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*Post–Katrina New Orleans:
The Crisis of Black Leadership Revisited
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The New Orleans hurricane disaster's impact on, among other things, refocusing attention on America's racial–class divide could well prove the tipping point that determines the political and economic future of Black and Urban America. At about the time Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on New Orleans from the Mexican Gulf, I became aware of the death of perhaps black America's greatest thinker and critic over the past several decades, Harold Cruse. Cruse's *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (William Morrow & Co., 1967), provocatively subtitled "a historical analysis of the failure of black leadership," caused all kinds of black–on–black tremors when it first appeared in 1967, followed twenty years latter by his equally seminal but less well–known *Plural But Equal* (William Morrow & Co., 1987).

But what, one might wonder, does Harold Cruse have to do with Hurricane Katrina? The connection is in the timing of my own knowledge of Cruse's passing, coinciding with the New Orleans disaster and its immediate race–class and wider political reverberations. This prompted, by association, a reflection on Cruse's many prophetic insights on the intertwined fate of blacks and America's cities. Katrina's devastation, and the Bush administration's faltering response, rudely re–awakened national and international awareness of America's unresolved racial and class dilemmas. It also exposed the closely related precariousness of America's cities highlighted by Katrina's swamping of New Orleans.

To underline these linkages, *The Nation* had written that as far as the nationally dominant Republican party was concerned, "New Orleans and cities like it have for a long time been written off as expendable." This was by way of explaining House Speaker Dennis Hastert's initial reactions to the New Orleans devastation to the effect that its rebuilding "doesn't make sense to me" and that "it looks like a lot of the place could be bulldozed." Cruse, on the other hand, at a time when ghetto insurrections were defining the plight of blacks in the cities, was at pains to point out that "the large cities, especially in the North, are where the decisive struggles of the Negro movement will be waged. It will be a difficult and complex struggle, but the Negro movement must win political and economic power within these urban communities, while seeking cultural freedom and equality there and beyond..."

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Various and sundry ideological, partisan and public policy constituencies are engaged in trying to decipher the meaning of this most devastating of America's hurricane seasons for the country's near-term political future, and the fact that race (and class) has suddenly taken on renewed salience. Crucially, though, how does America's black political leadership stack up in the stock taking – or does it? – apart, that is, from the predictable outrage at the impact of Katrina on New Orleans' 'left behind' black victims? Revisiting Cruse's original intellectual and leadership crisis perception seems a fitting place to start in grappling with these questions.

Cruse, after all, warned that "the Indian world of the reservation exemplifies the fate awaiting the American Negro, who is left stranded and impoverished in the ghettos, beyond the fringe of absorption. He will be pushed there through the compulsions of the American capitalist dynamic if, as the most populous ethnic 'out' group, the American Negro fails to galvanize his potential as a countervailing force." Tellingly, Cruse, a widely acknowledged ex-communist member of the African-American Nationalist camp, counseled that "*the Negro group cannot act out this role by assuming the stance of separatism*. The program of Afro-American Nationalism must activate a dynamism on all social fronts." Moreover, at the time of writing, he was scornful of the nationalist tendency to express distrust of "the white man's Federal power to aid and abet the Negro's struggle" while leaping on the "band-wagon of every anti-poverty handout from the Federal power, and then complain that the Federal power is not doing enough" yet "refuse to launch an independent political party of their own in order to deal more effectively with the Federal power."

Cruse was not an easy read for many a black activist and intellectual during this age of militant protest and rhetorical offensives. Rather than African-Americans waging a "race struggle over civil rights," with its individualistic assimilationist implications, Cruse argued that "American group reality" mandated "a struggle for democracy among ethnic groups." African-Americans constitute one of the main ethnic-national blocs within a greater American republic still grappling with an unresolved "American nationality question" growing out of "a specific American historical condition – involving three racial stocks – the white, the black and the red."

