated his life to ameliorating the situation of the most disadvantaged within the New Orleans society, and Dottie Reese, a businesswoman who lost her home in Gentilly and member of the Louisiana State University’s Board of Supervisors, was also well-known for her involvement in good causes over the years. When Landrieu acknowledged many of his political supporters within the moderately diverse crowd he was also signifying the symbolism of their presence and his ability to garner significant crossover support.

Landrieu said:

What we need is someone who can work, communicate, and coordinate with the mayors of this great nation like Mayor Keith Hightower from Shreveport, Mayor Randy Roach, Mayor Kip Holden who are all with us today. And I thank you for your presence.⁹⁰

But in his campaign kick-off speech, Landrieu was also signifying what was to be his principal campaign strategy; a campaign of inclusiveness, but one in which there would be no criticism of past exclusionary rhetoric, and all of his campaign strategies were without controversy. But too many events that led up to this moment in time – events that were largely beyond his control – had already been interpreted as exclusionary in nature and proved too strong a force for his racially unifying campaign.

⁹⁰ Mitch Landrieu, CecilFilm footage, Feb. 22, 2006. [MR 01](#), 00:09:34:02.

The “Shadow Government” Meet in Dallas: Nagin’s Base Abandons Him

The early recovery rhetoric of post-Katrina New Orleans employed by various citizens whether white or black, rich, or poor, by business interests or residents of specific neighborhoods each contributed to the breakdown of communications between the races in different ways, and this vocabulary had its roots in a city that was historically divided along race-lines. But the very different hurricane experiences of groups differentiated by socio-economics also contributed to this breakdown, and these were difficult to separate from race. The damaged tone of race relations as manifested within the sphere of the 2006 Mayoral election also emanated from a series of public relations disasters post-Katrina, and shortly after the Hurricane, a meeting in Dallas, Texas, comprised an important moment in the series of such interconnected events. At some point between Hurricane Katrina and Martin Luther King Day, 2006, Mayor Nagin seemed to have lost the support of his white conservative base, and the members of the majority white New Orleans Business Council constituted an important part of this base. This group had largely endorsed Nagin throughout his first term, and so early in his re-election campaign, he had to look elsewhere for support. The moment at which Nagin lost his old endorsements might have been crystallized outside of Louisiana, at this now infamous meeting.⁹¹

A few days before September 10, 2005, word spread amongst many members of the Business Council who were displaced at various houses around the nation that there was to be a meeting at a big hotel in Dallas. It was the first opportunity for the majority of these men, later dubbed “the Forty Thieves” to gather together since Katrina had hit, and quite a few of them had questions for Mayor Nagin about the current state of New Orleans, as well as about the economic and political future of the city – both of which seemed extremely tenuous.⁹² The gathering occurred two days following James Reiss’s controversial interview with Christopher Cooper of the WSJ, in which Reiss mentioned the upcoming meeting and called for the new city of New

⁹¹ “The first campaign finance reports of next month’s mayor’s race are out, and one of the juiciest tidbits is that Reiss has donated \$5,000 to Audubon Nature Institute CEO Ron Forman. Reiss’ wife gave another \$5,000.” “Nagin appointee puts money on rival,” Stephanie Grace. Times-Picayune, Sunday, March 26, 2006. Metro Editorial.

⁹² Mike Davis, “Who is Killing New Orleans?” Nation, March 23, 2006. <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060410/davis/3>>. Last accessed July 13, 2009.

Orleans to be “something very different [...] with better services and fewer poor people.”⁹³ Reiss told Cooper that he has been in touch with forty other New Orleans business leaders since the storm, and that “he and some of those leaders plan to be in Dallas, meeting with Mr. Nagin to begin mapping out a future for the city.”⁹⁴

The mythology surrounding the meeting certainly became highly racialized, most of which seemed justified in light of Reiss’s other disastrous comments to the WSJ that the city must also change “demographically” if it was to improve in any beneficial way. But it must be remembered that the majority of those who attended the meeting in Texas were representative of the top sixty-five businesses of Greater New Orleans, the majority of which were white. Although the criteria for joining the Business Council remain rather obscure to the average New Orleanian, many at the meeting had strong social and business connections to networks of appointed boards and commissions that still remained elusive to minorities, and certainly most of those who attended the meeting represented the largely white economic power and influence of the city. Transportation was still difficult in the early days after the storm, but the methods of travel for some amongst the group bypassed the troubles that average citizens faced during this time; many flew in from second homes, gathering from all directions, some came on private jets, and a few without this luxury at their fingertips caught rides all the same.⁹⁵

“I don’t know how I got invited,” New Orleans CEO of Chase Bank John Kallenborn recalled, and referring to the Chaffe McCall lawyer who was also the 2002 King of the Carnival, said, “Bill Grace didn’t even know me, but he flew me over. Bill Hines called, and said did I want to go? He was more of an insider then, and had supported Nagin.”⁹⁶ Hines was a Managing Partner with the leading New Orleans law firm Jones Walker and was also well-known within business circles, even named one of the city’s “most powerful men and women” by New Orleans television station WWL-TV.⁹⁷ Another lawyer and Business Council member by the name of Hugh Palmer Lambert recalled that communications about the upcoming meeting

⁹³ Christopher Cooper, “Old-Line Families Escape Worst of Flood And Plot the Future.” WSJ, (Thursday, Sept. 8, 2005).

⁹⁴ Ibid. See also Giles Whittell, “Business elite hopes for a future without the poor.” The Times, (London). Sept. 9, 2005.

⁹⁵ Cecil, conversation with John Kallenborn, November, 2008.

⁹⁶ Cecil, conversation with John Kallenborn, November, 2008. On William Grace Jr., and Rex, see “Getting a Break – Insiders, especially those who donate to assessors’ campaigns, are more likely to have undervalued property,” Times-Picayune article published on Nola.com <http://www.nola.com/speced/dubiousvalue/index.ssf/?speced/dubiousvalue/dv_040504.html>. Last accessed June 10, 2009.

⁹⁷ WWL-TV Louisiana’s News Leader, <<http://www.wwltv.com/video/?z=y&nvid=196088>>.

were “largely word of mouth,” and that “there were a lot of business leaders that crashed it.”⁹⁸ Much of what the Dallas meeting came to represent for many people outside of the business community must be considered within the context of the enormous racial and economic disparities that the failure of the levees had exposed to the world at large, and as Dr. George Lipsitz of the University of California Department of Black Studies notes in The Possessive Investment in Whiteness, “there was no one present at the Dallas meeting likely to change the focus from the richest to the brokest – no representatives of the many grass roots groups working for justice in New Orleans.”⁹⁹

Jacques Morial, community activist, current Louisiana Justice Institute Co-Director, and brother of the former mayor Marc Morial, was someone not distinguishable for lacking the advantages of a politically connected family, and he expressed his concerns that African-Americans were being kept out of this early recovery dialogue. Referring to the old-line and almost exclusively white *Mardi Gras* Krewe, Morial said, “I forget how I heard about the meeting; I called Derrick Shepherd and told him the *Rex Crowd* were meeting in Dallas, and that he had to get there. He was the only one near enough.”¹⁰⁰ Shepherd was a State senator at the time and represented a large segment of the New Orleans neighborhood of Gentilly, an area that had been under-water following the levee failures.

As a major in the Army Reserves on active duty, Shepherd happened to be stationed at a base just outside of Dallas, and another source recalled an African-American man in military uniform, “because he stood out” and that several of the businessmen were wondering who he was. Other reports from attendees corroborated that there were “a couple of African-American business men in attendance,” and that the New Orleans born trumpeter and composer Wynton Marsalis was on loudspeaker from New York, where he had moved to become Artistic Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center. Times-Picayune Capital Bureau journalist Robert Travis Scott wrote about the meeting and said that in gathering research for his article, his impression was that those joining the dialogue via telephone were not aware of the number of participants in the room.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Cecil, conversation with Hugh Palmer Lambert, November 2008.

⁹⁹ George Lipsitz, “Change the Focus and Reverse the Hypnosis,” The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics, (247).

¹⁰⁰ Cecil, conversation with Jacques Morial, February 2007.

¹⁰¹ Cecil, telephone interview with Robert Travis Scott of the Times-Picayune, November 2008.

Former gubernatorial candidate and New Orleans businessman John Georges recollected that 2002 Nagin backer and RTA head James Reiss introduced participants to each other by name, and two others recalled that Scott Cowan, President of Tulane University, used a white board or large post-its to organize the comments and suggestions that arose, and that after Mayor Nagin's late arrival, Cowan continued to take notes of ideas discussed at the meeting.¹⁰² It is into this context that the Mayor meets many from the largely white Business Council for the first time since Katrina, most of whom had supported him in 2002. Nagin had appeared late, and was accompanied by his old friend and most trusted adviser, the famously media shy David White, who later worked closely with Jim Carvin during Nagin's re-election campaign.

Reflecting the less than judicious symbolism of the predominantly white and financially powerful meeting together *en masse* without having appeared to reach out to their African-American colleagues or counterparts, Travis Scott noted in his Times-Picayune article that "the Dallas meeting was an early lesson in the difficulties facing those who seek a consensus on a plan for the future. It quickly ignited a controversy and led to miscommunication and hard feelings among some political leaders."¹⁰³ Businessman John Georges lamented that the meeting "was not more representative," but the representatives of the top sixty-five businesses in the area were not a diverse group reflective of the New Orleans community as a whole. However, if this was strictly a gathering of business interests, one wonders why efforts were made to reach a famous New Orleans composer and trumpeter, but little or no outreach efforts were made towards prominent African-American business or community members.

To further explain the lack of diversity at the meeting, another participant, attorney Hugh Palmer Lambert recalled the practical element of John Georges, James Reiss, John Koerner, and Tommy Coleman all living next door to each other on Audubon Place, the exclusive and gated community next door to Tulane University, and hence that they probably all had each others' telephone numbers. He continued, "if the meeting became very racialized after the fact, it was more about how to provide relief at the time." After Katrina Marshall law was imposed, and before the arrival of the Louisiana National Guard, law and order had

¹⁰² Cecil, conversation with John Kallenborn, and John Georges.

¹⁰³ Robert Travis Scott. "Rebuilding plans confront turf wars, political strife, racial tension mars initial discussions," Times-Picayune, Sept. 18, 2005.

certainly been suspended within New Orleans, and there had been little appearance of coordinated city government. One Dallas participant described the meeting in such an altruistic and civically conscious manner, “we were all basically there with our check books open, saying what can we do to help reinstate city government, communications, and law and order.”¹⁰⁴

However, when James Reiss was quoted in the WSJ two days before the meeting, saying, “Those who want to see this city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, geographically and politically,” it is arguable that that there were some among the Dallas meeting attendees who shared his sentiments concerning the running of the city prior to Katrina. Reiss’ claim that he was not just speaking for himself also suggests that his view was shared by others within the white business community, and that his warning concerning the way they had “been living” prior to the storm will not happen again “or we’re out” intimates that the white business community might seize upon the situation New Orleans now found itself in to bring about changes they had desired for some time. What Reiss intended by the phrase “we’re out” still remains slightly mysterious to some; but a WSJ reader, along with many New Orleanians, would be inclined to understand that he meant business people like him would leave the city if things did not improve for them.

It seems that Nagin also interpreted the remarks the same way, but added references that placed this particular community within terms that explicitly suggested they constituted a white socio-economic elite. The day after his election victory, Nagin held a press conference at St. Peter Claver, the downtown Catholic Church that he had attended for some years. In the press conference Nagin made remarks that specifically spoke to this influential group and their threat to leave the city should he be re-elected, and significantly, Nagin referenced the antebellum time of New Orleans pre-emancipation in the same context as a well-known local restaurant known for the predominantly white clientele from New Orleans society that it attracts for the last weekday lunch. The Mayor said, “If they decide they want to opt out [...] then I don’t know where

¹⁰⁴ Cecil, conversation with James Roddy, January 2006.

they're going to go. Where are they going to find another New Orleans of 1840? It's not here anymore. So I hear all that rhetoric of them leaving; I don't believe it."¹⁰⁵ The mayor continued:

Business people are predators, and if the economic opportunities are here, they're going to stay. If not, they're going to leave, and they're going to have their jets and they're going to fly back for Mardi Gras, and they're going to fly back on a Friday for Galatoire's [...] So God bless them. I hope they stay, but if they don't, I'll send them a postcard.

Reiss's use of the word "demographically" as quoted by Cooper in the WSJ article is equally unambiguous. If, as his friends maintain, his words had been taken out of context by an unscrupulous journalist, then perhaps all he is guilty of is astonishing racial insensitivity during a time of national disaster; however, the sentiments in the now infamous WSJ article seem to reflect conversations that anyone with a little access might encounter upon an extended visit to the Crescent City.

Few articles specifically dealing directly with the subject of the Dallas meeting go into Nagin's mental state at the time, which echoed the anguish felt by many New Orleanians at the slow federal and state rescue efforts. In the days following Katrina on September 1, 2005, twenty-three days before Hurricane Rita made landfall, and nine days before the Dallas meeting, radio listeners had heard WWL-AM's host Garland Robinette interview Mayor Nagin over the telephone, during which, the mayor's strong language and emotional descriptions of what wasn't happening personified the leadership vacuum and articulated the chaos of the time.¹⁰⁶ At this moment, damaging rifts had re-formed between Governor Blanco and the Mayor. Pre-Katrina, Nagin had crossed party lines and supported Republican candidate Bobby Jindal over Blanco's gubernatorial bid. To add to this, in the wake of the chaos that unfolded after the failure of the federal levees, relations between Blanco and President Bush had reached a devastating low as state lawyers debated the legal ramifications of her ceding state control to the Administration and to federal agencies in the wake of the flooding and the ensuing civic chaos. State legal experts said that such an idea was unprecedented, and jeopardized Louisiana autonomy, and at this point Nagin had shown more inclination towards dialogue with President Bush than with Governor Blanco which further complicated recovery efforts, and despite the

¹⁰⁵ St. Peter Claver Press Conference, May 21, 2006. CecilFilm footage, MR 67, 01:24:17:10.

¹⁰⁶ For a transcript of the WWL-AM interview, see <<http://edition.cnn.com/2005/US/09/02/nagin.transcript/>>. Last accessed June 2009.

unprecedented circumstances and scale of the problems at hand, this amplified the incompetence witnessed at a local level.

Businessman John Georges recalled encouraging the Mayor to talk to the Dallas meeting attendees about what had been happening on the ground in New Orleans, “I said Ray, you’ve gotta [*sic*] get over it,” before telling him about his own grandfather during the war in Greece. Georges recalled that another attendee, the venture capitalist Gary Solomon – who later went on to support Landrieu – then said, “...well, tell us about it Ray,” and “...then Ray started talking about St. Bernard, and being in New Orleans and there was nothing there, and St. Bernard having everything. And when he’d finished he said, ‘I’m over it.’” Dallas meeting participants James Roddy and James Reiss talked of the group’s willingness to help the Mayor in any way that they could, but stated that Nagin failed to follow up on many of the recommendations that came out of the meeting, and expressed surprise at this, saying that, “the call never came.”¹⁰⁷ Reiss recalled that lawyer Jeff Parker directly asked the Mayor what plans he had for the recovery of New Orleans:

...and his response was ‘none.’ None! This is ten days after the storm, he didn’t say I’m working on it, we’ve got a lot of stuff on the way, he just... his answer was one word, ‘none,’ and Jeff asked him ‘well if you don’t have any plans for recovery, what resources do you have that we can draw on?’ And again he gave a one word answer, nil.

In recalling the moment, Reiss appeared to speak for all of the group and said, “We were shocked, shocked,” before proceeding to contrast the mayor’s inability to express any plans for recovery with that of Tulane University President, Scott Cowan, who he said emerged with an “entire comprehensive plan for the recovery and the renewal of Tulane University; they hit the ground running, they weren’t waiting on anybody, they weren’t waiting for the Federal government or FEMA or anyone else, and in total contrast to that, here’s our Mayor who we’d all supported, who said ‘none’ and ‘nil,’ we were shocked.”¹⁰⁸ Reiss contrasted Cowan’s situation, that he had been “locked up, marooned in the Reily Center at the back of Tulane University’s campus before he could be rescued by boat and helicopter,” with that of the Mayor, who in his eyes had a

¹⁰⁷ CecilFilm interview with James Roddy and James Reiss, January 4, 2008. [MR 86A](#).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

wealth of resources available to him. Nagin's former Communications Director, Sally Forman would publish a book after the election that gave a much less rosy picture of the resources available to the Mayor.¹⁰⁹

Following the publication of the controversial WSJ article and two days after the Dallas meeting, Times-Picayune journalist Robert Travis Scott reported on a more internal black debate, that certain state lawmakers and New Orleans City Council members challenged Nagin at the state Capitol concerning the racial implications of what they saw transpiring, and how "The story enraged a number of black state lawmakers and New Orleans City Council members, including Council President Oliver Thomas, state Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-New Orleans, and Sen. Diana Bajoie, both D-New Orleans." Travis Scott reported that they "confronted Nagin in a public meeting Sept. 12 at the state Capitol," and that they "expressed concern that Nagin and the Dallas group of mostly white businessmen were coordinating a recovery program assuming that a large portion of poor African-Americans would be discouraged from returning to the city."¹¹⁰

Travis Scott makes it apparent that Nagin felt uncomfortable concerning the appearance of what the Dallas meeting might represent to African-American political leaders, and writes that Nagin "responded sharply that he had no such intention and said he had made that point clear at the Dallas gathering." Travis Scott quotes Nagin as having said to the group, "So don't worry about this city being hijacked by a small group of people who are trying to take us backward." These sentiments on Nagin's part might explain his alleged failure to follow up on any of the recovery suggestions made by the Dallas attendees. But then, businessman John Georges recalled that the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which was to comprise many of the more conservative of Nagin's supporters, was born out of Dallas, Georges said, "that it was the beginning of it all."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ For a primary source account of the few resources available to Mayor Nagin and his staff from City Hall during the early aftermath of the 2005 hurricanes, see Eye of the Storm: Inside City Hall During Katrina, by Nagin's former Communications Director, Sally Forman (Forman resigned her position upon her husband's announcement that he would run against Nagin in the 2006 election).

¹¹⁰ Robert Travis Scott, "Rebuilding plans confront turf wars, political strife," Times-Picayune, Capitol bureau, Sept. 18, 2005.

¹¹¹ Cecil, conversation with John Georges, November 2008.

Chapter 2: Images and Geographies

Katrina Images: Racial Inequities and Poverty Exposed

The proliferation of Katrina images depicting New Orleanians in dire conditions and the federal government's slow response to the suffering they portrayed created a visual portrait of the greatest embarrassment of the Bush Presidency's two Administrations. Photographs and news footage that showed people of color behind metal barriers sweltering in the heat after days without adequate nourishment, security, or even basic bathroom facilities combined with efforts to restrict their free movement facilitated painfully obvious analogies to the antebellum conditions of enslaved peoples. International, national, and local media swarmed over the city as countless civilian volunteers provided relief and rescue where they could. But despite President Bush's pre-Katrina reassurance that they were "fully prepared," FEMA took until the following Saturday to render the rescue services to New Orleanians seeking refuge that the payment of their federal taxes had led them to expect.¹¹² The New Orleans writer, poet, and arts administrator Kalamu ya Salaam was a senior partner in the public relations firm Bright Moments from 1984 to 1996, along with Nagin's 2006 campaign advisor Bill Rouselle, and Salaam expressed in words the question that many observers asked themselves upon viewing the unfolding reality of the situation, "were the sufferers who we all saw really American citizens, and if they were, was nothing being done to help them?"¹¹³

In the following months, many newspaper columnists pointed out that white Americans to date had ignored urban poverty at their peril, and the chickens were now coming home to roost.¹¹⁴ Some local commentators objected to the national portrayal of New Orleans as a racially divided city, taking umbrage at the descriptions of the city as having a large underclass of ill-educated and impoverished African-Americans and a largely indifferent rich white elite. These caricatures failed to mention the many black college-educated

¹¹² "Video shows Bush got explicit Katrina warning, President, Chertoff were clearly told of storm's dangers numerous times," *Associated Press*, and *MSNBC*, Thursday, March 2, 2006. <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11627394/>>. Last accessed July 2009.

