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*Cover Story*  
*Whose Plan for New Orleans?*  
*Blacks Need a Vision for the Cities*  
by BC Co-Publishers Glen Ford and Peter Gamble

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*"Every resident must have a voice in the rebuilding process. This will take a coordination of community town halls and meetings to an unprecedented level given the geographic dispersion of residents. Community involvement will be a challenge, but one that cannot be ignored. To truly rebuild communities of lasting value, residents, business interests and elected officials must make decisions about their community together."*  
– **Paul Farmer**, AICP, Executive Director, American Planning Association

*"All displaced persons should have the right to participate in the rebuilding of the city as owners, producers, providers, planners, developers, workers, and direct beneficiaries. Participation must especially include African-Americans and the poor, and those previously excluded from the development process."* – Point Four of the New Orleans Citizens Bill of Rights

*"Elsewhere in the Gulf, you can see commercial transactions, people doing business, and cleanup. But in New Orleans you don't see people."* – Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-GA)

New Orleans has emerged as a 21st Century political cauldron for Black America, a gaping wound that exposes African American vulnerabilities and institutional weaknesses in the face of both super-predatory capital and Old South racial oppression. A shocked and outraged community – and by this, we mean the national Black polity as well as the hundreds of thousands directly affected by the Katrina phenomenon – is now challenged to fight on many fronts simultaneously.

Printer Friendly version of "Who Decides" cartoon

Two events this week in the Crescent City serve to illuminate the emerging order-of-battle in what will surely be a multi-year struggle – one that must ultimately engage every sector of Black America.

On Monday, November 7, New Orleans police first tried to prevent, and then peacefully escorted, a cross-bridge protest march to the two-thirds white city of Gretna, on the east bank of the Mississippi River.

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During the first week of hell in New Orleans, Mayor Ray Nagin told desperate residents seeking to escape the city that busses were waiting on the other side of the river. However, Gretna police, Jefferson County sheriff's deputies and assorted white vigilantes, fired shots over the heads of the would be evacuees, halting the exodus. Gretna's police chief declared: "If we had opened the bridge, our city would have looked like New Orleans does now: looted, burned and pillaged."

For organizers of this week's protest – an impressive array of regional and national activists – it was a nightmare flashback to a bridge outside Selma, Alabama, in 1965. "The Gretna City Bridge incident will live on in civil rights history just as does Bloody Sunday at the Edmund Pettus Bridge," said Rep. Cynthia McKinney, the lone congressperson among the 100 or so marchers who successfully passed the "Welcome to Gretna" sign on Monday.

The event was a civil rights affair, with marchers singing "We Shall Overcome." Congresswoman McKinney's legislative response to the Gretna outrage also harkened back to what many think of as a past era: She has demanded a Justice Department investigation, and that Gretna's police department be denied federal funds.

Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther who co-founded the local social justice group Common Ground, understood that the past was also the present. "What happened here showed the old way of doing business in the state of Louisiana is alive and well," he said. "The world needs to know what happened."

But the world didn't learn about the protest on Monday – of how Jim Crow's supposedly dead hand had reached out over two generations to replicate 1965 Selma in 2005 New Orleans. Although CNN and other national broadcasters were on the scene with their cameras, and the Associated Press issued two brief reports, the march received virtually no national broadcast or major newspaper coverage – a clear sign that corporate media editors consider the Black "rights" aspect of Katrina a non-story.

Katrina proves how fragile the tissue of Black rights has become. The debacle takes us back to pre-civil rights days, when any white man with a gun possessed both power and impunity; back to the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, when thousands of African Americans were purposely left stranded on levees surrounded by water, so that they could not leave the region and deprive rich whites of their labor; back to the days of near naked slavery.

Katrina should forever silence the voices of those who, through ignorance, delusion, or in return for a check, proclaim the struggle for civil rights, over. Yet even as we are forced to reaffirm the bedrock civil rights to freedom of movement, to security in our homes and persons, to due process, Katrina challenges us to demand other rights not recognized by the captains of capital and their servants in government, as enumerated in the New Orleans Citizen Bill of Rights. *(Full text at bottom of this page.)*

Which brings us to the other significant event in New Orleans, this week.