Cruse was an ardent nationalist, but warned against separatism at a time (including today) when conventional black and white American wisdom on race simplistically conflated race nationalism with racial separatism; when the choice put before us was to either integrate as individuals into a color-blind nonracial America or make a clean break with an American identity of any kind. Yet, the de facto separatism of much of black America is a reality – nationalism or not. If, therefore, integration is still on America's agenda, it must be pursued from this uniquely African-American group reality and not from the disempowering assumptions of the assimilationist myth of individualism.

Cruse's vision was to turn this de facto separatist reality into a countervailing political and economic empowerment advantage for blacks, thereby bridging the gap between black separatism-cum-nationalism and integrationist assimilation. Whether this is still possible in 2005 and beyond looms as a major challenge confronting black America. The string of increasingly ideological conservative electoral triumphs that has ushered in right wing Republican dominance over Washington, interacting with the plight of blacks unveiled by Katrina's devastation, would appear to underline the essential defeat of the "Negro movement" as Cruse perceived it. But the battle is not yet over though, from a black perspective, it would have to be judged as an "uphill struggle."

However, the shape that such a defeat could take was chillingly sketched out last year by a series on "Wanted: A Plan for the Cities to Save Themselves," by *The Black Commentator* web journal: "The fatal blow will come when the Black and Latino populations of America's cities – the only potential mass base of opposition to corporate rule – are dispersed from the urban centers. It is here, in the geography of the cities, that the line of resistance to the rule of the rich must be drawn. Therefore, we must take the offensive now, while Blacks and Latinos still represent urban majorities, and while the corporate schemes to co-opt and, ultimately,

displace these populations are still fragmented and uncoordinated." (See *BC*, [July 29, 2004](#))

In the wake of Katrina, the web journal's [audio commentary](#) raised this warning: "One of the premier Black cities in the nation faces catastrophe. There is no doubt in my mind that New Orleans will one day rise again from its below sea level foundations. The question is, will the new New Orleans remain the two-thirds Black city it was before the levees crumbled?...New Orleans is a poor city. Twenty-eight percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Well over half are renters, and the median value of homes occupied by owners is only \$87,000. From the early days of the flood, it was clear that much of the city's housing stock would be irredeemably damaged. The insurance industry may get a windfall of federal relief, but the minority of New Orleans home owners will get very little – even if they are insured. The renting majority may get nothing. If the catastrophe in New Orleans reaches the apocalyptic dimensions towards which it appears to be headed, there will be massive displacement of the Black and poor."

If this New Orleans rebuilding scenario is borne out, the de facto urban black separatism and isolation of the poor that currently characterizes the plight of blacks throughout much of urban America could be but a transitional way–station to urban black dispersal, communal fragmentation and marginalization. While such a fate hints at the magnitude of the challenge confronting the black leadership generally and black politicians in particular, this is getting a bit ahead of the story. The point for now is that the isolation of pre–hurricane New Orleans' 'left behind' black community could not have been more complete than if an avowedly ideological 'go–it–alone' program of black separatism had been openly and actively pursued and acquiesced in by Louisiana's white political establishment.

On the other hand, had such a course been consciously pursued, it is arguable whether it would have resulted in the situation motivating *New York Times* neo–conservative columnist David Brooks' rebuilding prescription: to "culturally integrate" the urban black poor. "The only chance we have to break the cycle of poverty," in Brooks' view, "is to integrate people who lack middle–class skills into neighborhoods with people who possess these skills and who insist on certain standards of behavior."

The black nationalist paradigm assumes a culturally integrated African–American "nation" transcending socio–economic class divisions though one would imagine this is hardly what Brooks has in mind. But given the plight of New Orleans' black underclass which can be replicated throughout urban America, there are many questions that go begging beyond the issue of how the black poor "culturally integrate." How, for example, does America's non–ideologically pragmatic black leadership begin to transform an existential situation of de facto urban black isolation resembling "the Indian world of the reservation" into one of black political and economic empowerment? After all, with or without a nationalist program, an isolationist separatist reality is a fact of life for many African–Americans.