¹¹³ Kalamu ya Salaam, "Below the Water Line," *What Lies Beneath*. Edited by the South End Press Collective, South End Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2005.

¹¹⁴ See "Race, Poverty and Katrina," "Morning Edition, September 2, 2005. *NPR*, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4829446>>. Also, Bob Faw, "Katrina exposes New Orleans' deep poverty," *NBC News*, September 1, 2005. <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9163091/>>. Last accessed July 2009.

professionals whose homes also flooded, the more affluent communities, the professional middle-income families in Holy Cross and eastern New Orleans, the middle-income and working class whites, or even the quirky cliques such as the artists and bohemians that had come to dominate the Upper Ninth Ward.



Illustration 5: The Superdome after Katrina, New Orleans. Agence France Press, August 31, 2007. <<http://www.thewildeast.net/applications/wordpress/index.php?s=nevah>>.

However, as with most caricatures where there lies a painful truth that those under fire are all too often unwilling to admit, in New Orleans, that truth was that a combination of the burden of Southern history, an underlying mutual distrust between the races, and thousands of failed policies and half-hearted initiatives had resulted in the difficulty of separating race and class in the city. Socio-economic disparities or “class” had become a convenient euphemism for many New Orleans whites and more affluent African-Americans alike not to talk about race, which might have reminded many of the historical reasons for this inequality.

The post-Katrina local disconnect between the issues of poverty and the rhetoric surrounding it was conspicuous, as was its absence from the majority of the 2006 New Orleans mayoral campaigns and from within the local coverage of this pressing topic. Political commentator and academic Dr. Silas Lee said of the storm and its significance to outside observers, “what Katrina did was expose the fault lines by race and by class, in terms of social and economic inequities, and for the first time, in many cases, the world saw those fault lines.”¹¹⁵ But less than one week before the April primary elections, Tulane Professor of International Health and Development, Mark VanLandingham, described New Orleans as having become “an easy and inappropriate scapegoat [...] for a national tragedy.” VanLandingham wrote defensively about the proliferation of these images from outside the Superdome, and stated that “these confused notions regarding

¹¹⁵ CecilFilm interview with Silas Lee, PhD., Mar. 29, 2006. MR 21, 00:06:01:00.

poverty, segregation and region have serious consequences,” and he viewed these portrayals as “misleading.”

He continued:

Worse, they divert attention from the central causes and worst examples of urban black poverty in America, and from the central and most immediate problems facing New Orleans. Black poverty in urban America is a national tragedy. An extensive body of research shows a clear connection between such poverty and the isolation of urban black Americans.¹¹⁶

Similarly and over forty years earlier, American writer and essayist James Baldwin had articulated with distressingly prescient relevance that African-Americans, “know no North and South.”¹¹⁷ Certainly urban black poverty was and still is an issue of national concern for all Americans nationwide, and in the decades since Baldwin’s comment, it had become convenient for the rest of America to see the issues of race and poverty as Southern issues, and in New Orleans, these trans-racial social and economic disparities could not be seen as somehow totally distinct from other urban American environments.

However when VanLandingham argues that addressing the issue diverts attention from “the central and most immediate problems facing New Orleans,” it is arguable that this *was* just such a “central” and “most immediate problem.” That local journalists and commentators should become embroiled in whether or not black poverty was worse in New Orleans than elsewhere or VanLandingham’s concern that New Orleans was a “scapegoat” for a national problem seemed to miss the point of one of the most painful lessons of the storm, that these issues were not only right in the backyard, but in the front yard and inside the house too, and that as the city headed towards the election and an uncertain hurricane season, finger-pointing or the futile subject of local versus telescopic philanthropy only suggested an unwillingness to face home truths or to ameliorate the situation on the ground and rather, a desire to divert attention to the same problems in other American urban environments.

In the same vein, many of the largely white first and second tier mayoral candidates failed to open up a serious dialogue about New Orleans poverty in any profound way, and this also revealed a disconnect

¹¹⁶ Mark VanLandingham. Times-Picayune, Monday April 17, 2006.

¹¹⁷ James Baldwin. ‘Three Perspectives,’ “The Negro and the American Promise,” American Experience, produced by Boston public television station WGBH, 1963, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/mlk/sfeature/sf_video_pop_04b_tr_qry.html>. Last accessed May 2009.

between the issues and the rhetoric that described them. Part of the absence of any serious debate about race and poverty within the campaigns most certainly reflected candidates' fears that such a topic might be negatively construed in a racially disadvantageous manner, and attests to the sensitized post-Katrina climate. Candidates had witnessed the reception of Peggy Wilson's insensitive and divisive remarks and seemed forewarned; but the result was that many of the campaigns failed to reflect the gravity of what Katrina had revealed so starkly. Wilson, a white Republican former City Council member and 2006 mayoral candidate, had inflamed many New Orleans African-Americans by stating that not all New Orleans residents should be welcomed back to the city, and she often repeated comments in debates that New Orleans did not want "drug dealers," gangs," "pimps," or "welfare queens" to return, with Wilson specifically referencing those living in subsidized housing.¹¹⁸ Due to the alphabetized seating of candidates at debates, Ms. Wilson and Rev. Watson more often than not battled over the rhetoric of poverty rather than questions of how to address the issue itself.

The Rev. Leonard Lucas, an African-American Pastor of the Light City Church on St. Claude Avenue in the Lower Ninth Ward also drew attention to insensitive phrases employed by the Republican mayoral candidates Rob Couhig and Peggy Wilson, and also noticed them in prevalent use within the returned white community, phrases such as, "those people," and "these people," in referring to low-income African-Americans but who, as Lucas stated, were more than the pigeon hole in which they were all too often placed, they were not "welfare queens," or "gang-bangers" as Wilson had painted with such broad brush strokes, but professionals and homeowners too. Referring broadly to "people" who were using such terms, Lucas said, "they have to understand that *these people, those people, you all* [sic] are citizens of New Orleans [...] People

¹¹⁸ For Peggy Wilson's comments, see "The Situation Report," CNN.com,

<<http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/03/22/sr.weds/index.html>>. Last accessed July 2009.

Also see Wilson's comments at the Marriott Mayoral Debate, March 31, 2006: "Unfortunately, some of the people who have left have found a better life where they are, and it's embarrassing to see that." CecilFilm [MR 23](#), 02:25:28:27. Compare with Barbara Bush's comments following Katrina: "Accompanying her husband, former President George H.W. Bush, on a tour of hurricane relief centers in Houston, Barbara Bush said today, referring to the poor who had lost everything back home and evacuated, 'This is working very well for them.' Also, "'And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this—this' (she chuckles slightly) 'is working very well for them.'" [Editor & Publisher](#), September 5, 2005.

<http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001054719>.

In an analysis of such "media-produced terms" as "welfare queen" and gang banger," Denise Ferreira da Silva asks "How can we reconcile modern modes of subjection that have distinct referents, that is economic position and racial difference?" [Toward a Global Idea of Race](#), *Borderlines*, <http://books.google.com/books?id=pLZFy5R4_AC&printsec=frontcover&dq=toward+a+global+idea+of+race>.

are insensitive [...] because they recognize the parts of town they are asking be cut off are the parts of town they don't want people to live in anyway.”

Such insensitive and sweeping language concerning race and poverty was not completely restricted to white Republicans; African-American City Council President Oliver Thomas talked of residents of the New Orleans housing projects sitting around watching soap operas during the day rather than working.¹¹⁹ Lolis Elie, Jr., one of only a few African-American Times-Picayune columnists, and one to sometimes deal with more social justice oriented issues, even referred to poverty as “the “P” Word,” inadvertently alluding to the potentially racialized component of the topic for white candidates. Whether carefully navigating the conservative inclination of the editorial board, or not, and in an article specifically dealing with the subject in relation to the top candidates, Elie fails to mention the race/poverty correlation in the white candidates' failure to address the question squarely. However, Elie does commend Rev. Watson, the African-American candidate, for addressing the issue head on, and quotes from Watson's website, “we must create wealth-building opportunities to address poverty.”¹²⁰

That the difficulty of separating the issues of race and poverty in American urban environments has its roots in the original sin of slavery is broadly accepted, as is its transformation into the separate but unequal Jim Crow laws, in the unfortunate necessity of federal legislation to guarantee basic civil rights, and in the ensuing white flight to the suburbs, the latter mandated and fueled by low federally backed mortgages, and in the development of the federal highway system, which destroyed historically black neighborhoods while it ferried new white suburbanites to and from work within the cities in which they had previously resided.¹²¹ To anyone visiting New Orleans pre-Katrina or today, these legacies and so many others are as plain to see as the equestrian monuments of P.G.T. Beauregard outside the New Orleans Museum of Art or the statue of General Robert E. Lee towering over Lee Circle, a block from Louisiana's Civil War Museum at Confederate

¹¹⁹ “We don't need soap opera watchers all day,” Council meeting, February 20, 2006. “What's next for public housing in New Orleans? Some of City Council want housing reserved for those willing to work.” Martin Savidge, “NBC News, Tuesday February 21, 2006. NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams,” <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11485681/>>. Last accessed July 2009.

¹²⁰ Lolis Elie, “Look under the rug for poverty,” Monday April 17, 2006. Times-Picayune, Metro Section.

¹²¹ “...New Orleans offers a complex case study of highway building, with the blacks ultimately victimized by the road builders with a little assist from local whites with power and influence. Currently, I-10 in New Orleans rolls through a devastated black community, a concrete jungle left in the shadows by a massive elevated highway.” From ‘Race and Space in the Modern City: Interstate-95 and the Black Community in Miami,’ Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America, ed. by Arnold Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl, (137).

Memorial Hall; each one a powerful communicating symbol rendered in stone and brick and attesting to the city's complex past and conflicted present.

Only a few years ago, acclaimed New Orleans artist Willie Birch moved from working in the medium of color to black and white, viewing the contrasts as “a metaphor for the city's often stark divisions.” Bill Sasser interviewed Birch for an Oxford American edition that marked the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, and alluding to the city's “stark divisions” in specifically racial terms, Birch said:

I looked around and realized that visually this whole city could be thought of in terms of black and white, and it behooves me to try to break that down, to get people to talk about what I would call ‘systematic racism.’ How do you force all the poor people into a certain area and give them inferior schools, and then they shoot and kill each other and you wonder why? That's a situation that's been created.¹²²

Birch's vital point about the correlation between the violence dominant amongst young African-American males and the socio-economic conditions and lack of advantages available to them had an important bearing upon race as major factor in electoral rhetoric about poverty. All too often, the majority of those who still remained displaced were painted in less than savory light, and dominant recovery rhetoric seemed to suggest that post-Katrina, the city of New Orleans was too vulnerable to spend time bringing back citizens who were viewed by many who had returned as “dependent upon welfare” and of “not contributing to society.”

To anyone who cared to look within the flooded parts of the city, the related legacies of white flight and Urban Renewal were temporarily washed bare with the Katrina floodwaters, allowing for the possibility of a new and more equitable approach. The flooding of 80 percent of New Orleans rendered a return to any pre-storm *status quo* within the city impossible as well as undesirable. Institutionally assisted self-segregation had become the norm of the post-Civil Rights era generation, as had the failing policies of Urban Renewal, which in 1963 James Baldwin had famously dubbed “Negro Removal.”¹²³ Racial economic disparities had become increasingly apparent, and following white flight to the suburbs, many inner city schools and neighborhoods in New Orleans and throughout the land had reverted to a pre-integration monochromatic

¹²² Bill Sasser, “In His Element: Willie Birch of the Seventh Ward says: ‘I believe that it's the culture here that will do the most to bring us back.’” Oxford American, October 2008.

¹²³ James Baldwin, “Three Perspectives,” “The Negro and the American Promise,” American Experience, produced by Boston public television station WGBH, 1963, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/mlk/sfeature/sf_video_pop_04b_tr_qry.html>. Last accessed May 2009.

student intake. With the loss of this white and more economically privileged tax base, the concentration of poverty by race felt elsewhere in America began to be seen in New Orleans, where historically, neighborhoods had been a little more mixed. In “The Katrina Conspiracies: The Problem of Trust in Rebuilding an American City,” Arnold Hirsch and A. Lee Levert contrast the policies of Urban Renewal to the devastation wrought by the flood waters, that unlike Renewal, “there was no targeted selection of needy neighborhoods in New Orleans.” Hirsch and Levert note that, “Renewal cut a large swath through densely settled urban land, cost millions of dollars, called for the displacement and resettlement of thousands, and finally had to confront the race issue in virtually every neighborhood it touched.”¹²⁴



Illustration 6: "The Shooting" by Willie Birch, Arthur Roger Gallery.
<http://www.arthurorogergallery.com/dynamic/artwork_detail.asp?ArtworkID=1705>.

¹²⁴ Arnold H. Hirsch and A. Lee Levert, "The Katrina Conspiracies: The Problem of Trust in Rebuilding an American City," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 207-219 (2009), (3).

Many journalists had referred to Katrina as having lifted a veil, that it would force many locals to acknowledge the harsh economic disparities between the lives of its average black and its average white citizens. In the same manner that Birch had described the prevalent violence within New Orleans socially and economically disadvantaged communities as a “created” situation, the exclusionary rhetoric employed by many white conservatives concerning poverty post-Katrina suggested that any acknowledgement of this was not going to be transformed into efforts to return poorer citizens home or to reinstate social programs and welfare to work initiatives. Instead, returned New Orleanians witnessed the birth of “a movement to exclude poor people,” the majority of whom were African-American.¹²⁵ For many of its proponents, the storm was an “opportunity” to continue such policies begun prior to Katrina, and to implement new ones that they would otherwise have been unable to implement.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) continued their policy of abandoning subsidized housing, and began procedures to demolish public housing developments, many of which had not flooded during Katrina and before their former residents could return. This debate began to heat up at the time of the election, but noticeably mayoral candidates steered clear of the topic, revealing a disparity between what was being said outside of the political arena, and electoral rhetoric within the debates, which seemed more about charting a safe course through a racialized mine field than about addressing the issues of race and poverty themselves. At the same time, few of the developers running around following Katrina, and fewer of the politicians running for office seemed to adequately address the pressing concern for affordable housing. Louisiana Congressman Richard Baker’s (R-LA) statement became the most well known example of such exclusionary sentiments; Baker said, “We finally cleared up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”¹²⁶ Referring to the

¹²⁵ See CecilFilm interview with Lance Hill, MR 89A, 08:18:24:27. “It began as a movement to exclude poor people, so in that sense it was about class. But within about four or five months, it became clear [...] that they could not accomplish their goals as long as African-Americans controlled city government. And I think at that point, which would be around January of 2006, when Ray Nagin, who was African American mayor, rejected his own appointed commission’s proposal, which would have resulted in the demolition of most of the black neighborhoods, that at that point, I think a large percentage of white people decided that they wanted to move to take over city government while blacks were gone. So in that sense, it went from class to race.

¹²⁶ See the [Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2005/09/12/repub-rep-we-finally-clea_n_7239.html), September 12, 2005, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2005/09/12/repub-rep-we-finally-clea_n_7239.html>. In June, 2006, “a lawsuit was filed by Advancement Project, Bill Quigley, Tracie Washington and the law firm of Jenner & Block, LLP against U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Alphonso Jackson and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) on behalf of public housing residents in United States District Court in New Orleans. The lawsuit seeks to bring families back to New Orleans

Mayor's BNOB Commission, Tracie Washington, a New Orleans Civil Rights attorney and President and CEO of the Louisiana Justice Institute, a "legal advocacy organization, devoted to fostering social justice campaigns across Louisiana," articulated the underlying and most central point of the debate in racial and socio-economic terms, she said: "If we are serious about the slogan 'Bring Back New Orleans,' HUD and HANO must re-open public housing and make repairs, where necessary. We've got to bring back all of the people – not just those who are rich and white."¹²⁷

Other commentators alluded to the coloration between race and poverty specifically in terms of the ability of capitalism to maintain inequities that had their roots in racial inequities, but which capitalism now facilitated. Canadian author, activist, and journalist Naomi Klein, devoted a chapter to Katrina in her work, The Shock Doctrine. Klein titles the chapter "Disaster Apartheid," and in referencing a political system that institutionalized segregation in specific relation to Katrina, she draws the reader's attention to the racial aspect of the economic divide between the New Orleans rich and poor. Klein writes:

The economically secure drove out of town, checked into hotels and called their insurance companies. The 120,000 people in New Orleans without cars, who depended on the state to organize their evacuation, waited for help that did not arrive, making desperate SOS signs or rafts out of their refrigerator doors.¹²⁸

Although there were some visiting tourists who ended up at the Superdome, as well as a few white people, the majority of those stranded there were African-American, and the media concentrated upon the indignities to which many were exposed, observing the horrendous conditions and the lack of supplies, all of which played out very publicly upon television sets around the country. But the city's inability to focus upon the most obvious lessons of Katrina persisted as the majority of its returned citizens dealt with their own more immediate problems that required attention, insurance settlements, getting their houses back in order, or putting their children back in the schools that had reopened, the majority of which were private or parochial, while the city's public schools remained largely in disarray for months to come, many flooded beyond repair.

as soon as possible. 'HUD plans to keep low-income Black families out of New Orleans,' said Judith Browne, co-director, Advancement Project, a national civil rights and racial justice organization. 'These families have a right to return and a right to be consulted about the future of public housing. HUD and HANO's plan discriminates against Black residents by excluding them with no clear plan of when, how and if they will be able to return.'" Advancement Project: Hurricane Katrina. <http://www.advancementproject.org/ourwork/other-initiatives/hurricane-katrina/news/display-article.php?content_news_id=102%22>. Last accessed July 2009.

¹²⁷ Ibid. For more on the LJI, see <<http://www.louisianajusticeinstitute.org/>>.

¹²⁸ Naomi Klein, "Disaster Apartheid," The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism, Metropolitan Books. New York, 2007 (408).

Teachers and students were scattered, and for those who had returned, resources and information were hard to come by.

Historical Geographies: Race and Elevation

The possibility of a new and more equitable approach engendering greater harmony between the races in New Orleans was to be thwarted on a number of different levels, and sea level was a concern that pre-dated Katrina. The correlation between elevation and race was one factor that would thwart the beginnings of this discussion, and reveal a far from level playing field. Outside of Orleans, the largely white St. Bernard Parish was inundated on a level comparable to the floods that destroyed New Orleans East or the Lower Ninth Ward, and each still continue in their struggles to return. Within New Orleans, with the exception of Lakeview or the more mixed neighborhoods such as Broadmoor, the flooding was more selective.

The “sliver by the river” is a term that refers to an area largely settled by Americans of European descent and makes up the higher ground that flanks the eastern bank of the Mississippi, and from one river bend near Jefferson Parish to the other nearer St. Bernard; this part of Orleans Parish had largely returned to the outer appearance of normalcy by the time of the 2006 Mayor’s Race.¹²⁹ Other than roof damage, fallen live oak trees, and the prolonged absence of the famed green Streetcars, this historically dry swath of the city was a world away from the soggy remains that constituted the eighty percent that had been flooded. Countless articles referenced the title of Dickens’ novel of A Tale of Two Cities¹³⁰ as journalists and bloggers attempted to make sense of endless divides: the wet and the dry, the high and the low, the black and the white, the haves and the have-nots, and how to come to terms with the less than arbitrary nature of what factors decided whose homes were flooded and whose didn’t.¹³¹

¹²⁹ See GNOCDC map of the flood extent, <http://gnocdc.s3.amazonaws.com/maps/PDFs/flood_extent.pdf>. Last accessed May 2009.

¹³⁰ NBC “Nightly News with Brian Williams,” MSNBC, <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13070610/>>. “AlertNet,” Reuters Foundation, <<http://www.alertnet.org/db/blogs/1265/2007/07/31-193640-1.htm>>. CNBC, <<http://www.cnbc.com/id/20425067/>>. Last accessed July 2009.

