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*Freedom Rider
Toledo, New Orleans and
the Failure of Black Leadership
by Margaret Kimberley*

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October 15, 2005 is a day that should live in infamy. On that date a group of white supremacists from the National Socialist Movement (NSM) were given permission to march in a racially mixed but mostly black neighborhood in Toledo, Ohio. Typically hate groups are allowed to march only near courthouses and city halls.

Their movements are kept under control; it is easier to separate them from protesters, and it is easier to arrest them too. The Nazis who attempted to march in Toledo should have been told where they could march, and been arrested if they deviated from police instructions.

Instead the Nazis were given permission to march on behalf of a white racist family who had called them to help harass their black neighbors. Inevitably, violence resulted.

The other inevitable result was the media's continued demonization of black people. Just as in post-Katrina New Orleans, the behavior of black people under assault was questioned, scrutinized and ultimately found wanting.

In New Orleans the captions of now famous photographs told us that that white people are always innocent, and black people are always guilty. White people find things and black people are always looters. In Toledo, black people under assault from their avowed enemies were dismissed by their own leaders and then characterized as criminals when they took to the streets in protest.

The irony of Toledo is that the NSM never even marched. They gathered at a high school football field and yelled insults at protesters.

"Hey! The Toledo Zoo called, and they want their monkeys back," shouted Martin, as the NSM members began making chimpanzee sounds. "Why don't you go cry to your daddy? Oh wait, you're a n*****; you don't know who your daddy is!"

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They wore themselves out with taunts and police escorted them away, but not before arresting black people who defied namby pamby political leaders and came out to protest against the outrage taking place in their community.

Residents gathered who were unaware that the planned march never even took place. They then became the subjects of police scrutiny instead of the group dedicated to inciting violence. Rev. Mansour Bey asked, “Why do police protect the Nazis but when five African–Americans are standing around we get questioned and maybe frisked by police?”

A good question. Black people do not fare very well when in contact with large numbers of cops, even if avowed Nazis are hanging about. Toledo officials decided that the way to maintain peace was to restrict the movement of black people, not to tell the NSM where they could march and arrest them if they didn’t follow orders. Toledo officials, including black Mayor Jack Ford, did everything wrong in dealing with the NSM march. The city’s police chief, Mike Navarre said, “Our job is to protect these protesters.”

Navarre’s job was to protect all of Toledo from the violence that results when Nazis come to town. The Mayor asked his constituents to ignore the NSM, an insult to injury if ever there was one. As usual the masses told the leadership what to do. They took to the streets. Most protested peacefully, but there was enough violence to make the news and be called a riot.

The NSM called their planned action a “march against black crime.” It isn’t surprising that white supremacists would raise the specter of black crime, but the media were little better.

Ever since hurricane Katrina, thoughts previously censored are now spoken. The media is complicit in bringing out the ugliness that always lurks below the surface. The initial reporting on Katrina focused on looters and exaggerated reports of other crimes.

It wasn’t just media excess during a fast breaking story that created the misinformation. Black America is always depicted as the evil, always at fault, always to blame for every mishap in the nation and apparently worse than Nazis.

The images of suffering created by hurricane Katrina evoked sympathy from many but they also evoked lurking hatreds. When the city of Toledo made it a priority to protect Nazis, instead of lawfully preventing them from marching in a residential neighborhood, it signaled a chilling sea change. Mayor Ford clearly didn’t think a Nazi march was a threat to his political fortunes.

That is a terrifying and sad comment on the state of black American politics. The only thing sadder would be a reelected Mayor Ford.

The City of New Orleans was destroyed by a combination of mother nature and years of government neglect. It is now being destroyed by the masters of disaster, such as Halliburton, who always profit from tragedy.

How can dispersed New Orleans residents fight for their right to go home when mayors of black cities respond to Nazi threats by telling their intended victims that their enemies are imaginary? If a city like Toledo can conclude that Nazis have greater rights than the residents they planned to provoke then the outcome doesn’t look good for New Orleans either. The same sort of political leadership that won’t or can’t stand up to Nazis won’t stand up to Halliburton either as it carves up the Gulf Coast with its no bid contracts.

Black America is weak and leaderless and the sharks smell blood in the water. They can tell us to ignore goose–stepping American Nazis or ignore people who were taken from New Orleans to Utah against their will.

Like the Toledo community residents who refused to play deaf, dumb and blind, the rest of black America will have to step into the gap and become the new leadership. If not, then Nazis, Halliburton or just plain evildoing Republicans will keep running and ruining our lives. We'll all be on planes to Utah and other far flung locales, whether we like it or not.

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