Neither white liberal nor conservative leaders in the Democratic and Republican parties want to be seen endorsing racial segregation, whether of old–style Jim Crow vintage imposed by white southerners or self–imposed by blacks. Especially from the perspective of left–liberalism, this would not be considered "politically correct." At the same time neither parties' white elites have an overriding commitment to improving the plight of the black poor in or outside America's cities. Redressing the backlogged legacies of centuries of black slavery and oppression disadvantaging the competitive chances of African–Americans relative to all other – mainly immigrant (including Afro–West Indian and, more recently, continental African) – ethnic groups has never been a priority investment on America's agenda. This predicament is compounded by the plight of the cities which is the bottom–line of the American black future as well as a story in its own right. It is intimately interwoven with the structural realities of a black separatism that neither white nor black leaders wish to own up to much less show any inkling of how to address apart from acquiescing in a corporatist solution of black dispersal–cum–urban "Negro Removal."

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To appreciate the magnitude of this urban "big picture," New Orleans should be seen through the prism of Frenchman Bernard–Henri Levy's May 2005 *Atlantic* impressions of his journey retracing the route taken by Alexis de Tocqueville 200 years ago. In a section aptly billed "They shoot cities, don't they," Levy's panorama of contemporary America's bleak urban terrain spans from Buffalo, New York to the city of my birth, Detroit, Michigan.

With a hint of dubious American exceptionalism, Levy preambles his narrative on a culturally aesthetic note: "That a city could die: for a European, that is unthinkable. And yet... Buffalo, a city that was once the glory of America, its showcase, where two presidents once lived (and where one was shot and another inaugurated), a city that on this late July afternoon – the anniversary, by the way, of Tocqueville's visit, in 1831 – offers a landscape of desolation." On to Cleveland: "Here too, deserted neighborhoods. Empty parking lots. Cars prowling along Euclid or Prospect, between Fifth and Sixth East. Winos in municipal buildings. Empty churches, or all bricked up, yet I keep being told about the renewal in America of evangelical faith and morality... And finally Detroit, sublime Detroit, the city that during the war, because of its car and steel factories, vaunted itself as "the arsenal of democracy," and that once one has entered it – whether in the Brush Park area, north of downtown, or, worse, East Detroit – seems like an immense, deserted Babylon, a futuristic city whose inhabitants have fled: more burned or razed houses; collapsed facades and roofs that the next big rain will carry away... An observer who knew nothing of the history of the city and riots that forty years ago accelerated the exodus of the white population to the suburbs might think now that he was in a bombed metropolis..."

Could it be that the urban panorama Levy describes in his Tocquevillian safari is the "reservation" exemplifying "the fate awaiting the American Negro" that Harold Cruse warned about? Bearing in mind House Speaker Hastert's dismissiveness about rebuilding New Orleans as a reflection on the politics of race and ideology in today's America, the bottom line could be summed up as follows. Basically, white America has abandoned the cities, except for smatterings of super-rich, driving the gentrification of downtown enclaves and historic old communities such as Harlem at the expense of blacks and Hispanics. New Orleans was no exception. It became an extreme case of the general rule of urban American neglect, as its below sea level geography always meant it was a city living on borrowed time. But "borrowed time" applies to many other cities as well. Public policy and private interests, interacting with increasingly conservative white political power have conspired to disinvest in the nation's infrastructure: water mains, roads, railroad tracks and beds, bridges and much else that make a modern urban industrial civilization functional. "White flight" begetting capital flight and exclusionary zoning rules, along with banking industry redlining, created the nation's inner city black separatist reality.

A major part of the current predicament afflicting America's cities, which have become the threatened political and demographic strongholds of black America and much of the Democratic party, is rooted in, and compounded by, America's inequitable electoral system. This is a historical legacy of the fact that the U.S. was conceived as a "white man's country" with the intent of protecting the interests of a propertied white male settler elite. The feared excesses of popular democracy had to be pre-empted through embedded minority-rule devices. These constitutionally structured inequalities have become increasingly pronounced as predominantly white small-town, small-state and/or suburban and up-state electoral constituencies out-vote major urban areas in election after election – albeit by close margins which are increasingly subject to vote-rigging.