¹³¹ See GNOCDC map of white and African-American racial demographics, <http://gnocdc.s3.amazonaws.com/maps/race/pdfs/african_american.pdf>, and <<http://gnocdc.s3.amazonaws.com/maps/race/pdfs/white.pdf>>. Last accessed May 2009.

Beginning in the very early part of the last century, New Orleans witnessed a rapid expansion of the city's footprint due to extraordinary advances in land-reclamation technology. Swampland that had been uninhabitable for centuries was made habitable, and as John Magill discusses in an article for Louisiana Cultural Vistas, "[by] 1915, huge pumps developed by A. Baldwin Wood were successfully draining swamps where such 20th-century neighborhoods as Lakeview, Broadmoor and Gentilly were destined to grow."¹³²

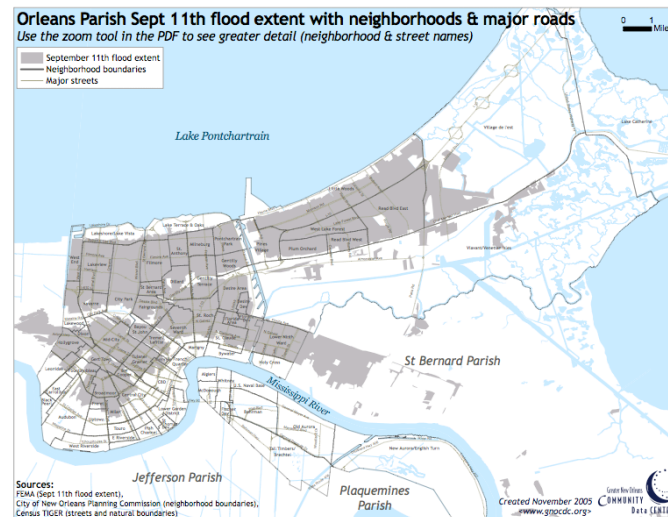


Illustration 7: “Orleans Parish Sept. 11th flood extent with neighborhoods & major roads,” GNOCCDC, original source: FEMA (Sept. 11th flood extent), City of New Orleans Planning Commission (neighborhood boundaries), and Census TIGER (streets and natural boundaries).

The residential developments that began to appear in these areas were hailed as examples of a new time where the modern was promoted over the out-dated, and services such as streetcars and motorbuses facilitated transportation to and from these new neighborhoods. The elevation of houses along the natural ridge of high land in Gentilly was increased as some of the houses were “raised further on small man-made terraces – an immense advantage since its surroundings flooded during the 1915 hurricane.”¹³³ In the following decades, the neighborhoods of Gentilly, Broadmoor, and Lakeview were enhanced further by improved drainage technologies, the creation of stepped seawalls, and pumping stations.

¹³² John Magill, “A Conspiracy of Complicity,” Louisiana Cultural Vistas, published by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, Fall 2006. See also “The Wood Srew Pump,” Jennifer Haydel, Loyola University, Student History Journal, <<http://www.loyno.edu/history/journal/1995-6/haydel.htm>>. Last accessed July 2009.

¹³³ John Magill, “A Conspiracy of Complicity,” Louisiana Cultural Vistas, Fall 2006.

In a still heavily racially segregated New Orleans, many of these neighborhoods were designed specifically for white people, and as Magill writes of Gentilly Terrace, developers stated in no uncertain terms that no site could be sold to minorities within this neighborhood. Magill writes of the increased monochromatic nature of these developments:

...their white populations ranged from working to upper income, and their houses were worlds away from old, racially integrated neighborhoods marked by high density blocks of shotgun houses.¹³⁴

Developers constructed other neighborhoods such as Sugar Hill and Pontchartrain Park for black professionals, and like many of the new constructions in white neighborhoods, they reflected the more slab-on-grade American style of houses that were built around modern conveniences, but most of the building took little account of the houses' low-lying situation. As long as the pumping stations remained functional and the levees remained intact, there was little to worry apart from drainage concerns during heavy storms; this was equally true of New Orleans East, the vast area that lies within Orleans Parish that suffered from terrible flooding.



Illustration 8: The Industrial Canal Levee Breach in the Lower Ninth Ward, from the Earth & Environmental Sciences Department's website, School of Science and Engineering, Tulane University, < <http://tulane.edu/sse/eens/stephen-nelson-10-10-08.cfm>>.

By the time of Hurricane Katrina, Broadmoor and the lower-lying areas of Gentilly had become more integrated, but Lakeview and areas such as Old Metairie in Jefferson Parish and most of St. Bernard Parish were also heavily flooded. These were the areas that grew significantly as a result of “white flight,” a period of time when large numbers of whites fled to the suburbs in fear and protest of federal integration policies. In

¹³⁴ Ibid.

the same article, Magill decries the national media's post-Katrina portrayal of African-Americans being relegated to the least elevated section of the city, and spends a substantial part of his piece discussing developments that flooded during Katrina that had specifically been built for white people, noting that "Since the 1920s whites have left above-sea-level homes in New Orleans for some of the lowest elevations."¹³⁵

However, African-Americans within Orleans Parish were disproportionately affected by the failure of the federally built levees, and Magill does not enter into a discussion concerning the correlation between race and elevation in the history of New Orleans residential expansion.

This correlation is especially evident when comparing the most damaged areas from flooding with a racial breakdown of neighborhoods. Historical race-related factors such as white flight and redlining; acquisitive land developers reclaiming swamp land to meet the growing demands for African-American homeownership; the building of cheaper slab-on-grade houses in black neighborhoods over the more historically sensible raised designs prominent in the older white neighborhoods all contributed to a disparity that reflected the historical color-line, and certainly, as many commentators had observed during Katrina, the last to be rescued and evacuated to safety were the last to return home, and the majority of them were African-American.

One of the largest cultural divides between the majority of white and the majority of African-American New Orleans communities is the conviction of the white community that the failure of the federal levees following Hurricane Katrina was the result of a design fault, whereas a substantial segment of the black community believes that the levees were deliberately dynamited preemptively to relieve water pressure and save white neighborhoods and more valuable city real estate, at the expense of predominantly black ones. The Times-Picayune reported on a New Orleans resident who spoke in Washington on the matter,

It's a deep-seated belief that reached Capitol Hill last week when Dyan "Mama D" French Cole, a community activist in New Orleans, startled a House committee by saying that failure of some of the levees was the result of an intentional bombing. Although she was ridiculed for her comments, public figures, including Black Muslim leader Louis

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Farrakhan, have publicly supported the claim. More than 100 days since the storm, it has become an urban myth.¹³⁶

Historically there had been a precedent during the 1927 Mississippi River flood; however, as Spike Lee's documentary When the Levees Broke explored, the significance is not in whether the levees were actually blown, but that so many people would believe it to be so, and what this says about the situation of inter-group trust prior to and following Katrina.¹³⁷

Other overarching factors to blame for the devastation of the city explained the widespread negligence of the city's most important infrastructure; the Army Corps of Engineers' faulty levee designs, and the existence of separate, non-communicating, and corrupt levee boards.¹³⁸ To this day, locals continue to react angrily to the media's continued description of Katrina as a 'natural disaster,' and correct outsiders to the distinctly unnatural failure of the federally built levees responsible for the ensuing devastation of the city. However, despite the Army Corps of Engineers' admittance of responsibility in shoddily built levees, citizens' demands for a thorough investigation into these failures have largely gone unheeded, and to this day, as thousands of lives continue and national memories fade, there has still not been a 9/11-style commission exploring the subject in depth.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Tara Young, "Rumor of levee dynamite persists: Expert: Explanation lies in history of bias" Times-Picayune, Monday, December 12, 2005. <<http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/index.ssf?base/news-4/1134370689216400.xml&coll=1>>. Last accessed April 2009.

¹³⁷ John M. Barry, Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

¹³⁸ John Schwartz, "A Reworked New Orleans Panel Adopts a Get-Tough Attitude on Levee Repairs." The New York Times, April 18, 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/18/us/18levee.html>>.

"Levee Engineers Were Unaware of Pooling Water." Los Angeles Times, November 19, 2005.

<<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/nov/19/nation/na-levees19>>.

¹³⁹ Levees.org. <<http://levees.org/>>. Last accessed June 2009.

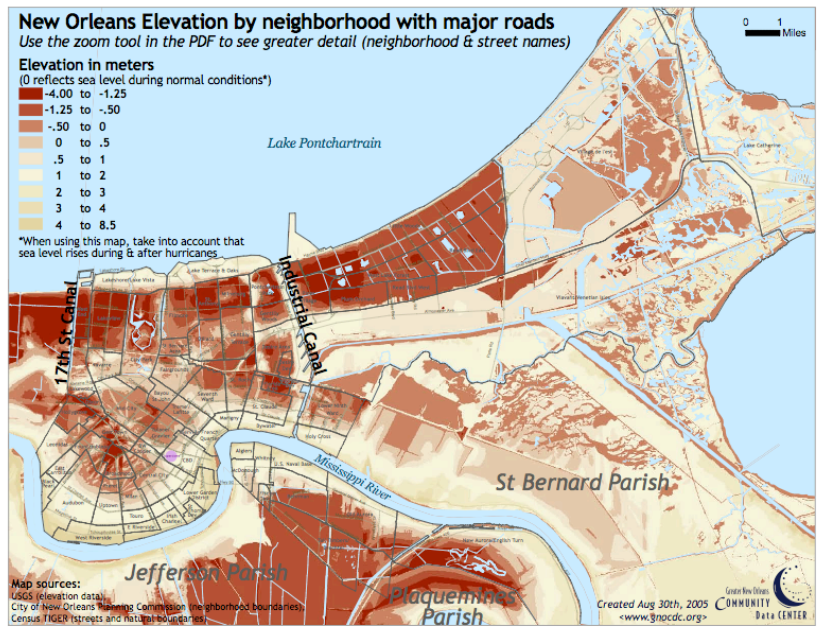


Illustration 9: New Orleans Elevation by Neighborhood with Major Roads, GNOCDC.

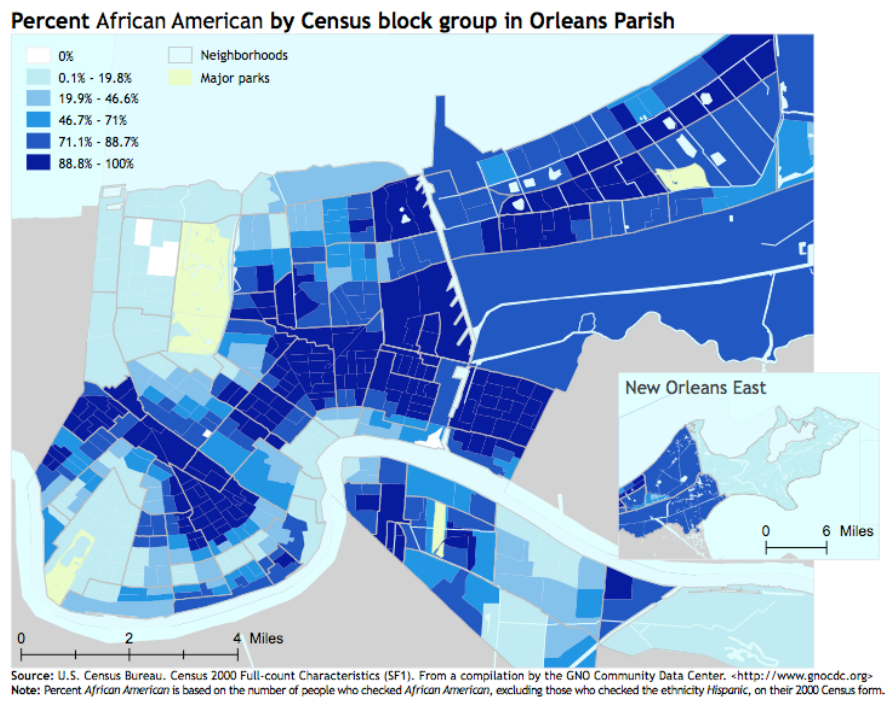


Illustration 10: Percent African-American by Census block group in Orleans Parish, Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC).

Early Planning Discussions: The “Shrunken Footprint” and the BNOBC

Prior to Katrina, eighty percent of the New Orleans African-American communities were renters, and the majority of renters did not have insurance coverage at the time of the storm.¹⁴⁰ Numerous homeowners lacked the benefit of speedy insurance settlements, and many tens of thousands of people were stuck in an uncertain limbo, unsure of the future of their neighborhoods. At the same time, with former residents still displaced, HANO, which had been under the control of HUD since 2001, began to implement pre-storm plans for the demolition of the Projects, which had been home to the most needy within the New Orleans community, and other less than inclusive rebuilding plans also began to take shape while politicians and urban planners continued to neglect the pressing concern for affordable housing.¹⁴¹ Pre-Katrina, the majority of those who had the resources to evacuate had done so, while the majority of those without funds stayed in the city during the storm, and after a delayed Federal response to the flooding and devastation, citizens were flown or bused out of town with no provisions made for a return journey.

Economic factors as determinants for the speed at which citizens could return abounded within post-Katrina New Orleans, and starkly intersected with other divides such as the wet and the dry and the black and the white. The majority of those able to return during the early days following the storm were those able to rely upon personal resources, while little or no path existed for many without such funds to rely upon.¹⁴² The population of New Orleans evacuees was estimated at 70,000 in Houston and 40,000 in Atlanta, and the absence of assisted facilitation enabling poorer residents to return was as apparent as the lack of places for people to return home to, and until the FEMA trailers finally began to trickle into the city for homeowners, many New Orleanians remained stranded in their places of evacuation. By January 2006, population estimates within the Parish of Orleans were contradictory, some putting it at 170,000, and others at 135,000, the larger estimate only 36% of the city’s pre-Katrina figure.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Lance Hill, “My Day of (trying to) Absentee Voting.” Commentaries by Lance Hill, Southern Institute for Education and Research, April 18, 2006. <<http://www.southerninstitute.info/commentaries/?m=200604>>.

¹⁴¹ “Homes & Communities,” U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development website, <<http://www.hud.gov/katrina/factsheet.cfm>>. Last accessed May 2009.

¹⁴² Eugene Robinson, “It might be nice; it won’t be the same.” syndicated Washington Post journalist, Times-Picayune, Tuesday, January 17, 2006.

To those attempting to make sense of the complex logistics of laying down a foundation for the recovery of the city, there were many catch-22 situations and countless unknown factors: whether to encourage the rebuilding of devastated areas when the federal levees would not be guaranteed for many years, and with a real possibility that the same situation might occur again? Or, that if these same neighborhoods returned in a slow and mottled fashion, how would the city ensure that there was not a jack-o'-lantern effect in which city services would be as stretched as the city budget?¹⁴⁴ Without the pre-Katrina population levels and a drastically reduced tax base, many of those well versed in city finance matters feared that the city was in danger of having to declare bankruptcy. However, most of these questions ran counter to a notion that was surprisingly not part of this recovery dialogue, that the federal recovery money should be spent on the most devastated areas, or as author Naomi Klein put it, that “New Orleans could be reconstructed by and for the very people most victimized by the flood,” and due to an exclusionary recovery rhetoric during the first days of rebuilding planning discussions, many of the people to whom Klein refers were to vote in large numbers for an incumbent who had done little to shift the tone of the dialogue until it became politically expedient for him to do so.”¹⁴⁵

By January 2006, Mayor Nagin, city bankers, lawyers, and moneymen from the Board of Liquidation, City Debt were negotiating loans for the City of New Orleans while planners, architects, and politicians openly questioned the viability or validity of rebuilding the whole city as it had been, and talk of the smaller “footprint” had began to emerge from New Orleans planners such as Steven Bingler, the result of which would inevitably have dramatically altered the city’s demographics as they had existed prior to Katrina.¹⁴⁶ As politicians and planners discussed the practicalities in rebuilding areas without the guarantee of safe federal

¹⁴³ James K. Glassman, “Back to the Future: The new New Orleans, a land of opportunity.” *WSJ*.

<<http://www.opinionjournal.com/cc/?id=110007798>>. Last accessed May 2009.

Jeff Crouere, Commentary: Problem-free primary election an amazing post-Katrina feat.” *AllBusiness*.

<<http://www.allbusiness.com/north-america/united-states-louisiana/4079429-1.html>>.

¹⁴⁴ The plan calls for stabilizing neighborhoods by encouraging residents to cluster homes on high ground — in the neighborhood or nearby — to reduce flood risk, as well as to target infrastructure investment and avoid the jack-o-lantern effect, in which blocks are an unplanned mixture of occupied houses, blighted properties, and vacant lots. “New Orleans Planners Brief Board and Commission on New Unified Plan,” *American Planning Association*, <<http://www.planning.org/katrina/newunifiedplan.htm>>. Last accessed July, 2009.

¹⁴⁵ Naomi Klein, “Power to the Victims of New Orleans,” *Guardian*, Friday Sept. 9, 2005,

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/sep/09/hurricanekatrina.usa4>>. Last accessed April 2009.

¹⁴⁶ See *Urban Land Institute*,

<<http://commerce.uli.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&CONTENTID=85160&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm>>. Also, “We Could Be Famous: Celebrity Blogutante,” <<http://wecouldbefamous.blogspot.com/2008/11/you-mean-were-not-done-shrinking-yet.html>>. Last accessed July 2009.

levees, other terms such as “Eminent Domain,” in which privately held property could be requisitioned in the name of public interest, and “green space” became scattered within the reconstruction rhetoric. Had these policies been implemented to the full extent in which many were advocating, including Republican mayoral candidates Rob Couhig and Peggy Wilson, and the more conservative leaning Democrat Ron Forman, then a dramatic reduction of the city’s African-American population would have occurred, and within a city not known for a progressive advancement in Civil Rights issues during the twentieth century, that such rhetoric had entered into the public discourse was to have devastating consequences in the advancement of inter-group trust.

The concept of taking privately held property from individuals also witnessed a reversal of a commonly held definition of conservative philosophy, in that New Orleanians saw white conservative interests running counter to those of private property owners, and the term “Right to Return” gained common currency among displaced African-Americans in direct response to the recovery rhetoric of a smaller city “footprint.” A widespread and justified perception emerged within different African-American communities that if you were poor and black and lived in one of the devastated neighborhoods, that there was no place for you within the “new” New Orleans, and even if you were affluent and black too, although this was covered less by the media.¹⁴⁷ In an article for [BlackCommentator.com](http://www.blackcommentator.com), New Orleans Human Rights lawyer and Loyola University law professor Bill Quigley described the political implications of “a dramatic reduction in poor and working mostly [sic] African-American people in New Orleans” as “straightforward,” Quigley said:

The reduction directly helps Republicans who have fought for years to reduce the impact of the overwhelmingly Democratic New Orleans on state-wide politics in Louisiana. [...] The forced relocation of hundreds of thousands, mostly lower income and African-American, could alter the balance between the two major parties in Louisiana and the opportunities for black elected officials in New Orleans.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Naomi Klein, “Power to the Victims of New Orleans,” [Guardian](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/sep/09/hurricanekatrina.usa4), Friday Sept. 9, 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/sep/09/hurricanekatrina.usa4>>.

Jesse Muhammad, “Evacuees demand their right to return,” [FinalCall.com News](http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/article_2345.shtml), Jan. 2, 2006. <http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/article_2345.shtml>.

Robert D. Bullard, “A 20-Point Plan To Destroy Black New Orleans,” [New American Media: Expanding the News Lens Through Ethnic Media](http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=ad54cb41686743ebb33ed2eb16647b16), <http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=ad54cb41686743ebb33ed2eb16647b16>. Last accessed July 2009.

¹⁴⁸ Bill Quigley, “Half New Orleans Poor Permanently Displaced: Failure or Success?” [Black Commentator](http://www.blackcommentator.com/267/267_justice_watch_no_half_displaced.html), <http://www.blackcommentator.com/267/267_justice_watch_no_half_displaced.html>. Last accessed July, 2009.