### ***"New" Rights***

Official commissions proliferate in the wake of Katrina, none of them adequately – if at all – representing the interests of Black New Orleans. Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco's Recovery and Rebuilding Commission's "planning and visioning" conference begins on Thursday, November 10 at the New Orleans Marriott Hotel. Four hundred notables were invited to register by last Friday's deadline; other citizens will occupy an over-flow room. According to a press release of the American Institute of Architects, which is presenting the conference in collaboration with the American Planning Association:

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"Louisiana citizens in attendance will be able to provide instant feedback on a range of planning and design principles and to rank their importance. This feedback will be tabulated and analyzed in real-time by AmericaSpeaks (a non-partisan, non-profit organization that conducts citizen engagement projects) and will be part of the conference's final recommendations (results will be shared with media during daily press briefings... Professional facilitators will assist small 'table' discussions, as well as the regional break-outs. They will help participants move through the process efficiently and smoothly, making sure that everyone's voice has an opportunity to be heard.

Absent, of course, will be the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons scattered throughout the region and nation – the people who demand the "Right to Return" should they choose to exercise it.

A bright red flag appears on the architect group's conference literature. Among four assumptions that will underlay their discussion on the future of New Orleans, right alongside projected demand for labor, petroleum prices, and the cost of construction materials, is the following assumption:

"Less than half of the lost housing stock in Louisiana is expected to be rebuilt due to decreased population base."

Clearly, the planners begin the conference with the assumption that huge numbers of the city's Black and poor – who suffered the most devastating housing losses – will not be returning. The assumption reflects the received wisdom that permeates the (white) national discussion of Katrina – an assumption that is, in fact, the fervent wish of corporate America and most of its media.

### **A Plan for Permanent Exile?**

It is patently obvious that, if a city is rebuilt on a plan that only accommodates a limited number of displaced people, it does not welcome their return; there will be no place for them to return to. There will not be enough schools to serve their children, nor public transportation to get them to and from neighborhoods that will have been "planned" out of existence. In effect, if you are not in the plan, you have no future in New Orleans; you are erased.

The architects foresee a two-stage, three to five year reconstruction period. "Close to a quarter million housing units are estimated to have been destroyed in the New Orleans metro area alone," says a report by AIA chief economist Kermit Baker. "Declining population levels in the near term will limit the need for replacement housing units, so not even all of the units lost in the storm will need to be immediately replaced to house its population."

Working from data compiled by consulting firm Economy.com, the architects expect that Baton Rouge and other Louisiana cities will absorb many of the displaced, and note that, historically, 40 percent of out-migration is to Texas. "By 2008," writes Baker, "probably only about 100,000 of the housing units lost to the stock will have been replaced." That leaves 150,000 housing units that will not be replaced, representing a huge number of Black people. Based on these assumptions, the people who once lived in those houses will not be part of the planning process; they are the uninvited.

Responding to questions from BC, Baker explained that the low-return assumptions also assume an "unsupported" economic environment – that is, the reconstruction of New Orleans will be based solely on market forces, without government intervention and subsidies. "This is what unsupported growth would look like... Private markets can't build" housing for rental at "\$250 or \$300 a month," he said.

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Of course they can't – or rather, won't – a fact known to urban planners for generations. But what about the many tens of billions of federal dollars that are targeted for the Gulf region? Clearly, this is not going to be an "unsupported" reconstruction. The question is: who will be recipients of "support," and who not. Certainly, those who are left out of the plan will receive no support. Plans are not neutral – they both include and exclude, and are the basis for funding.

At this point Baker, a PhD., offered: "If you are asking if the [availability of] free housing would change our conclusions – absolutely!" The same would go for subsidized housing "if that's the vision we want."

Unfortunately, planners who assume that New Orleans' fate will be left to private markets *and* that a population that once filled 150,000 housing units, will not return, will inevitably put forward a self-fulfilling "vision" – a city with no welcome mat for the unplanned Black and poor.

### *Planning as Valuable as Voting*

The architects' partners in organizing Governor Blanco's conference, the American Planning Association (APA), are no strangers to public-supported development "environments," since so many of their 38,000 members work with or for governments. At an October 18 hearing of several U.S. House subcommittees, APA executive director W. Paul Farmer sounded like a social democrat.

"Planning provides a way for engaged citizens to exercise their voice about how they want their community rebuilt. In this way, planning is just as valuable to democracy as voting privileges. No other public process allows citizens to become so directly involved in helping shape the future of the places where they live. Planning is truly democracy in action. Part of this democratic process involves residents, development interests, and other stakeholders coming together to create a shared vision of their community's future."