According to Robert Dahl, in his *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* the American Constitution of 1787 had little to say about minorities, with the exception of affording *geographical minorities* extensive protections. Power was decentralized to the states, and "in the federal legislature small states were given equal representation in the Senate." In effect, they saddled the nation with an inherently conservative geopolitical bias. This was traditionally reflected in an alignment of mainly small western/Rocky Mountain states and the former slave states of the Deep South. Together, these regions constituted a geopolitical combination that

once resulted in congressional alliances between southern Democrats ("Dixiecrats") and conservative Republicans before the latter replaced the Democrats as the dominant party in the south.

The specific inequalities in this constitutionally inspired geopolitical bias are two. First, is the fact that all states are accorded two members of the Senate no matter how big or small the state. This is known as the "constant two" advantage. The other inequality was the Electoral College. This, again, is weighted toward small states. Through an electoral college based on the combined numbers of Representatives *and Senators* from each state, small states won, not only representation in the Senate beyond proportion to their populations, but overrepresentation in the electoral college as well. The Senatorial "constant two" advantage combined with the small state bias of the electoral college exposes the woeful inadequacies of the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965 which has increasingly been manipulated by white conservatives with black political and civil rights establishment complicity. The result: black America has been lured into a political cul–de–sac of isolation without any leverage on the wider system.

In 1994 – ironically, the year in which black South Africans achieved their political liberation – Chicago labor lawyer, Tom Geoghegan, writing in *The New Republic* foreshadowed the racial implications of the 2000 elections and what they may hold for future elections. According to Geoghegan: "It is now clear that in the next century the U.S. will become a multiracial society unlike anything in our past. By some official estimates, the non–Hispanic white population could drop to 72 percent in the year 2000 and to 60 percent in the year 2030... In the new multiracial America, *the big–state minorities individually will have less voting power than they do now...* As the U.S. becomes more multi–racial and stranger to the people–of–the–interior, the non–Hispanic whites in most of the small states will get more and more heavily weighted votes [italics added]." And yet, Geoghegan wondered: "Right now, some American black leaders are obsessed with creating minority districts. The idea is to get around *Shaw v. Reno*, and to get more black representatives into the House. But who benefits? Why do blacks in the U.S. need more minority districts? No group is more in need of the changes we could get from a little dash of majority rule. What point is there in pumping up the Black Caucus in the House if everything gets shut down in the Senate?"

At the time these observations were made, the Democratic party controlled both houses of congress. In 2005, with both the House and Senate under Republican control, the Black Caucus has become all the more marginalized. This situation magnifies the disadvantages of African–Americans being politically beholden to one party. It plays into the constant refrain that blacks should not "put all their eggs in one political basket," the assumption – a faulty one – being that more would be gained if more blacks voted Republican; that blacks are taken for granted by the Democrats and lack leverage.

Given the rightward drift of the Democratic party this is largely true. But the notion that the black vote would be taken less for granted by the Democrats if more blacks voted Republican is spurious reasoning given the choice that both parties would present to African–Americans: a centre–right party competing with an extreme right party, both trying to out–compete the other on which can more effectively limit the role of government in economy and society to placate the corporate dictatorship of the managerial class depicted by John Kenneth Galbraith in his insightful essay on *The Economics of Innocent Fraud: Truth for Our Times* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004).

The black condition in America and the plight of the cities, coupled with the urgent need for refurbishing the nation's infrastructure cries out for more, not less government. The unfolding politics of post–Katrina recovery, in fact, could foreshadow a reversal in both parties' Reagan era–induced "withering away of the state" proclivities (Move over Karl Marx!). Only an intellectually and politically bankrupt non–ideological pragmatism devoid of any strategic sense of a black imperative for constructing countervailing power would countenance a strategy calling for African–Americans to split their allegiance between Democrats and Republicans. Rather, the African–American electorate and its political leadership would appear more in need of urgently considering options for molding the black vote into a "third force" catalyst for major

constitutional and systemic changes. The terms of an outdated American federalism need to be renegotiated and the post–Katrina recovery seems a likely point to start.