Such concerns built upon the inequities exposed by Katrina, and had an enormous impact upon the polarization as manifested within the 2006 New Orleans election results, and due to the conservative leaning inclinations of Nagin's 2002 electoral base, his position within these questions constituted something of a political tightrope walk, especially considering the composition of the BNOBC. As the Times-Picayune columnist Lolis Elie wrote of Mayor Nagin, "he was the one who raised the suspicions of the black community by appointing a Bring New Orleans Back Commission that seemed much more wealthy, white and suburban than the city itself."¹⁴⁹ However at the time Nagin appointed the commission, he was still financially and politically beholden to many of the voices that were reflected by its membership, and Nagin appointed the BNOBC in the early days following the storm and before he had begun to feel the political ramifications from the Dallas meeting.

But by early January, it had become clear that Nagin's original white supporters had begun to abandon him and were looking for another candidate to finance, and shortly afterwards, Nagin began to equivocate on the moratorium on issuing building permits within the most devastated areas, which was a position advocated by the more conservative business interests behind the BNOBC. This signaled a shift away from the interests of those who had endorsed and funded Nagin's campaign in 2002, and leading up to the 2006 primaries, many of the more conservative white economic powerbrokers had largely abandoned him in favor of Ron Forman. Times-Picayune staff writer Coleman Warner wrote of the failure of the BNOBC's "shrunken footprint" proposal failing purely in terms of Nagin's re-election battle, and that the notion was "tantamount to political kryptonite in many neighborhoods that feared being bulldozed." Warner continued, "Nagin's decision or lack of one, sparked outrage among urban planners at a national level."¹⁵⁰

Perhaps still flinching from the ramifications of this slight during a time of need, Nagin seemed less than enamored by his erstwhile supporters and a month before the runoff referred to "some of the historic businesses that are here," reproaching them for only really caring about "the trust funds and not a true economic environment of growth." Nagin expressed a desire that they "don't dominate the city moving

¹⁴⁹ Lolis Elie, "Mayor misses the mark with speech," Times-Picayune, Metro Section, Wednesday, January 18, 2006.

¹⁵⁰ Coleman Warner, "N.O. Planning Process Puts Residents on Edge: There's no way to tell what happens next." Thursday, August 31, 2006. Times-Picayune, [theurbanconservancy](http://www.urbanconservancy.org/news/roundup/archive/575), <http://www.urbanconservancy.org/news/roundup/archive/575>>. Last accessed July 2009.

forwards” before concluding, “So I’m on a mission, if you will.”¹⁵¹ Nagin was to allude to this group again two months later in his victory speech, in which he referenced a metaphor that many commentators were unfamiliar with, but one from which the meaning was largely clear. The Mayor said that some of his former supporters had “gone over to the red light district,” but that he would forgive them. Some listeners thought that in the Mayor’s opinion, perhaps like some of the women from the infamous brothels in Storyville, Nagin’s former supporters had sold themselves to the highest bidder in a less than salubrious manner. However Nagin’s campaign strategist Jim Carvin viewed this as like so many of the Mayor’s off the cuff comments, as uncalculated, and thought that he probably wanted to say “A lot of you went over to the enemy, but in searching for a euphemism,” he found something else.¹⁵²

In the Fall of 2005, celebrated architects and town planners descended upon the city as different and conflicting rebuilding plans began to take shape, at first the Urban Land Institute’s (ULI) report, then Mayor Nagin’s BNOBC plan, followed by the City Council’s Lambert plan.¹⁵³ The ULI strategy became controversial when it “called for immediately rebuilding areas that were not as hard hit by the storm while studying the safety and viability of redeveloping the most severely affected areas, such as most of eastern New Orleans and Gentilly, the northern part of Lakeview, and parts of the Lower 9th Ward, Mid-City, Broadmoor and Hollygrove.”¹⁵⁴ The ULI advised Mayor Nagin’s BNOBC, and continued the idea of a smaller city with a “shrunken footprint.” African-American leaders and elected officials were quoted in the Baton Rouge newspaper the Advocate, and “denounced the phased-in approach, arguing that shrinking the city’s footprint would likely have a disproportionate effect on areas populated largely by black residents.”¹⁵⁵ But as American urban theorist and social commentator Mike Davis wrote in an article for the Nation during this time, “while elected black officials protest impotently from the sidelines, a largely white elite has wrested control over the debate about how to rebuild the city.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ CecilFilm interview with Mayor Nagin. April 4, 2006. MR 32, 00:51:03:00.

¹⁵² CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin. May 14, 2007. MR 82, 00:28:17:00.

¹⁵³ Think New Orleans. <http://thinknola.com/wiki/Unified_New_Orleans_Plan>. Last accessed May 2009.

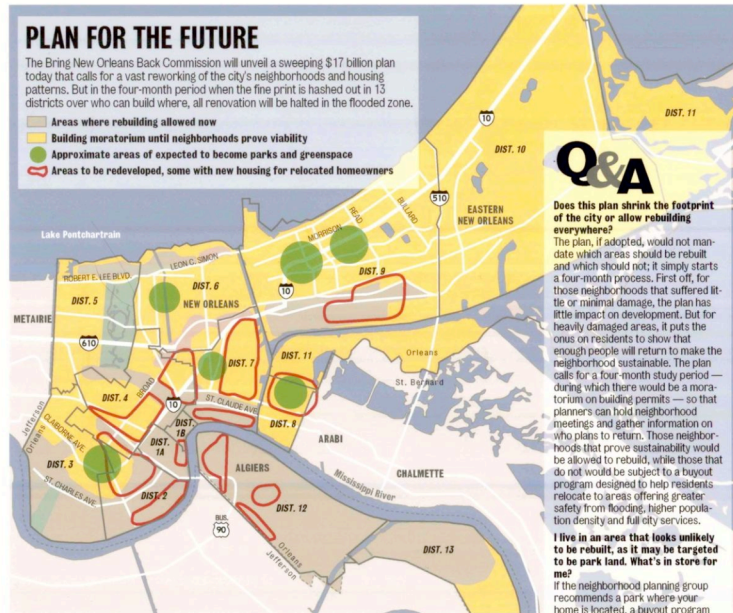
¹⁵⁴ Joe Gyan Jr., “First N.O rebuilding report due out today,” Advocate (Baton Rouge), Jan. 11, 2006, from BGR, <<http://www.bgr.org/news/archives/first-n.o.-rebuilding-report-due-out-today/>>.

¹⁵⁵ Joe Gyan Jr., “First N.O rebuilding report due out today,” Advocate (Baton Rouge), Jan. 11, 2006, from BGR, <<http://www.bgr.org/news/archives/first-n.o.-rebuilding-report-due-out-today/>>.

¹⁵⁶ Mike Davis, ‘Who is Killing New Orleans?’ Nation, March 23, 2006.

4 MONTHS TO DECIDE

NAGIN PANEL SAYS HARDEST-HIT AREAS MUST PROVE VIABILITY
CITY'S FOOTPRINT MAY SHRINK; FULL BUYOUTS PROPOSED FOR THOSE FORCED TO MOVE
New housing to be developed in vast swaths of New Orleans' higher ground



By Frank Donze and Gordon Russell
Staff writers

Residents of New Orleans areas hardest-hit by Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters would have four months to prove they can bring their neighborhoods back to life or face the prospect of having to sell out to a new and powerful redevelopment authority under a plan to be released today by a key panel of Mayor Ray Nagin's rebuilding commission.

In perhaps its boldest recommendation, the panel says Nagin should impose a moratorium on building permits in shattered areas covering most of the city, while residents there meet to craft plans to revive their neighborhoods. The proposals are spelled out in the final report of the land-use committee of Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back commission, which was obtained by The Times-Picayune.

Addressing the debate about whether planners and politicians should declare areas off limits or allow market forces to determine the city's future, Nagin's panel clearly sought a compromise by instead proposing a process to gauge residents' intentions to return to their neighborhoods. But ultimately, commissioners say, not every neighborhood will be sustainable and there will be a need to use eminent domain to seize some property. The panel proposes the creation of a new public agency, tentatively called the Crescent City Redevelopment Corp., to use that power, but only as a "last resort."

While debate has focused heavily on the hot-button footprint issue, the report also proposes a number of lofty ideas that could change the cityscape, including a light-rail system.

See **PANEL**, A-8

See **Q & A**, A-8

Illustration 11: "4 Months to Decide: Nagin panel says hardest-hit areas must prove viability," *Times-Picayune*, Wednesday January 11, 2006. New Orleans Edition.

On January 11, 2006, members of the BNOBC and the Philadelphia-based firm Wallace Roberts & Todd presented their “Action Plan for New Orleans: The New American City,” at the Sheraton Hotel before a large and nervous audience, and many observed what came to be known as the “green space map,” where large green circles defined areas that the Commission deemed unwise to rebuild. Predominantly white neighborhoods that had flooded such as Lakeview, to the west of City Park, were now noticeably absent from the areas defined by the green circles, which were majority African-American neighborhoods. The dramatic implications of both the BNOBC “green space map,” as well as of the psychological effects of the one printed in the Times-Picayune (see Illustrations 11 and 12), were profound.¹⁵⁷



Illustration 12: ‘Parks and Open Space Plan,’ from the “Action Plan for New Orleans: The New American City,” Bring New Orleans Back Commission and the Urban Planning Committee, January 11, 2006.

Another now well-known map depicting the New Orleans of 1878 was routinely shown in relation to the areas unaffected by the 2005 flooding revealing the same geographic area as an indictment of the developers who had drained the swampland for building that many felt should not have occurred in the first place, and local conservative and liberal columnists alike presented the shrunken footprint as an almost

¹⁵⁷ Despite repeated telephone calls, neither Nola.com (online publisher of the Times-Picayune), nor the Times-Picayune was able to explain the absence of the entire month of January 2006 from the T-P’s Katrina Graphics online archive. The index contains images from the newspaper for every month from August 2005 to November 2006. Nola.com, <<http://www.nola.com/katrina/graphics/>>. Last accessed July 2009.

inevitable part of the “new” New Orleans, restricting more inclusive dialogue and fueling a growing fear amongst the displaced that they would not be part of the rebuilding discussion. These calls were joined by well-known conservative voices within the national media; in a WSJ article subtitled “The new New Orleans, a land of opportunity,” libertarian conservative journalist, author, and future Bush political appointee, James K. Glassman equated “smaller” with possibly “better,” and viewed what opponents referred to as “the free market chaos” alternative as having been one of the founding beneficial forces in the city’s early settlement history. Glassman wrote of what should be done with the most flooded areas in no uncertain terms; “those areas should return to marshland.”¹⁵⁸ But as Dan Baum, author and staff writer for the New Yorker perceived, the most flooded areas were treated rather differently from each other, “...nobody seriously proposed ditching Lakeview, an upscale white neighborhood that had borne the force of another breach, that of the Seventeenth Street Canal, and lay under even deeper water.” Baum wrote:

Some bluntly welcomed an opportunity to abandon the Lower Ninth Ward. ‘I don’t want those people from the Lower Ninth Ward back,’ Robby Robinson, the owner of French Quarter Candles, said. ‘I don’t think any businessperson does. They didn’t contribute anything to this city.’¹⁵⁹

Jed Horne, a former editor of the Times-Picayune noted the ease with which the public safety argument could be made, “a flood line up near the eaves of a house in eastern New Orleans spoke with unambiguous eloquence.” He continued, “But the economic argument against re-populating the entire city leaned on speculative judgments about New Orleans future that were susceptible both to dispute and to accusations of racial bias.”¹⁶⁰ If the recent historical model of pre-Katrina mayoral elections had been coalition building between the races, whether moderate progressive or more conservative, then such post-Katrina exclusionary rhetoric signaled a shift in the paradigm, and this was the beginning of race as a factor in the upcoming elections – front and center. As Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson wrote at the time, “One way or another – through a proposed moratorium on rebuilding in the areas flooded when the levees failed, or

¹⁵⁸ “Mr. Glassman, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and host of TCSDaily.com, founded and edited the New Orleans weekly *Figaro* during the 1970s.” James K. Glassman, “Back to the Future: The new New Orleans, a land of opportunity.” WSJ, Thursday, January 12, 2006. WSJ Opinion Archives, <<http://www.opinionjournal.com/cc/?id=110007798>>. Last accessed May, 2009.

¹⁵⁹ Dan Baum, “The Lost Year; Behind the Failure to Rebuild.” The New Yorker, August 21, 2006. From Letter From New Orleans (Pg. 46 Vol. 82, No. 25). <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/08/21/060821fa_fact2>. Last accessed July, 2009.

¹⁶⁰ Jed Horne, Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City, New York: Random House, 2008 (316).

through protracted argument over whether to have a moratorium or not – the plan all but guarantees additional months of delay and rot.”¹⁶¹ Referencing majority African-American New Orleans neighborhoods, Robinson goes on to say, “The Lower 9th will never be the Lower 9th again. Neither will Central City or a half-dozen other big neighborhoods that the city wants to condemn and sell for new development. Much of what has always been considered the heart and soul of black New Orleans has effectively been wiped off the map.”¹⁶²

The Republican and President Bush supporter and fundraiser Joe Canizaro typified the less diverse and more partisan New Orleans members of the BNOBC, and in this now famous January 11 public meeting, the Commission also announced its moratorium on issuing rebuilding permits in devastated areas.¹⁶³ At this meeting, many citizens not only objected to the nature of the plan that was unfolding, but to the fact that New Orleanians who had contributed to the economy and wellbeing of their neighborhoods for many generations had not been consulted during the planning process, and now the plan to demolish their neighborhoods was now being presented as a *fait accompli*. Reflecting the magnitude of his fury towards outside voices having such conclusive opinions as to the future of his home and neighborhood and referencing President Bush’s contentious war overseas, New Orleans East resident Harvey Bender said of the plan’s principal author, “Joe Canizaro, I don’t know you, but I hate you. I’m going to suit up like I’m going to Iraq and fight this.”¹⁶⁴ Bender continued, “You’ve been in the background scheming to take our land.”¹⁶⁵ Judging from the rising temperatures at the meeting, Nagin then sought to alleviate fears and by announcing that it was “just a plan,” and said that, “This is a process [...] This is a journey.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Eugene Robinson, “It might be nice; it won’t be the same.” Times-Picayune, Tuesday, January 17, 2006.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ “Canizaro has developed more than \$1 billion in Big-Easy real estate and is the chair of First Bank and Trust. He became one of the nation’s top individual “soft money” donors to the Republican National State Elections Committee in 2000 when he wrote it a \$240,000 check.” Texans for Public Justice, <http://www.tpj.org/pioneers/joseph_canizaro.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Gary Rivlin, “Anger Meets New Orleans Renewal Plan,” New York Times, Jan. 12, 2006.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/12/national/nationalspecial/12plan.html>>.

For more on Harvey Bender see Glen Ford and Peter Gamble’s article “Fighting the Theft of New Orleans: The Rhythms of Resistance,” Black Commentator, <http://www.blackcommentator.com/167/167_cover_fighting_no_theft.html>. Last accessed July 2009.

Bender’s allusion to Iraq constituted a foreshadowing of the rhetoric used by many who protested the voting rights issues threatened by the holding of the 2006 mayoral elections, and the issues represented by the “Right to Return” slogan intersected closely with voting rights concerns. Referring to the Secretary of State’s decision not to allow out of state polling stations in the cities with the largest populations of exiled New Orleanians, April 1st Bridge March signs and placards depicted the words “Iraq has fairer elections,” these and other such signs dominated the landscape. The overarching question was, if it had been possible for a displaced Iraqi to vote in New York for an election taking place in Baghdad, why could a New Orleanian not vote in Texas? These sentiments paralleled those questions following the delay in relief reaching Katrina victims, if we can get aid to Somalia in under three days, why did it take five to reach New Orleans?

¹⁶⁵ USA Today (AP), January 12, 2006. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-01-12-rebuilding-new-orleans_x.htm>. Last accessed July 2009.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Canizaro's endorsement of Mitch Landrieu four months later over Ray Nagin, whom he had supported in 2002, might have had repercussions in Mitch's bid for crossover votes within parts of the New Orleans African-American community. Discussions concerning the implications of Canizaro's involvement in the BNOBC had been prominent within New Orleans blogs and online discussion groups. The Daily Kos: LA-02: A Primer for Non-New Orleanians [sic], stated that, "Black people are very suspicious of people like Joe Canizaro, who is a huge real estate developer. They see him as a person who wants to take over their neighborhoods and kick out their people in the name of 'revitalization.'" When Mitch Landrieu's father Moon was named President Carter's Secretary for HUD in 1979, a possible conflict of interest emerged due to Moon Landrieu's real estate dealings with Joe Canizaro Interests, Inc. Despite his friendship with Moon Landrieu, Canizaro had repeatedly funded Republican challengers to his daughter Mary Landrieu's senate bids, and this, combined with his reputation as a Republican real estate developer who had advocated for the "shrunk footprint" did not endear him to the New Orleans African-American communities.¹⁶⁷

The "green space" issue was raised at many election debates, with Landrieu's most memorable catchphrase summing up his stance on it, "to shrink the city's footprint is to shrink its destiny," which contrasted to that of his Republican opponent Rob Couhig, who called for a smaller city. Couhig's sentiments more often than not read to many African-American citizens as code for a whiter city, as indeed maps such as the BNOBC's prove that it would have been. President of the National Urban League and former New Orleans mayor Marc Morial was vocal about the issues at stake and directly linked the idea of developers seeking opportunity from the misfortune of others with historical procedures put in place by white power structures that withheld economic progress from African-Americans. Morial referred to the BNOBC's plan as a "massive red-lining plan wrapped around a giant land grab."¹⁶⁸ The symbolism of green lines within the

¹⁶⁷ Spokesmen Review,

<<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1314&dat=19790809&id=gMYRAAAIABJ&sjid=vu4DAAAIAIBJ&pg=7110,5082901>>. Last accessed July 2009.

¹⁶⁸ Gary Rivlin, 'Anger Meets New Orleans Renewal Plan,' New York Times, January 12, 2006.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/12/national/nationalspecial/12plan.html>>. Last accessed April 2009.

F.D. Roosevelt's New Deal and its Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) sanctioned "color-coded maps of American cities that used racial criteria to categorize lending and insurance risks." "Redlining." Encyclopedia of Chicago,

<<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1050.html>>. Last accessed April 2009. The red lines drawn upon these maps delineated low-income and minority residents while green lines signified the more affluent neighborhoods, and redlining was a practice that restricted and denied financial services to neighborhoods based upon the color and class of their occupants.

BNOBC map might have reversed the color-symbolism associated with redlining, but it essentially constituted the same thing. New Orleans Civil rights attorney and community activist Tracie Washington summed up the issue of race and rebuilding within the post-Katrina landscape in an online interview for ColorLines, “I don’t think it’s something a lot of folks want to face, but unless we face the issue of race and racism in the rebuilding and return of former residents, we will not heal this city [...] and when you don’t return poor black people to the city, you’ve got a race problem.”¹⁶⁹

A recent 2009 poll conducted by the celebrated campaign strategist and Louisiana native James Carville shed further light on this fear and inadvertently revealed distinctly different opinions between black and white New Orleans populations on one particular single issue: the question of whether all neighborhoods should be rebuilt. This is significant for several reasons, firstly because racial harmony was something that the poll was attempting to emphasize, and secondly because nearly four years after Katrina, this issue largely remains prominent as well as divisive within the city. New Orleans radio host Vincent Sylvain of WBOK 1230 AM and publisher of the political list-serve the New Orleans Agenda interviewed Lance Hill of the Southern Institute for Education and Research, who observed that this was by far the most racially polarizing of post-Katrina questions, and that Carville’s data disclosed that the majority of African-Americans answered that all neighborhoods should return, while in contrast, the majority of whites answered that they should not.¹⁷⁰

Such sentiments were shared by director of the Finance Authority of New Orleans and New Orleans East resident Mtumishi St. Julien who when interviewed by Los Angeles Times journalist Richard Fausset about the poll said that the result among African-Americans was a “justifiable paranoia” based “upon a historical legacy of privilege, which seems to be heavily based on race.”¹⁷¹ The climate of distrust between the two communities was firmly in place before campaigning began for the 2006 mayoral election, and an

¹⁶⁹ Tracie Washington, “The Right to Return,” COLORLINES: The national newsmagazine on race and politics, You Tube – Broadcast Yourself, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IHT3Uz2_D8>. Last accessed June 2009.