Farmer warned that "communities cannot afford to forgo planning in the rush to rebuild..." – an interesting thing to say to Republican committee chairmen, given that the Bush administration rushed, Iraq-style, to award no-bid New Orleans contracts to construction giants Halliburton, Bechtel and others before the elemental needs of Katrina's human victims had been even minimally addressed. Moreover, said Farmer:

"Public financing must be provided for neighborhood and community planners to assist residents in planning and financing their reconstruction, to provide an opportunity to develop creative strategies for neighborhood improvement and evacuee community building, and to provide a communication link between local government and residents."

"That's just not going to happen," said one of the crafters of the New Orleans Citizen Bill of Rights, when informed of the APA director's remarks. Neither the mayor, the governor, nor the federal government are willing to finance the work of community activists struggling to give voice to "the unplanned for" and displaced. Many of these long time activists have themselves been displaced and "find it physically impossible to attend" planning conferences – "we're scattered throughout the United States."

Organizers like Mtangulizi Sanyika, of the African American Leadership Project, who was willing to speak for the record, say they have their hands full trying to save the heavily Black lower Ninth Ward from bulldozers. "The important task is organizing the dispersed population [in 44 states] and the neighborhoods," said Sanyika. "We are starting to witness a bubbling up from the bottom."

The "bottom" is nowhere to be found on city and state reconstruction commissions. Although racially integrated, Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin's commissions are top-heavy with boardroom Blacks – like Nagin, himself – a Democrat in name only who attempted to privatize everything in sight immediately upon assuming office.

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But Black New Orleans has millions of allies who are engaged in a multitude of projects on their behalf. In truth, most African Americans see their own fate in the muck of the Ninth Ward, and the cruel exile of their brothers and sisters.

### *The Necessary Focus*

Katrina has set African American forces in motion on a scale not seen since the Civil Rights Movement entered its mature phase in 1963, when, according to NAACP Chairman Julian Bond, "there were more than 10,000 anti-racist demonstrations." Just three months into a Gulf saga that will unfold over a period of *years*, we are already witnessing an impressive mobilization across the political spectrum of Black America, and among many traditional allies. So deep and wide has the Katrina wound cut, it seems clear that activity among high-profile organizations represents only the "tip of the iceberg," so to speak. Every consciously Black grouping appears to be working on, or is contemplating, a Katrina-related project, and numerous non-Black organizations are engaged in solidarity activity.

Although a host of separate campaigns do not (yet) constitute a "movement," the sheer volume of Katrina activities has every potential to galvanize broad sectors of Black America into something that resembles a movement – and relatively quickly.

There must, however, be a focus – and that focus should be to create a Movement for Democratic Development of the cities. The threatened cataclysmic gentrification of New Orleans is but a high-speed version of what is occurring, nationwide, as capital seeks to seize back the centers of urban life.

At the same time, the images and events of Katrina have demonstrated beyond doubt that Blacks' civil rights are, to put it mildly, insecure. Activists must now engage the long-neglected battle for Democratic Development of, not just New Orleans, but their own cities, while also confronting old-style racism in the raw. The Black condition has not fundamentally changed; it has become more complicated.

Above all, the configuration of our cities must not be left to others – even well-meaning others.

On July 29, 2004, in the last of a five-part series titled, "Wanted: A Plan for the Cities to Save Themselves," BC proposed that Black labor take the leading role in creating "flying squads" of urban experts to assist local activists in developing a practical blueprint for urban development that serves and empowers the masses of residents. "The pool of talent available to us" in this project, we noted, "is far larger than that which the activists of the early 1960s could call upon." The article continued:

"We must disrupt and *supersede* corporate development schemes, by becoming city planners in the service of the people. We must take the initiative away from the corporations, who are currently in possession of all the data that make up the life of a city, and who use it selectively to present their self-serving brand of 'development' as the only option available. We must redefine the term 'development,' to mean *change that benefits the people impacted by the project*. Development that does not meet that definition, is unacceptable....

"We must halt the corporate-imposed *triaging* of urban America, that accepts the incremental expulsion [in New Orleans' case, catastrophic expulsion] of populations based on corporate promises of a 'greater good' in the future – for those who somehow manage to hang on to their addresses....

"Relatively small teams of people, equipped with specialized knowledge of how cities function, and having gathered the widest possible specific information on targeted cities, can provide the basic outlines for comprehensive urban Plans that serve the inhabitants. These

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Plans, created in a process that intimately involves the people themselves – eliciting their dreams – will serve as the basis for democratic discussion, negotiations, and struggle over the development of the city."

Had such a team been created, white trade organizations and planners would not be monopolizing the public discussion of New Orleans' future. But who knew that nature and the Bush regime would combine to visit such devastation, so soon?