¹⁷⁰ 2009 Poll conducted by James Carville and Democracy Corps, and noted by Dr. Lance Hill of the Southern Institute for Education and Research on the New Orleans radio station WBOK, May 12, 2009. Statement 31, to which those polled are asked to agree or disagree with various degrees of emphasis reads: “Some areas of New Orleans destroyed by Hurricane Katrina should not be rebuilt as residential areas again,” to which 74% of African-Americans in total disagree, and 64% of whites in total agree. <<http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/deor-neworleans.pdf>>.

¹⁷¹ Richard Fausset, Los Angeles Times. “Many whites oppose reviving some areas of New Orleans; Poll indicates divide along racial lines.” The Boston Globe, June 1, 2009. NEWS; National: Pg. 6.

exploration of it is vital in order to understand Mitch Landrieu's failed attempt at running a "post-racial" campaign, and Ray Nagin's triumphant racialized strategy. It has taken nearly four years for data such as Carville's to emerge; however, in the course of the 2006 election, there were other clues that would point towards the ensuing block voting and the turnaround that resulted in Nagin's re-election from a different demographic base from that which elected him in 2002, and Hill's interpretation of Carville's poll provides further supporting evidence.



Illustration 13: From "Katrina Aftermath: Capitalist Land Grab Black People Flooded Out, Now Kept Out," (The Internationalist, September 2005).

Chapter 3: Old Rhetoric versus New Rhetoric?

Chocolate City Revisited: Nagin as an Emerging Civil Rights Leader and Black Power symbol?

As Landrieu had articulated in his campaign kick-off speech, Katrina had opened up yet another opportunity for dialogue about race and poverty, but post-Katrina, who had been able to come home to take part in this dialogue, how would it unfold against this ominously developing backdrop, where would it lead its participants, and who were its participants? Judging from the recollections made by some of the Dallas meeting attendees, it would seem that following the meeting there had been little dialogue between Nagin and the more affluent white base that had elected him. James Reiss and James Roddy maintained that following their offers to assist the mayor in whatever way they could, that, “the call never came.” Certainly the combination of African-American lawmakers’ responses to the Dallas meeting in September 2005 considered the later rebuilding talk of a “smaller footprint” within the white community might have accounted for Nagin’s distancing from a group with which he had previously allied himself.

Mayor Nagin’s first term was marked by what more conservative voters viewed as something of a reform effort to oust local corruption, but this was most memorably targeted at tax evaders, unlicensed local cab drivers, and the African-American community, and had Katrina not challenged his leadership credentials, many white New Orleans voters would not have viewed his administration as unsuccessful. Speaking of his 2002 victory in an interview in April 2006, Nagin said, “Well you know, when I first ran, there were fourteen candidates and it was majority African-American city. I came and ran on a platform of cleaning up corruption and being more business-oriented. It had a definite appeal to people of European descent.”¹⁷² Many of the Business Council members, including its Chair, James Reiss Jr., had been surprised by Nagin throwing his hat in the ring for the mayor in 2002, but had supported him, thinking that as a business candidate, he would “change the political mix at City Hall by bringing in business people to his administration.”¹⁷³ In early April 2006, Nagin claimed to view his attempt at winning a second term as an opportunity to continue much of

¹⁷² CecilFilm interview with Mayor Nagin, April 4, 2006. [MR 32](#), 00:48:11:00.

¹⁷³ CecilFilm interview with James Reiss and James Roddy. January 4, 2008. [MR 86A](#).

what he began to put in place before Katrina, of “diversifying the economy and brining in players from around the country and around the world.”¹⁷⁴ As CEO of Cox Communications in New Orleans, Nagin had been one of the few African-American members of the majority white New Orleans Business Council, and in the 2002 mayoral race, he was elected to City Hall largely with the backing of most of its members.

Crossover voting became less relevant in one particular context, as white candidates stopped making the runoffs in the city’s open primary mayoral elections, and then they largely ceased running altogether. It was often said that candidates would need eighty percent of the African-American vote, and 20 percent of the white vote to secure victory. To many voters of European descent within the business community, it simply became a question of which African-American candidates were the most likely to win, and which would best represent their interests, and their principal concerns became about which candidate wouldn’t get in the way of businesses and economic development within the city.¹⁷⁵ During the late 1990s and before considering a political career, Ray Nagin’s public profile had been rising. As CEO of Cox, Nagin hosted a twice-weekly call-in show on television for cable customers, which made “his a more familiar face and personality than most business executives.” Then in 1998, “Nagin moved further into the public eye when he introduced professional hockey to the city with an East Coast Hickey League team, the New Orleans Brass.”¹⁷⁶ Nagin’s longtime friend and associate David White noted:

Ray is not afraid to take risks, and that was quite a risk [...]. You start talking about black folks owning a hockey team? In New Orleans? That’s a pretty strange situation, but that’s what sets Ray apart. He thinks outside traditional boxes.

Over the last century, the powers enjoyed by New Orleans mayors had been consistently reduced, with the reality being that there were severe limitations upon a mayor’s chances of achieving major change through policy. University of New Orleans historian Arnold Hirsch places this moment within the context of a different inter-group power struggle, and writes that due to the influx of Irish immigrants into the New Orleans voting population a century earlier, white power brokers had:

¹⁷⁴ CecilFilm interview with Mayor Nagin, April 4, 2006. [MR 32](#), 00:51:03:00.

¹⁷⁵ Cecil, conversation with New Orleans CEO of Chase Bank, John Kallenborn, November, 2008.

¹⁷⁶ Mark Miester, [Tulanian](#), Spring 2003. <http://www2.tulane.edu/article_news_details.cfm?ArticleID=4713>. Last accessed July 2009.

...succeeded in creating a network of appointed boards and commissions from which they could effectively protect their interests. Because they controlled key city functions such as tax rates, riverfront development, and drainage, they could still dictate the pace and nature of urban development from perches.¹⁷⁷

These perches – or boards – remained outside of City Hall and the electoral process, and in 2009, their membership still fails to reflect the diversity of the current city’s electorate, and even a century after their creation, gaining access to broaden their composition, or even to monitor their activities still remains elusive to women and minorities, with their demographic makeup providing a marked contrast to that of elected political city positions. Similarly elitist to these boards in appearance, the composition of the largely white New Orleans Business Council was determined by more economic factors, and was comprised of about sixty-five CEOs or presidents of the largest and most successful companies from Greater New Orleans.¹⁷⁸ This economic racial-divide seems acutely apparent in Nagin’s mind during the 2006 election period:

We've always been a very diverse economy but [for] the most part African-Americans haven't really taken part in the economy of this city [...] we own just two percent of the businesses that are here. And it's just created this whole tension that continues to exist through the day.¹⁷⁹

Despite the advances in racial equality since integration, economic disparities to date have been slower to rectify, and few mayoral candidates had been elected without the financial backing of men from the prominent and largely white New Orleans Business Council. Since being edged out of the public political arena after the benefits of modern Civil Rights era federal legislation began to be felt by leaders within the African-American community, the political power of the white establishment had been reduced to behind the scenes king making where they financially supported candidates whom they thought would aid their businesses and reflect their interests.

Wielding influence by voting with their pocketbooks, the majority of them anointed more conservative leaning candidates with varying degrees of success, such as Sidney Barthelemy in 1986.

¹⁷⁷ Arnold R. Hirsch, *African American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City*, (114-115).

¹⁷⁸ CecilFilm interview with James Reiss and James Roddy, January 4, 2008. [MR 86A](#).

¹⁷⁹ CecilFilm interview with Mayor Nagin, April 4, 2006. [MR 32](#), 00:53:40:00.

Referring to Moon Landrieu – sometimes dubbed “the first black mayor” by white business men – Dutch Morial, who was the first African-American mayor – and his son Marc Morial, also former mayor and now President of the Urban League, the predominant feeling amongst members of the majority white business council had been that political families such as the Landrieus or Morials equated with political patronage and contract bids that locked them out of the process. They believed that this was bad for New Orleans business, and that it engendered a system that benefited a select few whom they viewed as less than qualified. To this group, Nagin personified someone who was an outsider, someone who was apolitical and without ties to prominent African-American political families such as the Morials, who many of them saw as counter-productive to their goals in moving the city forward.

James Reiss had been one of the most prominent of Nagin’s early champions from the Business Council, and after Nagin appointed him to chair the Regional Transit Authority (RTA).¹⁸⁰ The business community deemed Nagin’s first term largely a success, and thought that he would have been re-elected virtually unopposed if Katrina hadn’t happened.¹⁸¹ Mark Miester quoted James Reiss speaking about Nagin in the spring 2003 edition of the Tulanian, the Tulane University magazine of the institution whose board members were largely drawn from within the uptown establishment and from within the business community, a significant number of whom had attended the Dallas meeting:

He’s got an altruistic view of city government and a real love for New Orleans. The reason I got involved is I think it’s the only time in my adult life where I’ve seen an opportunity like this to really put this city back in the position of being the jewel of the South. If it doesn’t happen now, it will never happen again.¹⁸²

Mayor C. Ray Nagin was born in Charity hospital, New Orleans two years after the landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka U.S. Supreme Court Decision, in which school desegregation was declared unconstitutional. Reiss came up during the Civil Rights era, and had certainly witnessed the decreasing influence of white political families that had dominated the city’s landscape for generations.

¹⁸⁰ It was under Reiss’s watch at the RTA that federal investigations began into former Mayor Marc Morial’s uncle, Glenn Haydel, who in September 2006 was sentenced to two years in federal prison for siphoning \$550,000 of RTA money into his own bank account. See “Glenn Haydel sentenced in RTA scandal,” Associated Press, WWLTV.com, 02:26 PM CDT on Wednesday, September 6, 2006. <<http://www.wwltv.com/local/stories/wwl090606khglennhaydel.722419e0.html>>. Last accessed May 2009.

¹⁸¹ CecilFilm interview with James Reiss and James Roddy. January 4, 2008. MR 86A.

¹⁸² Mark Miester, “Ray Nagin,” Tulanian, Spring 2003. <http://www2.tulane.edu/article_news_details.cfm?ArticleID=4713>. Last accessed July 2009.

After years of corruption and abuses of power at the hands of white politicians, rather predictably, newly enfranchised African-American elected officials also reaped the gains associated with political office in Louisiana with similar fervor, but this time, all that was different was that the recipients of this cronyism were of a different hue. It is difficult not to read Reiss's statement about the opportunities Nagin represented to the business community with this in mind, or to wonder when he last considered New Orleans as a "jewel of the South." In relation to the period of time of which Reiss speaks, his choice of phrasing is interesting as such a metaphor evokes a pastoral scene of a bygone era, but it must be remembered that the last time New Orleans was viewed as an economic powerhouse the majority of the city's electorate remained largely disenfranchised, and certainly the oil fueling this Southern economic engine questioned the ideals set out in the American constitution.

Many African-Americans less oriented towards big business viewed Nagin as similar to Mayor Barthelemy, as the "white candidate" for their retention of white business interest support, and with all of the connotations that accompany such a sentiment. In "Nagin's Re-election as Mayor of New Orleans," academic, author, social justice advocate and political analyst Mtangulizi Sanyika of the African-American Leadership Project (AALP) writes:

During Mr. Nagin's 3 and ½ years in office prior to Katrina, there was a widely held perception in the Black community that white elites were trying to recapture the city; and that Ray Nagin was their instrument to accomplish such an objective. After all, he was elected by the minority white population in a coalition with higher income black residents.¹⁸³

For the business community, Nagin had the advantage of being an African-American candidate in a majority black city, and also a candidate with conservative leanings. Several sources state that Nagin had been a registered Republican for much of his early voting life, and that he had contributed to the Bush Presidential campaign in 2000. Having already revealed credentials sympathetic to big business, conservatives were reassured that the ways of free market economics were more familiar to him than concerns about social justice. Furthermore, they would have seen his subsequent move to the Democratic Party, shortly before

¹⁸³ Mtangulizi Sanyika, "Nagin's Re-election as Mayor of New Orleans: Anatomy of a Civil Rights Protest." ChickenBones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes. <<http://www.nathanielturner.com/naginsre-electionasmayorofneworleans.htm>>. For more information on Mtangulizi Sanyika, see The Black Collegian Online: The Career Site for Students of Color, <http://www.black-collegian.com/african/sanyika_0607.htm>.

seeking office in 2002, as strategic in that many would-be Republicans desirous of the black vote in New Orleans had been doing such since the modern Civil Rights era.

Speaking of his 2002 “reform” campaign persona, Nagin’s campaign manager Jim Carvin said, “Ray Nagin was the anti-political candidate, he was the business candidate, he was the guy who was going to bring a whole fresh business-like approach to the City Hall. It was an anti-incumbent; almost throw the bums out kind of approach.”¹⁸⁴ Nagin had also directly expressed a desire to institutionalize a change so that whoever succeeded him might not so easily return to the “politics of old, where you have to kiss the ring to get anything done in City Hall.”¹⁸⁵ In 2002, these economic powerbrokers viewed Nagin’s lack of political experience as a bonus, especially relishing the fact that he was not connected to previous city administrations that they viewed as running counter to their interests, and in the 2006 mayor’s race, Carvin targeted these specific white voting groups with similar rhetoric again, but this time asking questions that alluded to the more negative implications that might arise from portrayals of Mitch Landrieu as part of a “political family” with ties to a “Landrieu machine.” Through campaign commercials he asked voters, “do you want a political family to be back in office again – and what that might mean in terms of patronage?”¹⁸⁶

Carvin gauged that his strategy would play into feelings within the white community concerning former mayor Marc Morial, and said, “there had been a lot of press about the patronage issues that went on during Marc’s administration and people going you know, under federal indictment, and that sort of thing.” He understood that the more conservative within the white community viewed former Police Chief Richard Pennington – Nagin’s opponent in the 2002 runoff – as having taken on “the mantle of the political establishment candidate and [that] people were really looking for a change.”¹⁸⁷ For these reasons, Nagin was able to raise a lot of money from within the business community.

Such opinions were not limited to within the white business community, but also resonated with more mainstream white liberal voices such as Clancy DuBos of the Gambit Weekly, who viewed the Nagin of 2002 as having leapt “over the traditional racial divide.” In early April 2006, and referring to the black political

¹⁸⁴ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, May 14, 2007. MR 82, 00:48:52:00.

¹⁸⁵ CecilFilm interview with Mayor Nagin, April 4, 2006. MR 32, 00:51:03:00.

¹⁸⁶ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, May 14, 2007. MR 82, 00:46:06:24.

¹⁸⁷ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, MR 82, 00:48:52:00.

organizations specific to different New Orleans neighborhoods associations and hitherto viewed as essential to any African-American candidate seeking political office, DuBos writes:

Four years ago, Ray Nagin set out to change the paradigm for electing a New Orleans Mayor. He succeeded. Snubbing the alphabet-soup of black political organizations and leaping over the traditional racial divide, Nagin assembled a coalition based on economic rather than racial interests. He captured the vote of the middle class – black and white – as well as the business and professional community.¹⁸⁸

However in New Orleans, racial politics seems to dictate that if an African-American candidate is largely financed from within the white community, he will come to be viewed as “the white candidate” by many within the African-American communities, and certainly Nagin was financially beholden to white business interests, and during his first term he did little to improve the situation of the more socially disadvantaged citizens of New Orleans, the majority of whom were African-American. Many of Nagin’s critics viewed him as having been incapable of ameliorating the conditions of the majority of New Orleanians who did not fit within the business community mold, and the Reverend Leonard Lucas of Light City Church in the Lower Ninth Ward was just such a detractor, and said of the Mayor, “We have a mayor that our community, not only do we not know him, they don’t even call his name. Four years he’s been in office and no one seemed to talk about him. He’s done very little in our community.”¹⁸⁹

In contrast, Nagin explained his unpopularity amongst black voters in 2002 as more about economics than race, and spoke of having won “the vote of everyone making 35,000 or above.” But Nagin continued, “African-Americans didn't understand me because I didn't come from a political family and I was talking business. The race ended up being more about economics.”¹⁹⁰ That those who made less than \$35,000 constituted the majority of the New Orleans African-American population did not seem to be a factor upon which the Mayor would dwell, and while poverty rates soared pre-Katrina, issues concerning black poverty or cultural inequity had not seemed to register with him much either. After the storm, the socio-economic

¹⁸⁸ Clancy DuBos, “Politics,” *Gambit Weekly*, April 04, 2006.

¹⁸⁹ CecilFilm interview with Rev. Leonard Lucas, March 24, 2006. [MR 14](#), 00:15:39:15.

¹⁹⁰ CecilFilm interview with Mayor Nagin, April 4, 2006. [MR 32](#), 00:48:11:00.

conditions of vast numbers of African-Americans had not improved, and the city remained devastatingly separate and unequal.

The striking image of majority white faces amongst the first and second tier candidates in the 2006 election was enormously beneficial in Nagin's re-election bid as the black candidate over the candidate who *happens to be* black, and perhaps helped contribute to the mayor's relatively relaxed demeanor during this time. White New Orleans commentators began to wonder whether Nagin, having lost some of the white voters who "sealed his [...] victory four years ago" could "win over a black electorate that [had never] appeared particularly enamored of him."¹⁹¹ That Nagin had not held true to "his culture" was an accusation with which he had undoubtedly become familiar pre-Katrina. In a spirited article titled "How White People Elected Ray Nagin," Lance Hill turned to popular culture as a barometer for the perspective of younger and more economically disadvantaged African-Americans concerning Mayor Nagin, and cites the New Orleans Hip Hop artist known as "Juvenile," who:

In early September [...] penned the song "Get Ya Hustle On" which was released as an album and video in February of 2006. The song castigated Nagin as someone that black people couldn't trust and his video featured three figures wandering the devastated Ninth Ward wearing paper masks of George Bush, Dick Cheney, and Ray Nagin. Three peas in a pod as far as Juvenile was concerned.

Hill writes of a precedent in which Juvenile was an equally good barometer amongst "poor dispossessed blacks," when a 2002 Tulane University public opinion study conducted in Central City polled residents as to which elected officials or rap entertainers were "regarded as the most important leaders in their community for 'getting things done.'"¹⁹² Hill writes that Rap artist Juvenile, "trounced his opposition," presumably making the point that to young African-Americans, local politicians seemed completely incapable.

In the 2002 runoff, Nagin was elected to office with 86 percent of the white vote and nearly 40 percent of the African-American vote. In 2002, Nagin won re-election with 83.3 percent of the African-American vote, and only 20.5 percent of the white vote, with a potential margin of error of 5% depending

¹⁹¹ Gordon Russell and Frank Donze. "23 likely battling just to face Nagin in the runoff." Times-Picayune, March 5, 2006.

¹⁹² Lance Hill, "How White People Elected Ray Nagin." Louisiana Weekly, May 21, 2006.
<<http://www.southerninstitute.info/commentaries/?m=200605>>. Last accessed July 2009.

upon the limitations of ecological regression, which is the preferred statistical method used by political scientists to determine voters by race.¹⁹³ Referring to the Nagin's loss of his original white base of support from 2002 to Ron Forman, Karen Carvin Shachat said that there was absolutely no question that Ron Forman had the complete support of the 'Uptown establishment,' which she viewed as including members of the New Orleans society and the business community, she continued:

They were with him I think almost completely and in fact these were the same people who had been for Ray Nagin the first time he ran for mayor and Ray Nagin had an almost total abandonment of his base of support post-Katrina, which was a tough blow for him politically and personally, but one that we encouraged him that he could overcome.¹⁹⁴

It is tempting to conclude that following the Dallas meeting, Nagin had begun to realize that many of the white powerbrokers who had retreated to the background of political life since African-Americans constituted a voting majority had now begun not only to reassert themselves in a way that Nagin had not expected, and that he now found himself on a side that was neither politically secure, or inclusive, but that also they had abandoned him for another candidate and that he must look elsewhere, and in a very different manner from his 2002 campaign.

This notion is further supported by themes explored by the Mayor Nagin only few months after Dallas in a Martin Luther King Day speech that was quickly dubbed "Chocolate City" because of Nagin's allusion to funk artist George Clinton and Parliament's 1975 song, from the album of the same name, in light of the changed demographics of New Orleans. Writing in the Nation, journalist and author Ned Sublette viewed this single sound bite as a "defining moment in the New Orleans mayoral election."¹⁹⁵ Some viewed Nagin's speech as merely an example of an ill thought-out and a vintage "off-the-cuff" moment on the part of the mayor; some saw it as a direct political ploy in which he attempted to show the African-Americans who had accused him of pandering to the white community that he was no longer their man; and others expressed outrage and indignation, and viewed the speech as yet another New Orleans public relations disaster. It was an event difficult to entirely separate from the controversial Dallas meeting, and the speech constituted an

¹⁹³ Baodong Liu and James M. Vanderleeuw, Race Rules: Electoral Politics in New Orleans: 1965-2006. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007 (10-11).

¹⁹⁴ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin and Karen Carvin Shachar, MR 82, 00:27:22:00

¹⁹⁵ Ned Sublette, "P-Funk Politics," Nation, June 5, 2006. <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060619/sublette>>. Last accessed May 2009.

important moment within the racialized 2006 electoral rhetoric and allowed for an increasingly polarized tone within the election itself. The phrase within the “Chocolate City” speech to enrage a large part of the New Orleans white community and that would dominate within the white media’s coverage of it was Nagin’s statement that, “This city will be a chocolate city at the end of the day.”

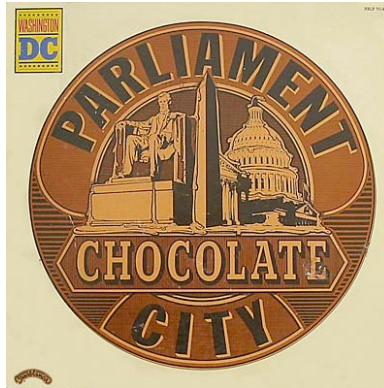


Illustration 14: “Chocolate City” Album cover by Parliament-Funkadelic. From [TheFunkStore.com – Your Music Superstore](http://www.thefunkstore.com/PFunkCDs/PFunkCDs-P2.htm), <<http://www.thefunkstore.com/PFunkCDs/PFunkCDs-P2.htm>>.

With few displaced African-Americans able to return to the city, Nagin sought to use his MLK Day speech to reach out to those who felt most disconnected, but what ensued was a political firestorm with repercussions that would continue throughout the mayoral campaign. Nagin continued, “and I don’t care what people are saying uptown or wherever they are...” and his statement, which many took to specifically refer to white people who lived uptown, was certainly racialized in tone. Many in both the black and white communities of New Orleans quickly denounced its more divisive implications; however, as Times-Picayune staff writer John Pope notes, these comments “were tucked into a wide-ranging speech.”¹⁹⁶ The thrust of the speech concentrated upon the state of the African-American community prior to Hurricane Katrina, and in it, Nagin touched upon black-on-black crime, and on the community coming together to resolve issues that had hitherto been major hindrances to progress within the black community as a whole. It is ironic that a speech viewed as divisive within the white community should have begun with the words, “I greet you all in the spirit of unity. Because if we are unified, there’s nothing we cannot do.”¹⁹⁷ The Mayor structured the discourse around the rhetorical device of a “dream conversation” that he imagines having had with Dr. King

¹⁹⁶ John Pope, “Evoking King, Nagin calls N.O. ‘chocolate city.’” Times-Picayune, Tuesday, January 17, 2006.

¹⁹⁷ “Transcript of Nagin’s Speech.” Times Picayune, Tuesday, January 17, 2006, Metro Edition, A-7.

about the state of post-Katrina New Orleans, and within the speech, referred jokingly to the device itself, “Now you might think that’s one Katrina post-stress disorder.”¹⁹⁸ Through his imagined conversation, Nagin imparts his own thoughts that Katrina’s devastation of the city in part results from God’s wrath at America, and that because of this, God is “sending hurricane after hurricane.” Nagin continues, “surely he’s upset at Black American,” that “we’re not taking care of ourselves.”

Although “Chocolate City” led many white New Orleanians to somewhat justifiably believe that their point of view was irrelevant to the post-Katrina Nagin, it seemed more in keeping with Nagin’s growing tendency to speak hastily and without thought, and at the most inappropriate of times. It is easier to argue that these impromptu remarks bore testimony to the intensified racial sensitivities of post-Katrina New Orleans, and were enormously blown out of proportion by the white community. The greater significance of his comments lay in their ability to continue as a major local news story within the more liberal-leaning media, providing many white New Orleanians with an excuse to accuse Nagin of being a racist, and become somewhat indignant about it too. Historian Arnold Hirsch refers to Gambit Weekly’s Clancy DuBos as having “neared hysteria in venting white shock and dismay at Nagin’s clumsy “chocolate city” ploy, ‘Congress can finally stop accusing us of being corrupt,’ Dubos wailed. “Nagin has finally given them a fresh argument: that we’re stupid, incompetent, and led by a mindless racist.”¹⁹⁹

Mtangulizi Sanyika viewed the effects of the speech as profound, and saw within the white reaction to them an underlying racial component that he links directly with the 2006 election, “White folks were angry and uniformly berated Nagin’s comments as pandering.”²⁰⁰ In 2002, African-Americans had found him wanting as a candidate, and there were objective grounds for such opposition; however, more importantly, many African-American observers noted that the “Chocolate City” Speech was a convenient way for white voters to find an excuse for not continuing to support the mayor, and certainly there was much evidence to support such a view. Sanyika writes, “Many whites had already deserted him as incompetent

¹⁹⁸ “Transcript of Nagin’s Speech,” Times Picayune, Tuesday, January 17, 2006, Metro Edition, A-7.

¹⁹⁹ Arnold R. Hirsch, “Fade to Black: Hurricane Katrina and the Disappearance of Creole New Orleans.” The Journal of American History, published by the Organization of American Historians, Vol. 94 No. 3. December, 2007, (753).

²⁰⁰ Mtangulizi Sanyika, “Nagin’s Re-election as Mayor of New Orleans: Anatomy of a Civil Rights Protest.” ChickenBones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes. <<http://www.nathanielturner.com/naginsre-electionasmayorofneworleans.htm>>. Last accessed June, 2009.

and impetuous and the chocolate city remark gave them a perfect excuse to dump him publicly, and even call him a racist.”²⁰¹ Early into the mayoral campaigns, many conservative Forman backers had grown disappointed by Forman’s lackluster performance as a potentially winning candidate, and many of them had begun to hedge their bets by financially supporting both Nagin as well as Forman. Arnold Hirsch noted that Gambit Weekly publisher and political commentator Clancy DuBos failed to recognize this point, and wondered how his description “could be reconciled with the flow of conservative money into Nagin’s campaign.”

That Nagin might alienate potential white voters did not seem to prevent him from making his racially insensitive comments, and perhaps it was more important for him to reach out to an electorate he had not hitherto courted than to worry about a section of the community that had begun to look towards other potential candidates. Ned Sublette, a less animated commentator than DuBos on the “Chocolate City” speech, noted the important political message embedded within the original George Clinton song, especially the lyric “You don’t need the bullet when you got the ballot,” which strikes the more central chord that constituted the main focus of Nagin’s speech, with its allusions to self-determination and to the black power movement.²⁰² Most importantly, the speech was one of the first public moments in which Nagin attempted to speak out to the black community in a way that could not be appropriated by the uptown conservative whites who had elected him, especially following Nagin’s associations with the BNOBC, and its most controversial initiatives. It was also striking that white liberals seemed more upset about the implications of the speech than white conservatives, who probably recognized the practical strategy at play over any post-racial ideal, and that they had already moved to Forman as their candidate of choice. However, some right wing blogs wrote profusely and gleefully of a double standard, claiming that Nagin’s comments were acceptable simply because he was an African-American as well as a Democrat, and that had the same sentiments been uttered by a white man about a majority “Vanilla City” by Republicans, they would have been viewed as deeply unacceptable.

²⁰¹ Mtangulizi Sanyika, “Nagin’s Re-election as Mayor of New Orleans: Anatomy of a Civil Rights Protest.” ChickenBones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes. < <http://www.nathanielturner.com/naginsre-electionasmayorofneworleans.htm>>.

²⁰² Sublette, Ned. “P-Funk Politics,” The Nation, June 5, 2006. <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060619/sublette>>.



Illustration 15: “Hershey’s Milk Chocolate, Unofficial Sponsor of Hurricane Katrina.” RIGHTWINGED.COM, <http://www.rightwinged.com/2006/01/nola_mayor_nagin_wants_a_choco.html>.

Nagin’s campaign manager Jim Carvin maintained that he was unaware of Nagin’s words until after he had made the speech and claimed not to have been too bothered about them during the media field day, and Bill Rouselle, another of Nagin’s re-election campaign strategists, recognized that it was “a clumsy” but necessary way for Nagin to reach out to those who had felt disconnected.²⁰³ Certainly “Chocolate City” came at a time when many within the African-American community felt actively discouraged from returning home, and when the majority of reports circulating about New Orleans that reached residents stuck elsewhere attested to the city’s lack of resources and infrastructure following Hurricane Katrina, which often meant that the large numbers were being discouraged from returning home. Like many observers, Mtangulizi Sanyika viewed the Mayor’s allusion as a comment that “signaled Nagin’s acceptance of the loss of his white base, and his strategic move to capture the black base.” Sanyika continues:

He drew the line in the sand and reminded black folks that they were the majority and should remain so; thus launching his re-election as the advocate for black folks: an emerging Civil Rights and Black Power symbol. It worked.²⁰⁴

Some white New Orleanians seemed less upset about Nagin evoking Katrina as evidence of God’s wrath than about his illusions to “uptown,” which they understood as code for themselves. In evoking the storm as a punishment from God, a few white observers compared Nagin with television evangelist Pat Robertson, and later, Nagin retracted the comments, saying, “I don’t know what happened there [...] I don’t know how that got jumbled up. That whole God thing, I don’t know how that got mixed up in there.”²⁰⁵

²⁰³ CecilFilm interview with Bill Rouselle, May 12, 2006. [MR 56](#).

²⁰⁴ Mtangulizi Sanyika. “Nagin’s Re-election as Mayor of New Orleans: Anatomy of a Civil Rights Protest.” [ChickenBones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes](#). <<http://www.nathanielturner.com/naginsre-electionasmayorofneworleans.htm>>.

²⁰⁵ James Varney, “Nagin backpedals, apologizes: Katrina’s wrath not God’s will, he says.” [Times-Picayune](#), Wednesday, January 18, 2009 (New Orleans Edition). R.J. Eskow, “The Etymology of Nagin’s “Chocolate City.” [Huffington Post](#), January 17, 2006.

Although noticeably Nagin did not retract his comments concerning the future racial makeup of the city; in April, 2006, Nagin’s reference to the speech might have showed a political shrewdness that he had hitherto not been associated with, “I’ve had some high profile comments that the white community didn’t understand and didn’t appreciate, but at the end of the day I think we’re gonna win a good chunk of them back.”²⁰⁶ At this point in time, Nagin was becoming aware the Ron Forman campaign was failing to gain any traction, and that although the old white guard had Forman’s candidacy over his own, that it would be hard for them to vote for a Landrieu.



Illustration 16: “Willy Nagin and the Chocolate Factory,” From ‘I’m not chocolate,’ [BOALT Blog](http://www.boalt.com/blog/2008/09/im-not-chocolate/).
<<http://www.boalt.com/blog/2008/09/im-not-chocolate/>>.

Cultural divides between the races became manifest in the ways that different sectors of the community responded to the story, and in characteristic New Orleans fashion, amongst these responses there was room comedic and irreverent interpretation, which might have also put balm on the wounds of the genuinely hurt post-racialists. Tourist shops on Bourbon Street took to selling tee shirts and coffee mugs of Ray Nagin dressed as Willy Wonka, the protagonist from the film version of Roald Dahl’s children’s book Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, and Bill Rouselle noted with good humor that, “Clearly a lot of white people didn’t understand Chocolate City, because they did their Willy Wonka thing, but if you don’t know George Clinton, then you don’t understand Chocolate City.”²⁰⁷ The more negative manner in which this episode resounded amongst different local and displaced communities became a further barometer of the electorate’s unwillingness to recognize Mayor Nagin – and themselves – as part of a pattern that constituted a

²⁰⁶ CecilFilm interview with Mayor Nagin, April 4, 2006, [MR 32](#), 00:49:25:00.

²⁰⁷ CecilFilm interview with Bill Rouselle, May 12, 2006, [MR 56](#).

less than serious political history of “character” politicians, and as with the Kimberly Williamson Butler episode, many New Orleanians were understandably not in the mood for laughter.

Landrieu’s repeated campaign slogans, that “what was okay before Katrina is not okay now” reflected the desire of many white voters to be taken more seriously, both as a community worthy of national recognition for the recent tragedy as well as for the hard position that many residents were going to be in for a very long time during an uncertain recovery. To many African-American voters, and to the cynics who distrusted his motives, Nagin was doing just the same thing, but he was also recognizing the pain and seriousness of New Orleans losing its majority black citizenry and also the threat of African-Americans losing political representation in New Orleans, which in light of Dallas and the plans suggested by the BNOBC, had infinitely more serious ramifications. The rhetorical and visual manifestations of race into which Nagin’s campaign managers tapped had been present well before the March qualifying for the 2006 elections, and in order to trace their influence, it is necessary to return to the storm itself, which dictated the tenor of so many of the candidates’ platforms in both the primaries as well as the runoff elections.

Katrina had thrust New Orleans into the national spotlight, and after the deaths of over a thousand citizens and the horror of the Katrina aftermath; New Orleanians were then thrown into the political arena. The nation was shocked to discover disturbingly entrenched black poverty in a city known more for its Mardi Gras beads and *laissez-faire* attitude. Recovery related public forums and neighborhood meetings continued alongside other public discourses and discussions about leadership: how would the city come through the crisis and what kind of mayor might bring New Orleans back, or recreate it in some newer and improved shape. To many African-Americans stranded outside of the city, a *new* New Orleans was code for a leaner, whiter city. Feeling shut out of the city exacerbated deep-rooted fears about also being kept from participating in the recovery process, and also fears about white opportunism during a moment of tragedy. The tenor of the early planning discussions concerning a “shrunken” city “footprint” exacerbated these fears, and became transformed into some of the most polarizing rhetoric to dominate the election debates.

Indeed, the rhetoric and images that might be interpreted as code seemed to dominate much of this time period; however, it is not always easy to distinguish sentiments that should be taken at face value from

those that are, to say the least, less than inclusive. The more extreme views in the spectrum stand out from the middle ground where most of us are comfortable and thus our ears tend to bend towards them; it therefore becomes important to recognize what is significant or representative of a particular community, and what is not. As Nagin found following “Chocolate City,” to both white and black candidates in the 2006 mayor’s race, negotiating the difficulties of identity politics while the disparities between black and white voters were so much in evidence became political minefields, and for this reason many refused to even acknowledge race as a factor. It was left to outside observers and foreign media to make generalizations that included truth, but that probably eclipsed a more complex reality.

Legacy Versus Dynasty: Landrieu Fails to Create a New Rhetoric

When Ron Forman became the conservative candidate of “uptown whites” and of the prominent businessmen who had largely returned to New Orleans, Nagin had lost his political base as well as any chance of further major economic support; however, already holding a full campaign war chest at the start of the election period, and not wanting to be defined by accusations of leadership failures following Katrina, Nagin was always going to run for a second term.²⁰⁸ However, having garnered unsubstantial African-American votes in 2002, he was politically hemmed in. Without an obvious base from which to draw upon, Nagin faced two main sources of opposition during the Primary election: Forman as the conservative candidate to his political right in whom his original primary base had left him to support, and Landrieu to his ideological left, who hoped to fight for “the middle ground,” referring to his goal of building a coalition of black and white voters in the vein of the earlier historical paradigm. Nagin campaign strategists faced enormous challenges; they did not know the location or the identity of potential 2006 Nagin voters, but they knew that the voters that they had in 2002 had evaporated.²⁰⁹

So by mid-January, there was significant evidence that the campaign Nagin had fought in 2002 was to undergo something of a transformation in 2006, and that he and his campaign managers would choose to appeal to an altogether new electorate that was predominantly still displaced at the time of the election, and the ground was ripe for Nagin strategists to achieve this by appealing to African-American voters along race lines. In contrast to Landrieu’s attempt at a more unifying approach, Jim Carvin chose to run two distinctly different Nagin media campaigns in an almost divide and conquer-like fashion; one targeting the white community by drawing negative attention to Landrieu with the legacy / dynasty dichotomy, either of which potentially had negative implications for possible Landrieu voters of either race who were familiar with the old rhetoric, and one targeting African-American communities who felt disconnected, disenfranchised, and undermined by the re-assertion of white interests after the storm. Carvin was especially proud of the campaign slogan “Re-elect Our Mayor,” which could be understood upon several levels; it reached out to

²⁰⁸ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, May 14, 2007. [MR 82](#).

²⁰⁹ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, May 14, 2007. [MR 82](#), 00:33:50:00.

African-American voters concerned about the “whitening” of New Orleans and the loss of City Hall, and also referenced that Mayor Nagin was of course still the Mayor of all New Orleans and had seen the city through arguably its hardest challenge in history, regardless of who might have done a better job of it.²¹⁰



Illustration 17: The campaign slogan “Re-elect Our Mayor” against a downtown Houston skyline. [Associated Press](#), [Houston Chronicle](#).

In choosing this slogan, Carvin hinted at the campaign’s new emphasis upon identity politics, and had Nagin subtly appeal towards racial unity amongst African-Americans while not overtly offending Nagin’s white supporters. In referring this tactic Carvin said, “we started out shooting to get the black vote, so you could call that racist, and elections in New Orleans in my memory have always been racist.” Carvin then went on to directly link the quick recovery of the white community in contrast to that of the African-American community in the wake of Katrina, “In an interview with Newsweek, or I think on 60 Minutes, I pointed out that the Mardi Gras balls, the social events, in the white community all went on, they did not in the black [community]. There’s no question in my mind that a lot of the things that happened during Katrina and afterwards were race-based.”²¹¹ By targeting New Orleans voters as two distinct racial entities, Carvin’s strategy not only illustrated a historical racial divide and an exploitable separateness between the two communities, but he also suggested the predisposition of voters to be targeted this way and his own ability as a political consultant to stoke a racial fire. The old rhetoric into which Carvin and his colleagues tapped was infinitely more powerful post-Katrina because the very racial inequities exposed by the storm were real, and

²¹⁰ CecilFilm Interview with Jim Carvin, May 14, 2007, [MR 83](#) 00:45:45:00.

²¹¹ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, [MR 82](#), 00:56:26:17.

this factor prevented Landrieu's apparent post-racial appeals from gaining any traction. This was especially significant because the largest question to loom over Mitch Landrieu's 2006 mayoral campaign was whether or not he might generate enough African-American votes or "crossover support" to enable him a victory, and considering Nagin's pre-storm unpopularity within the black community, the fact that he didn't, is what made the election so interesting.

It appeared that Landrieu had endeavored to run a campaign that transcended race, but his overall hesitancy was paralyzing and suggested the opposite. Landrieu appeared to reach towards two goals; to attempt to take the moral high ground from Mayor Nagin's strategically targeted campaign appeals, while also attempting to unify the city. However, considering the rhetoric used during the early recovery period, any effort to run a post-racial campaign was nearly impossible within the post-Katrina climate. Furthermore, while the Landrieu family's Civil Rights legacy might have been viewed as a positive force for a family member's appeal to a broad base, it soon became a liability within both the black and white communities for very different reasons, and any reference to a Landrieu "legacy" that he himself might have made could potentially draw accusations that he was being boastful about policies his father instigated that should have been implemented many years earlier.