Had Katrina not occurred, the Black grassroots movers–and–shakers of the Crescent City would probably not have refined their New Orleans Citizen Bill of Rights, an exquisite Democratic Development document, born of dire necessity, and applicable to every urban center in the nation. Adversity is one route to maturity, in which case, progressive Blacks must begin acting like elders.

Unless we have learned nothing from Katrina, Democratic Development be must be at the top of the agenda at the March, 2006 national Black convention, in Gary, Indiana.

Without a Plan, we will never beat The Man.

### *African American Leadership Project & The New Orleans Local Organizing Committee & The Greater New Orleans Coalition of Ministers*

#### *New Orleans Citizen Bill of Rights'*

1. All displaced persons should maintain the "**Right of Return**" to New Orleans as an International "**Human Right.**" A persons' socioeconomic status, class, employment, occupation, educational level, neighborhood residence, or how they were evacuated should have no bearing on this fundamental right. This right shall include the provision of adequate transportation to return to the city by the similar means that a person was dispersed. **THE CITY SHOULD NOT BE DEPOPULATED OF ITS MAJORITY AFRICAN–AMERICAN AND LOWER INCOME CITIZENS**, and must be rebuilt to economically include all those who were displaced.
2. All displaced persons must retain their **right of citizenship in the city**, especially including the right to vote in the next municipal elections. Citizen rights to the franchise must be protected and widely explained to all dispersed persons. The provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 should be examined and enforced in this regard.
3. All displaced persons should have the **right to shape and envision the future of the city**. Shaping the future should not be left to elected officials, appointed commissions, developers and/or business interests alone. We the citizens are the primary stakeholders of a re–imagined New Orleans. Thus, we **MUST** be directly involved in imagining the future. Provisions must be included to insure this right.
4. All displaced persons should have the **right to participate in the rebuilding of the city** as owners, producers, providers, planners, developers, workers, and direct beneficiaries. Participation must especially include African–Americans and the poor, and those previously excluded from the development process.
5. In rebuilding the city, all displaced persons should have the **right to quality goods and services** based on equity and equality. Disparities and inequality must be eliminated in all aspects of social, economic and political life. It should be illegal to discriminate against an

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individual due to their income, occupation or educational status, in addition to the traditional categories of race, gender, religion, language, disability, culture or other social status.

6. In rebuilding the city, all displaced persons should have **the right to affordable neighborhoods**, quality affordable housing, adequate health care, good schools, repaired infrastructures, a livable environment and improved transportation and hurricane safety.

7. In rebuilding the city, workers, especially hospitality workers should have **the right to be paid a livable wage** with good benefits.

8. In rebuilding the city, African–American should have the **right to increased economic benefits** and ownership. The percentage of Black owned enterprises **MUST** dramatically increase from the present 14%, and the access to wealth and ownership must also be dramatically improved.

9. In rebuilding the city, African–Americans and any displaced low income populations should have the **right to preferential treatment in cleanup jobs, construction and operational work associated with rebuilding the city.**

10. In rebuilding the city, the **right to contracting preference** should also be given to Community Development collaboratives, community and faith–based corporations/organizations, and New Orleans businesses that partner with nonprofit service providers and people of color. No contracts should be let to companies that disregard Davis–Bacon, Affirmative action and local participation. Proposed legislation to create a "recovery opportunity zone" should specifically include Community Development organizations and minority firms as alternatives to the no bid multi–national companies. Over the last 30 years, such firms have demonstrated their capacity to successfully build hundreds of thousands of quality affordable housing, and neighborhood commercials and businesses and service enterprises.

11. In rebuilding the city, priority must be given to the **right to an environmentally clean and hurricane safe city**, rather than the destruction of Black neighborhoods or communities such as the lower 9th ward. Priority must also be given to environmental justice, disaster planning and evacuation plans that work for the most transit dependent populations and the most vulnerable residents of the city.

12. In rebuilding the city, priority must be given to the **right to preserve and continue the rich and diverse cultural traditions of the city**, and the social experiences of Black people that produced the culture. The second line, Mardi Gras Indians, brass bands, creative music, dance foods, language and other expressions are the "soul of the city." The rebuilding process must preserve these traditions. **THE CITY MUST NOT BE CULTURALLY, ECONOMICALLY OR SOCIALLY GENTRIFIED. INTO A "SOULLESS" COLLECTION OF CONDOS AND tract home NEIGHBORHOODS FOR THE RICH.** We also respectfully request that the CBC initiate its own Commission to thoroughly investigate all aspects of the physical and human dimensions of the Katrina disaster.

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