Certainly Landrieu had some significant advantages over Ron Forman, his main competitor in the primaries. Hailing from a prominent Louisiana political family with this respectable Civil Rights era record, he had also consistently reached out to African-Americans citizens in ways in that his more conservative peer had failed. But the Landrieu legacy was now thirty years old, and many thought that not only had Moon helped bring in legislation that should have transpired many years earlier, but that no debt of gratitude remained. Political commentator Silas Lee spoke of support for the Landrieu family not being as automatic within the African-American community as some people assume, and that rather than his family's Civil Rights era "legacy," Landrieu was one of the front runners because "of the fact that he is able to earn the respect and loyalty of voters based on his job performance."²¹² As Lieutenant Governor, and having spent years in the State House of Representatives, Landrieu had accumulated crossover support on his own merits.

²¹² CecilFilm interview with Silas Lee, Ph.D., Mar. 29, 2006. [MR 21](#). 00:25:03:00.

However, due to the displacement of so many African-Americans, in many ways the election came to constitute of a Civil Rights protest of sorts, and one in which Landrieu's color consciousness prevented him from placing himself within. In what can only have pained him, Landrieu would witness the racialized rhetoric of the early recovery placing race in the foreground over record, and during this time, he would see at first hand an unlikely voting alliance beginning to forge between white Republicans and African-Americans, and the re-election of an incumbent whose conservative credentials could not have been more different from his own Democratic ideals.

The Landrieu name evokes different images to different constituents; however, most would include those of a large, sprawling, Catholic, and political family whose present head – and the city's past mayor – Maurice "Moon" Landrieu is credited with the "integration" of City Hall, and thus paving the way for greater levels of African-American political representation within New Orleans. Moon Landrieu is generally considered as a transitional political figure, because although African-Americans were on their way to constituting a majority within Orleans Parish, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had only been in place for four years, and many African-Americans, justifiably, failed to have either the confidence that white voters would endorse a black candidate, or black mayors as historical reference points from which to draw upon. As University of Southern Mississippi political scientists Allan McBride and Joseph Parker note, "Black involvement in the voting process is partially predicated on the political process itself, in a self-reinforcing cycle, called 'empowerment;' as blacks gain more political power, they become more likely to participate."²¹³

By actively countering the segregationist efforts that reflected the institutionalized racism prevalent at the time, Moon Landrieu distinguished himself from many other white New Orleanians in political office during the modern Civil Rights era. As a member of the Louisiana State House of Representatives, Moon Landrieu represented the New Orleans 12th Ward in the Louisiana State House of Representatives, and was one of the few to vote against the "hate bills" "of the retreating segregationists, which the legislature passed in

²¹³ Allan McBride and Joseph B. Parker. "Chocolate City" Politics: Race and Empowerment in the First Post-Katrina New Orleans Mayoral Election." *Politics and Policy*, June 1, 2008.

the effort to thwart the desegregation of public facilities and public schools.”²¹⁴ When Moon Landrieu became Mayor of New Orleans, he continued to put into action many of his beliefs in applied and constructive integration. At the height of Moon Landrieu’s efforts to further desegregate New Orleans, large sections of conservative New Orleanians pushed against integration with unequivocal force and due to Moon’s outspokenness concerning the evils of Jim Crow, they would often refer to him using racial epithets. He recalled:

I got to be known as “Moon the Coon.” That was a common reference term. That’s a badge of honor I wear with pride. People call you “nigger lover,” and I’d say, “You right, I am. I flat am, without any shame or apologies.” But you don’t get there overnight. Those kind of epithets in a Southern society will rock you the first time you hear them.”²¹⁵

Although undoubtedly a more conservative Democrat, Moon’s daughter Mary certainly benefited significantly from her father’s Civil Rights legacy within the African-American community, and achieved victory as a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives with significant support from African-American voters, and today, as she continues as one of the two U.S. senators to represent Louisiana. Moon’s Civil Rights era stands were not forgotten by the older generation, and like Mitch, Mary Landrieu also benefited from the recognition that accompanied the Landrieu name.

Following in his father and older sister Mary’s political footsteps, Mitch Landrieu, Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana since 2003, was first elected to the Louisiana State House of Representatives in 1987, and represented the same seat that his father and Mary had also held at different periods in recent history. Landrieu’s first unsuccessful mayoral bid against Marc Morial in 1994 witnessed him making the top three candidates but achieving only ten percent of the votes cast, he failed to enter into the runoff.²¹⁶ Mitch’s 2006 mayoral bid was a much closer election, in which, not only did he make the runoff, but his loss surprised many New Orleanians, and even the New York Times had predicted a Landrieu victory.

²¹⁴ [biographybase](http://www.biographybase.com/biography/Landrieu_Moon.html). <http://www.biographybase.com/biography/Landrieu_Moon.html>.

²¹⁵ Kim Lacy Rogers, “Would New Orleans Burn,” Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement (108-109).

²¹⁶ “New Orleans mayoral election, 1994.” Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Orleans_mayoral_election_1994>.

In 2006, racial epithets applied to Moon Landrieu during years past were transferred to his son, and were fairly common on less mainstream blogs and forums during the 2006 mayoral elections. Rumor had it that there were some white voters who extended the earlier Landrieu slur and referred to Mitch Landrieu as “Little Coon,” in an apparent effort to tie the Landrieu family to the their notion that New Orleans had gone downhill since Moon had made efforts to further integration within the city. However some insults prominent on more mainstream websites such as the notorious public forums at NOLA.com, the website through which citizens access the Times-Picayune, and the little moderated site introduced a button to allow readers to report offensive and inappropriate language at the hands of authors disguising their identities through the use of online handles – the virtual and present day equivalent to Klan sheets.

Many conservative white voters were explicit in their views of the Landrieu family’s Civil Rights legacy as a negative force, and directly linked New Orleans’ demise in fortune and efficiency with the emergence of a black majority within city politics, the subtext of which seemed to be a not altogether subtle advocacy for returning to the years of Jim Crow and institutionalized segregation. Although veiled, such sentiments were surprisingly commonplace, and further revealed prevalent racism and also the deterioration of race relations within New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina. This subtler form of code still contained a rather explicit meaning. Without mentioning Moon Landrieu’s integrationist policies, an Algiers voter of Cajun origin directly linked Mitch Landrieu to what was in her eyes a less than glorious family legacy:

I’m tempted by Ron Forman, only because Mitch Landrieu’s father put the city in the shape that it’s in, and I don’t think that we need to perpetuate that. Moon Landrieu was mayor several eons ago, and he’s the one that made the city, in my opinion, the armpit of the nation. To put his son in, I think would just make that a lot of... I just – I don’t want that.²¹⁷

The demographic shifts within the city of New Orleans post-Katrina certainly encouraged some of the white candidates to have run, as few would have envisaged the possibility of winning an election without such changes to the makeup of the city. This factor led some people to accuse white candidates of “opportunism” during a moment of crisis for the New Orleans African-American community, and Mayor Nagin suggested as

²¹⁷ CecilFilm interview with Kimberly Guidry, Apr. 15, 2006. MR 41A, 02:20:23:00.

much when at the beginning of March he told a crowd of displaced citizens in Houston, "There are 23 candidates running for mayor. Very few of them look like us," he continued, "There's a potential to be a major change in the political structure in New Orleans."²¹⁸ That Landrieu had previously run for the mayor's office was an easy point with which to counter any accusation of opportunism; however, candidates were critical of other factors that related to the ideals supposedly represented by his family's legacy. In referencing this, Mayoral candidate the Rev. Tom Watson was especially outspoken of Landrieu's decision to run in the first mayoral election post-Katrina in an interview in late March, 2006, and condemned him as a "hypocrite for even being in the race"²¹⁹ Watson spoke of a lot of suspicion as to why Landrieu was running, and believed that his electoral bid was a strategic move to help his sister Mary Landrieu, and that should he win, his election would help maintain her U.S. Senate seat, which was under threat from Republicans contenders.

Watson also evoked the Landrieu family's Civil Rights era "legacy" and used direct analogies to slavery and slavery motifs as well as to a system of indentured servitude that was used by white plantation owners following the Civil War. Sharecropping tied many African-Americans in an eternal cycle of unending financial obligation, and bound them to the very land that they had worked as enslaved peoples. Watson spoke disparagingly of a "debt" owed to the Landrieu family by the black community for their speaking up for African-Americans during the Civil Rights era, and his use of the sharecropping metaphor evokes a racial system which viewed African-American labor in purely economic terms that did little to advance their humanity or their liberty. Following emancipation, this ugly condition of eternal servitude in which formerly enslaved people found themselves all but in name extended slavery to the benefit landowners with property but little cash. Watson said:

From the black community I believe that they continue to say we owe them a debt for what their father did. I call it sharecropping. At what point do you pay your debt to the Landrieus in terms of African-Americans?²²⁰

²¹⁸ "First debate for N.O. mayoral hopefuls." Times-Picayune, Wednesday March 8, 2006.

"New Orleans mayor moves his election battle to Texas." China Daily, Mar. 6, 2006. <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2006-03/06/content_526839.htm>.

²¹⁹ CecilFilm interview with Rev. Tom Watson, March 28, 2006. MR 20. 00:23:46:15.

²²⁰ CecilFilm interview with Rev. Tom Watson, March 28, 2006. MR 20. 00:23:46:15.

During a service held at Rev. Watson’s church for Mayor Nagin the night before the May 20 Runoff, another mayoral candidate and member of the New Orleans African-American religious community, also alluded to a debt “owed” to the Landrieu family. Pastor Marie Galatas described how many years ago, she hosted a “prayer breakfast in her home for Moon Landrieu, and how “Moon Landrieu came inside [her] house.”

Galatas continued:

...and my husband said, ‘honey, we’re going to go’ – in those days, the black community is *going* [sic] – And we got together with the black community and the black community was going to Moon and saying, Moon, if we put you in, you’re going to have to bring us in. And for years they’ve been telling us that we owe Moon Landrieu’s family something. And I tell them you cannot have the train without the tracks.²²¹

Jim Carvin, Nagin’s chief campaign strategist, shared the sentiment that in promoting affirmative action policies and placing African-Americans as department heads in City Hall Moon Landrieu had only instigated what should have happened years earlier, and during the Nagin campaign, he preferred to foreground the idea of a Landrieu “dynasty” over a Landrieu “legacy,” in that it was “much more negative.”²²² Carvin and his fellow strategists sought to appeal to conservative white voters who saw the Landrieus as too ubiquitous within Louisiana politics, and did little to discourage the idea of a “Landrieu machine,” a term that had begun to emerge in more conservative online political forums. White voters of this persuasion already associated Landrieu with Marc Morial’s supporters and their notions of black political patronage from which they felt excluded. Carvin noted that, “there was never any symbiotic relationship between Nagin and Morial,” and referring to his 2002 Nagin campaign, he said, “Morial people all backed someone else, mainly Pennington, and were very contemptuous of Nagin and his chances. And then when they were proved wrong and Nagin was elected, Nagin threw them out of office and cut off their political patronage.”²²³ In 2006, Carvin saw Morial’s former supporters as “looking for a place to go and they saw Landrieu as the best possibility.”

²²¹ CecilFilm footage, May 19, 2006, MR 62, 00:52:49:16.

²²² CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, May 14, 2007: “We chose to call it a dynasty because that’s much more negative than the legacy and we didn’t see it as a legacy; I mean because Moon Landrieu broke the color barrier at City Hall, does not entitle anyone named Landrieu to automatically get black votes, especially against a black candidate.” MR 83, 01:14:22:00.

²²³ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, MR 82, 00:51:08:00.

Referring to the large number of Landrieu family members holding political office, Carvin repeated a common campaign joke, “how many Landrieus does it take to run Louisiana?” Indeed, the legacy / dynasty dichotomy was one that would come up repeatedly to thwart Mitch Landrieu’s campaign, and its ability to connote different things to different constituencies reflected the sad complexity of racial politics in New Orleans. Landrieu attempted to counter the notion of a Landrieu dynasty by promoting the idea of a Landrieu legacy instead, and at several debates said, “you call it a dynasty, but I call it a legacy, and I’m very proud of my family’s history.” The degree to which Watson’s sentiments concerning Landrieu were representative of widespread opinion within the New Orleans African-American community is debatable; however, Landrieu’s decision to only promote “legacy” over “dynasty” when forced into a rhetorical corner seems proof that it had some traction. As seen by Watson’s analogy, too much reference to his family’s “legacy” could backfire, and the result was that he tried to steer clear of the topic altogether. To borrow Karen Carvin Shachat’s analogy of a “Catch-22 situation,” what resulted was yet another arena in which Landrieu appeared prisoner of his own limiting campaign strategy.

At the same time that Watson was slighting him, Landrieu was still attempting to remove race from the dialogue and publicly discredited the notion of it as a factor within the election. In an interview in late March after the unveiling of his vision for bringing New Orleans “back on his feet,” Landrieu said:

It’s not about race, it’s about something much more important and that’s going to hold us in really good stead in the years to come as we deal with really hard challenges – education, healthcare, housing and those things that are always really hard to solve.²²⁴

As Landrieu attempted to shift the dialogue to an inclusive recovery effort that would transcend race, it continued to loom as an issue for many voters. In answering a question about the controversy surrounding some footage shot by a videographer during the storm of him rescuing people in a boat and later used by his campaign in a commercial, Landrieu reiterated his view that it was important to avoid dwelling on race. He said, “It’s also important for people to know that this race is not about race; it’s about all being in the boat

²²⁴ Mitch Landrieu, MR 14, CecilFilm Interview. March 24, 2006.

together. Those pictures are very important and will take on more significance later.”²²⁵ However, this was not altogether true, and Landrieu’s equally evident failure of *not* dwelling on race was to thwart his own efforts of moving through it. Longtime journalist and media consultant Warren Bell was struck by Mayor Nagin’s absence during Hurricane Katrina, which was an episode much covered by historian Douglas Brinkley in his book The Great Deluge. Bell said, “None of this was brought up during the campaign because Mr. Landrieu, and I know this because he shared it with me, was concerned that if he did that then he would be accused of attacking the black mayor [...] and that would have had a negative impact.”²²⁶

From the day he announced, Mitch Landrieu emerged as a strong mayoral contender in this election, and again, at the start of the campaign, he was expected by many to collect significant crossover support. But what began as a strong undercurrent during the 2006 New Orleans mayoral campaigns then came to dominate as a as a destructive issue, and as hard as Landrieu tried he could not move the rhetoric, to use his own words, “beyond race.” However by May 16, Landrieu acknowledged “race” – along with but over “ideology” – as the determining factor should his electoral bid meet with failure. Referring to his ability to garner African-American votes as “the center hold[ing],” which was his chief campaign concern, Landrieu said, “If the center holds, if this issue is not about race, but about getting job done, I win; if the center does not hold, and the extremes come together to say there's something about this guy that I just don't like, and I can't get beyond ideology or race, then he's gonna [sic] win.”²²⁷

Having at moments acknowledged race as a factor within his campaign kickoff speech, Landrieu might have improved his mayoral chances had he then articulated that the election was about race, that following what Katrina had exposed, that it should be about race, and that under his watch and as mayor of New Orleans, he would make sure that the indignities to which the most socially and economically disadvantaged New Orleanians were exposed during the storm – the majority of whom were African-American – would never be allowed to happen again. There had been early polling data to suggest that

²²⁵ CecilFilm interview with Mitch Landrieu, March 24, 2006. MR 14, 00:13:51:01.

²²⁶ CecilFilm interview with Warren Bell, May 25, 2006. MR 70, 00:22:47:00.

²²⁷ CecilFilm interview with Mitch Landrieu, May 16, MR 60, 00:38:27:08.

Landrieu might have appealed to different segments of the New Orleans African-American community on targeted grounds, he might have appealed to homeowners, to small business owners, and to the churchmen and women whom Nagin had ostracized during his first term.

Landrieu might have then pointed to the incumbent's record and asked the New Orleans electorate what the Mayor had done for them in four years, he might even have taken Nagin to task on his professed newfound "blackness," tying himself directly to a stronger moral high ground, and questioning Nagin's alleged loyalty to his race that his first term had done little to substantiate, and which the recommendations of his own commission had done nothing to demonstrate. Dubbed "Ray Reagan" during his first term for Republican-leaning sympathies and policies that had been widely deemed detrimental to New Orleans African-American communities, there had also been early evidence that many had viewed Nagin's targeted appeals to African-Americans such as "Chocolate City," as transparent and "pandering." The effects of Katrina remained raw, and as Mtangulizi Sanyika writes concerning Nagin's "Chocolate City" speech, in "Nagin's Re-election as Mayor of New Orleans: Anatomy of a Civil Rights Protest," "Black folks knew that [Nagin] was being patronizing, but cheered because he stated the obvious albeit too little too late."²²⁸ However, Landrieu's fear of addressing race head-on as a central campaign point either in connection to the Katrina related discrimination of citizens, or of race relations as an area to actively ameliorate within the "new" New Orleans, both reflected his fear of the subject and even raised questions as to why he was running. Landrieu might have reclaimed the term "new" New Orleans as an inclusive phrase, and condemned the less than inclusive rebuilding rhetoric and denouncing it for the racism it engendered.

Landrieu's delay in deciding to run may have also contributed to his failure in generating campaign momentum; his alleged inability to communicate his eventual decision to his more conservative opponent Ron Forman then allowed two white candidates to split the white vote during the primaries, by which time Jim Carvin and Nagin's other advisors had already developed a campaign strategy and tapped into the fears of an historically anti-Landrieu camp, and begun to use an old and racialized campaign rhetoric to gain traction

²²⁸ Mtangulizi Sanyika, "Nagin's Re-election as Mayor of New Orleans: Anatomy of a Civil Rights Protest," Black Commentator, <http://www.blackcommentator.com/186/186_nagin.html>. Last accessed July 2006.

and narrow the perimeters of the debate. Furthermore, as the two leading white candidates, Forman and Landrieu did little to distinguish themselves from one another or from the incumbent within the public arena, and Nagin's win constituted the sum of many frustrating and lackluster components that failed to allow for a bolder and more honest discourse. If the election had been a referendum on the incumbent as many had thought that it would be, of Nagin's leadership skills during Katrina, then both Landrieu and Forman did little to encourage it to be such.

Non-local media reported on the very real perception of post-Katrina New Orleans as witnessing "the biggest, most brutal urban-renewal project black America had ever seen," and this was becoming horribly apparent to those still exiled outside of New Orleans and left out of the early planning discussions that proposed to erase their neighborhoods.²²⁹ To them, the little green dots of the BNOBC "green space" map connoted something much more sinister than merely innocuous parkland, and still, Landrieu failed to grasp onto Nagin's association with the plan. The "green space" plan was to become one of the most highly racialized issues of the early recovery, and it might have been one of the main issues that Landrieu could have seized upon with unwavering certainty, and called out the most awful of its implications. Had the Landrieu camp placed an ear to the ground and found a new boldness that there is evidence to suggest the times were calling for, he might have noticed voters that were potentially receptive to a new rhetoric.

At times Nagin did not sit comfortably in his new role of rejecting the white elites that had elected him, and courting a new base to which he had shown little allegiance in the past, there were moments during his campaign that he seemed to be sending mixed signals. When asked what his plan was for the recovery and rebuilding of New Orleans at a mayoral debate several months later, Mayor Nagin held up the final draft of the BNOBC report and said "Where's my plan? Here's my plan." Co-publishers of the Black Commentator Glen Ford and Peter Gamble considered Nagin's role in the BNOBC report in light of his now infamous "Chocolate City" speech on Martin Luther King Day, noting that the speech was delivered on January 16, less than a week after the controversial recommendations of the BNOBC to "shrink" the city's footprint. They write that Ray Nagin "is probably the most disoriented person in the country, these days," and continue by

²²⁹ "Harsh urban renewal in New Orleans," Associated Press. Wed., Oct. 12, 2005, <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9678167/>>.

referring to “the fruit of his own venality, sleaziness, and opportunism.”²³⁰ Such opinions revealed an opportunity for Landrieu to have called Nagin on this as well as many other different issues, but as Warren Bell had stated, his concern over the visual image of a white man attacking “a black man on issues of incompetence” were to prove too much of an impediment.

The Runoff: Did Anything Change?

On the eve of the May 20 Runoff, Rev. Watson hosted a prayer service at his church on St. Charles Avenue for Ray Nagin. The gathering was noteworthy not least because Rev. Watson had been the most vehement of Nagin’s critics, but also because the event signified an explicit endorsement from amongst the most prominent members of the New Orleans African-American Protestant communities, many of whom – like Rev. Watson – had found little in common with their Mayor until now. The event was not closed to outsiders, and yet it did not have the atmosphere of an entirely public occasion, and if any of the more vocal white critics of Nagin’s “Chocolate City” speech had been in attendance, undoubtedly the service would have received significant press coverage. Ray Nagin was there with his family, and he was seated in the front row to the right of Rev. Watson, in itself a powerful statement of endorsement to the congregation behind them. However the less than warm physical demeanors of both men towards each other could not have been more revealing.

Only a few months before, Rev. Watson had of course also accused the Mayor of having been personally responsible for the drowning of 1,200 people, and there was little love lost between them. At another debate, Rev. Watson had stated angrily to the Mayor, “I rebuke you,” as Nagin then made light of Watson’s agitated state, and while furrowing his brow he mockingly made signs of the cross in the reverend’s direction while saying, “Pastor, Pastor...”²³¹ Therefore it was little wonder that during the proceeding few hours Rev. Watson hardly looked to his neighbor, and while Mayor Nagin frequently exchanged comments

²³⁰ Glen Ford and Peter Gamble, bc publishers. “Fighting the Theft of New Orleans,” [Black Commentator](http://www.blackcommentator.com/167/167_cover_fighting_no_theft.html), <http://www.blackcommentator.com/167/167_cover_fighting_no_theft.html>.

²³¹ Harry Mount, “Will battered Big Easy elect a white mayor?” [Telegraph](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/1516416/Will-battered-Big-Easy-elect-a-white-mayor.html), April 22, 2006.

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/1516416/Will-battered-Big-Easy-elect-a-white-mayor.html>>. Last accessed July 2009.

and laughter with the man seated to his right, no similar exchanges took place between the two former mayoral candidates. Nagin's more animated exchanges to the right seemed to reflect his amazement as well as his delight at what was unfolding, as he proceeded to be enveloped by this congregation within an electoral rhetoric with which he had not been very familiar during his first term. Towards the beginning of the service Nagin heard a speaker say:

Because the business-minded candidate *happens* [sic] to be the black candidate, it is not a choice between a *black* [sic] candidate and a brilliant candidate, because the brilliant candidate *happens* [sic] to be the black candidate. It is not a choice between a bridge-building candidate and a black candidate, because the bridge-building candidate *just happens* [sic] to be the black candidate. It is not a choice between the black candidate and the *best* [sic] candidate because the best candidate just happens to be...a black candidate.²³²

From amongst this impressive show of unity behind the Mayor, what proceeded to take place was a confirmation of the prevailing view that within the post-Katrina climate of fractured racial unity; with the reassertions of narrow racial interests on the part of the white conservative community; and considering the less than inclusive recovery rhetoric employed by developers, planners, and citizens, that evening the only course of action the speakers promoted was to vote for the one person of color to have made it into the Runoff, despite his less than favorable record.

From within the confines of the Watson Memorial Teaching Ministries, different congregants referred to Nagin's leadership efforts during Katrina, and made repeated analogies to Nagin as a captain who had not abandoned his ship during the storm, but despite this, there was little allusion to anything that might have been deemed successful within Nagin's first Administration. Moreover it was stated in no uncertain terms that should any African-American citizen of New Orleans not vote for Mayor Nagin, he or she risked losing his or her voice. The same speaker told the congregation, "No vote – no voice. No vote – no voice. No vote? No voice. No vote – no voice. Let us lift our voice come tomorrow."²³³ Other speakers were more explicit in connecting their preferred choice with the candidate's race as well as of the significance of African-Americans ceding control of City Hall; a young woman called Shenay said:

²³² CecilFilm footage, Nagin at Rev. Watson's church, May 19, 2006. MR 62, 00:00.15:00.

²³³ Ibid. MR 62, 00:01.37:25.

I've had several people walk up to me and say, 'Shenay, who should I support for this mayoral election?' And if you look like me, and you're asking me that question, you need to go back and look in the mirror again. This is not the time to give it away. This is not the time to let the captain of our ship leave *our* [sic] ship. This is not the time to change the sergeant-in-arms.²³⁴

Following the voting rights concerns voiced at the Bridge March almost two months earlier, it had become apparent that what Nagin symbolized as an African-American figurehead to a significant number from within the New Orleans black communities, was of more importance than his ideology, and this service constituted a continuation of rhetoric that reflected these sentiments.

The threat towards African-American voter representation within New Orleans post-Katrina had largely been perceived in relation to the dearth of white officials and political leaders speaking up about real issues of disenfranchisement, and as such, this lack of communication suggested that by not highlighting these concerns, the "system" that had not historically benefited minorities was advancing these exclusionary sentiments. One speaker told the crowd assembled, "We are living in a time where you can get nothing past the system; nothing past the enemy. You all know there is an enemy; the Bible says Satan is of this world. That word 'world' in Greek means 'cosmos,' 'the system.' That's what it means – system. We are up against a system."²³⁵ Another speaker referred to a "takeover," and alluded to an "atmosphere of fear" amongst voters,

And I'm here to tell you tonight that not only another chance, but that chance is that four years. There's an atmosphere over this city of fear on one side. And there is an atmosphere all over this city of victory on the other side. Hallelujah! And that atmosphere of victory outweighs that atmosphere of competitive jealousy and competition and takeover.²³⁶

The morning after the May 20th Runoff election, Mayor Nagin spoke at a very different church, to the congregation at his Downtown Catholic church on North Prieur Street. He spoke to the gathered crowd in a manner that reflected his mood, and the people at St. Peter Claver heard him say what most people in New Orleans would also come to understand within the following months, "Who won this vote? White

²³⁴ Ibid. [MR 62](#), 00:41.08:10.

²³⁵ Ibid. [MR 62](#), 00:24.18:23.

²³⁶ Ibid. [MR 62](#), 00:25.24:03.

Republicans and the black vote!”²³⁷ But whether Nagin did actually fuse an unlikely but winning coalition between white Republicans and African-Americans in the 2006 election actually leaves room for doubt. Political observers commonly believe that Nagin’s win merged white Republicans who could not bring themselves to vote for a Landrieu – either for his family’s Civil Rights legacy, or due to his more liberal leaning philosophies that they saw as bad for business – and African-Americans who, to use the words of Jim Carvin, “when it came down to pulling a lever for a qualified black candidate, versus a qualified white candidate, at the end of the day, the black community decided not to give up the office.”²³⁸ Carvin’s sentiments matched a pervasive climate of distrust exacerbated by Katrina, and suggested that African-American voters chose to elect Nagin for the symbolism that such a statement would engender over any other reason, and that by “voting color,” this sent a signal that their votes would and should be counted.

The conservative contribution to Nagin’s re-election is harder to pinpoint. In a sampling of the most conservative leaning wards of the most conservative leaning uptown and monochromatically white precincts, Dr. Lance Hill of the Southern Institute for Education and Research conducted a brief study to which I was part of, correlating a map of the New Orleans wards and precincts with the Louisiana Secretary of State’s Primary and Runoff Election Results, also broken down by wards and precincts. Hill’s findings seem to suggest that a more in depth study would confirm what we were seeing, that in these wards, the majority of the conservative-leaning votes cast within the Primary election, those that had gone to the two Republicans Rob Couhig and Peggy Wilson, and to the more conservative leaning candidate Ron Forman *did not* migrate to Ray Nagin in the Runoff election, as is more commonly held, but that rather, they went to Landrieu. While an intriguing narrative twist and a compelling indictment of white voters in the South, the idea that white conservatives could not bring themselves to vote for Landrieu on the grounds of his inclusive approach towards the African-American community is rather harder to corroborate, even from even a brief examination of the voting data, but it was likely a factor all the same.

²³⁷ CecilFilm footage, St. Peter Claver Church, May 21, 2006. [MR 66](#), 00:50:00:00.

²³⁸ CecilFilm interview with Jim Carvin, [MR 82](#), 00:40:22:00.

Political scientists' methods commonly used for determining a voter's choice of candidate in relation to their race involves a statistical examination of largely monochromatic wards and a system of inference analysis known within the field as "ecological regression," or "ecological inference" which as a method is potentially problematic in that it can hold a 5 percent margin of error, which could have potentially over-estimated crossover voting information, that is, the number of votes cast by an African-American voter for a white candidate, or underestimated the number of votes cast by a white voter for an African-American one. Hill's interpretation would suggest that the block voting within the 2006 election was even more pronounced than many observers had thought and than the Nagin camp had suggested. This would mean that the 2006 election was much more polarized than was in the interests of the media or the Nagin camp to suggest. To begin his second term with a popular conception that he had forged a winning coalition that was representative of more than one community would certainly have been to Nagin's benefit.

An examination of the Times-Picayune Runoff election results as shown by precinct (see Illustration 18) in relation to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center's map charting the percent of African-American citizens by Census block within Orleans Parish (see Illustration 19) shows an obvious correlation between race and vote. Not long before the Runoff election, Landrieu spoke at an event targeting a large group of women voters, and there he described his past run for New Orleans mayor in 1994 against Marc Morial. He talked of knowing what it feels like to lose, and of also knowing "what it means for a city to try to define itself in elections." Landrieu spoke of the democratic process as a beautiful thing because "because it forces us to look at ourselves. And every four years as it relates to the mayor, to re-think what it is that we want to be, who we are, where we're going."²³⁹ If a city does define itself in elections and if it does force people to look at themselves, then when considering the implications of an especially polarized final election result, a New Orleans citizen might ask whether the image that reflects back is a progressive one.

²³⁹ Mitch Landrieu, CecilFilm footage, May 12, 2006. MR 56. 00:11:58:00.

2006 MAYORAL RUNOFF

A look at how Nagin and Landrieu fared by precinct in Saturday's election for New Orleans mayor:

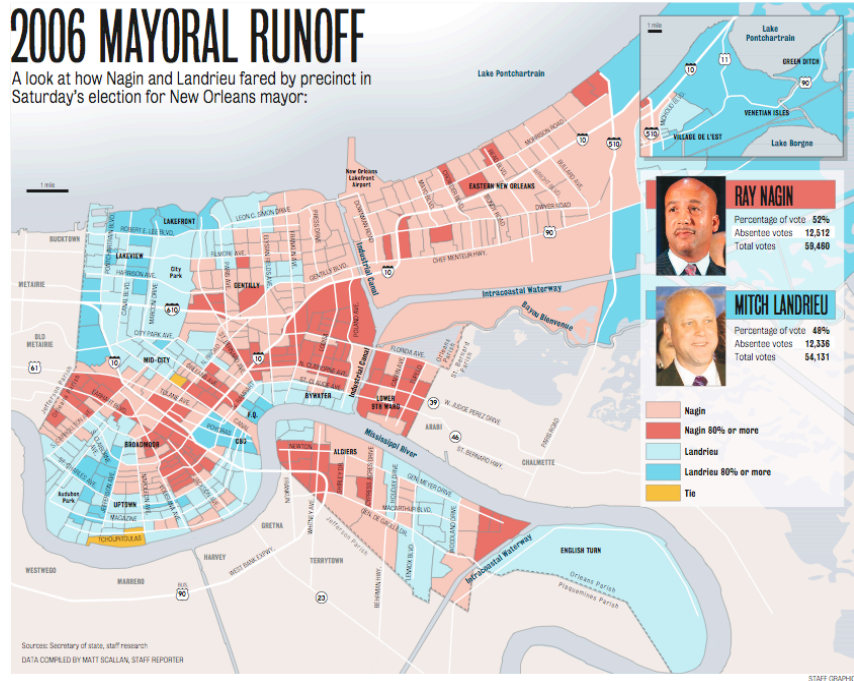


Illustration 18: 2006 Mayoral Runoff, Times-Picayune.

Percent African American by Census block group in Orleans Parish

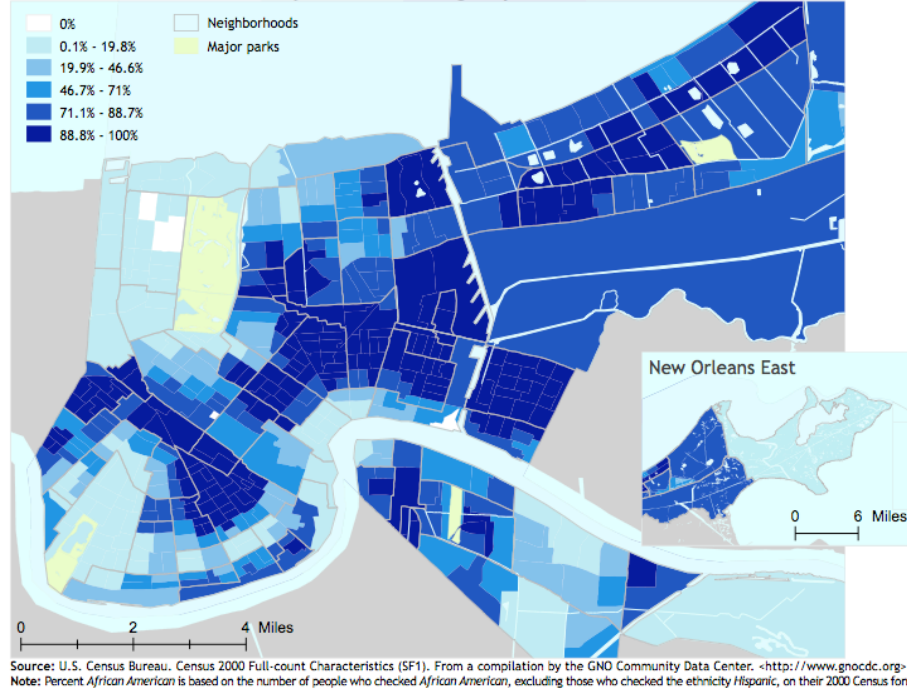


Illustration 19: Percent African-American by Census block group in Orleans Parish, Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC).

Conclusion

In the 2006 Mayor's race, Landrieu's ability to draw the African-American vote became of paramount importance to his campaign, but his slowness to enter the race, his failure at taking Nagin to task over his leadership performance during Katrina, and his subsequent struggle in distinguishing himself from the incumbent all culminated in Landrieu's inability to gain momentum or sufficient crossover support. But most importantly, because of Landrieu's failure to envisage a campaign rhetoric that moved beyond race by going through it, by broaching the issues it engendered such as the nation observed during Katrina, and broaching them head on, he enabled the Nagin camp's use of an older rhetoric that reflected deeper historical divides to win the day. Landrieu feared that attacking Mayor Nagin even in the slightest way would threaten his crossover vote became paramount, and by allowing this fear to dictate his campaign strategy, he charted an extremely safe course and repeatedly missed opportunities in which he might have gained momentum.

In contrast, beginning mid January, Nagin's conscious race-related appeal to African-American voters boxed Landrieu into a strategic corner before the election had even begun: how to win at a game he is excluded from playing? After Ron Forman failed to enter into the runoff, Nagin managed to regain some of the white conservative voters he had lost during the primaries. Regardless of the potential statistical overestimations within the method of ecological regression voter analysis, there were some white conservatives could not bring themselves to vote for a Landrieu; however, the exclusionary nature of early recovery discourse held more sway as a determinant for mobilizing block voting. African-American voters were faced with an almost impossible choice, re-elect an incumbent who had been neglectful of the concerns of many within the community, or trust City Hall to go white for the first time since 1978, and the 2006 election came to constitute a Civil Rights protest of sorts, but one in which many had mixed feelings, and in this election, race trumped record.

Although estimating voter turnout was impossible, many white voters began the electoral period by assuming that their voting power had increased, and this engendered a host of less than inclusive voices to reassert themselves into the political sphere in a way that they had not done since African-Americans had

gained an electoral majority, the effects of which increased the suspicions of a sufficient number of black voters to make race a possible winning campaign strategy for the Nagin camp from an early date, and most certainly encouraged greater voter participation efforts despite adverse conditions of unprecedented proportions.

Many white liberals as well as conservatives alike were surprised by Nagin's re-election victory, and in being so, they proved themselves unaware of the magnitude of the negative effects of the exclusionary early rebuilding rhetoric, and also insufficiently acknowledging of the disproportionate suffering of African-American communities within the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Landrieu's concerted avoidance of broaching race and poverty in a direct and forceful manner that might do justice to the horrors witnessed during Katrina, and his failure to use any more negative campaigning tactics to counter his opposition also facilitated the Nagin camp's strategy of "divide and conquer." Furthermore, Landrieu was supported by enough white supporters who had left the Nagin camp, which further encouraged some African-Americans who feared losing representation in City Hall to further view him as the "white candidate."

So at the beginning of 2009 when white voters in the United States of America have just helped to elect their first President of African descent, when a Vietnamese Republican Congressman has just been elected by a majority African-American district, when certain conservative columnists question the necessity of a Voting Rights Act, and when academics and men and women of the media debate what it means to enter into a "post-racial" environment, what is the benefit of writing about an election that took place three years ago, and concentrating on the pathologies to be found at that dangerous intersection of race and politics? To anyone who looked beyond the surface of these aforementioned examples, the question almost answers itself in the posing of it. While the world has recently witnessed an apparently successful "non-racial" campaign from the Obama team, the scale of the efforts made by its managers to keep race out of the dialogue undermines the notion that we have truly entered into a "post-racial era."²⁴⁰ Obama's pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, had made comments that many Americans of European descent found offensive. But when

²⁴⁰ For a discussion of President Obama's acutely non-racial strategy see "The Joshua Generation: Race and the Campaign of Barack Obama," by David Remnick. *The New Yorker*, Nov. 17, 2008. Pages 76-79.

white indignation was reaching a pinnacle, then Senator Obama turned a liability into a triumph during his “race speech” in Philadelphia, in which Obama said that he could no more disown the Rev. Wright than he could his own white grandmother who confessed at times to using racial epithets and fearing an encounter with black men on a dark street. At this moment, Obama’s campaign persona became that of Everyman, and in such a persona, he could take on the uglier sides of American inter-group relations, and without saying he agreed with them, he could say that he understood them. The less than savory xenophobic tactics employed by his opponent and vice-presidential candidate would further reinforce this notion. Similarly, Hilary Clinton witnessed numerous examples of far from gender-neutral media responses to her campaign. The term “post-racial” then almost becomes a synonym for white avoidance of the uncomfortable subject of race, and by its absence, sends another communicative message.



Illustration 20: “Big Shot,” by Willie Birch. [Arthur Roger Gallery](http://www.arthurrogergallery.com/dynamic/artwork_detail.asp?ArtworkID=1716).
<http://www.arthurrogergallery.com/dynamic/artwork_detail.asp?ArtworkID=1716>.

Although the symbolism associated with President Obama’s victory reveals an enormous progress in America’s ability not to move beyond race, but to move through it, on a more local level such as within post-Katrina New Orleans, where there is a more even balance between the races, the miscommunications that define the city’s identity politics have seemed to rear their ugly heads with more frequency, exposing the hopes, fears, and concerns of the electorate, and following one of the worst disasters in recent American history, the emotions of New Orleans voters were understandably taxed. Concerning the 2006 New Orleans mayoral elections, historian Arnold Hirsh writes of the difficulty of “seeking high ground on the low road of racial political campaigning,” and as New Orleans begins to prepare for the 2010 mayoral elections within an increasingly racially polarized political climate, we might learn something from revisiting this dangerous intersection.

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