The stakes involved in such a renegotiation are high. The rebuilding of New Orleans, and the Gulf Coast generally, may be where corporate schemes for re-taking urban America cease to remain "fragmented and uncoordinated." The Bush administration and its conservative allies are feverishly grappling with how to make concessions to the recovery imperatives of massive government intervention without abandoning their ideological commitment to private sector hegemony over state and economy if not to actually dismantle government. While this internal struggle could well expose unsustainable contradictions within Republican conservative hegemony in Washington, the black agenda within the scope of New Orleans and general urban recovery on a national scale could still wind up a casualty in what, essentially is a white–on–white struggle; one that will also determine intra–Democratic party political and policy alignments as well.

To summarize these contradictions, President Bush, in his September 15 speech to the nation pledged to spend whatever it takes to rebuild the Gulf Coast, triggering no little amount of consternation among conservatives about the New Deal/Great Society scale of such an undertaking. But is this a sustainable commitment by Bush, under a conservative agenda that has over–extended the U.S. military in a \$5 billion a month Iraq occupation coupled with rising oil prices and growing dependence on China and Japan's buying up American debt: Cruse's "compulsions of the American capitalist dynamic" coming home to roost in American economic and strategic decline?

Some commentators, like Noam Scheiber, writing recently in *The New Republic*, perceive a political trap that Bush Republicans have created for themselves by having crafted what essentially amounts to a white working class Christian nationalist coalition mandating that the GOP "constantly dole out both generous tax cuts *and* generous spending" in order to remain the majority party. This exposes a Republican dilemma. While the GOP is highly dependent – as are the Democrats – on money from corporations, since the '80s a smaller and smaller portion of the party's votes come from affluent voters, "even as its funding continues to come from the business community."

In effect, the Democratic and Republican parties, in socio–economic class and cultural terms, appear to be trading constituencies as the GOP becomes more dependent on a "downscale" white working class receptive to appeals to religiosity and cultural issues like abortion, gun control and gay marriage, while affluent professionals, repelled by this baggage are becoming a core Democratic constituency. The problem is that, in socio–racial terms, this affluent constituency tends to be fiscally conservative and anti–public sector which much of the black lower–middle and working classes and the poor are dependent on. And thus far, urban "revitalization" pushed by desperate black mayors of major municipalities has been pegged to attracting affluent whites and corporate capital back into the cities – but at what costs?

As *The Black Commentator* describes it ([August 14, 2003](#)), revitalization "strategy" has, essentially, been characterized by a process of giving away the public's assets. In addition to direct gifts of land and structures, plus tax abatements stretching into future generations, an array of federal and state programs evolved to subsidize the return of private capital and affluent populations. Municipal powers of eminent domain were made available to condemn, clear and shape the economic and physical contours of the city to capital's specifications. "Basic public functions such as zoning have become processes through which corporations plot the destinies of cities. Elected officials are neutered and their publics are not served, the root of the political crisis that afflicts Black and brown cities." Hence, the fear that rebuilding New Orleans may foreshadow the massive displacement of the black and poor who make – or made – up 67 percent of the city. Well over half of these are renters who will not qualify for President Bush's proposed Urban Homestead Plan. More suitable would be a rental voucher scheme similar to the special vouchers used by an estimated 10,000 persons (out of 20,000 affected) to move into stable apartments after being made homeless by the Los Angeles earthquake of 1994.

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According to *The Black Commentator's Radio BC*, "in place of the jobs that have been washed away, there could be alternative employment through a huge, federally funded rebuilding effort. But this is George Bush's federal government. Does anyone believe that the Bush men would mandate that priority employment go to the pre–flood, mostly Black population of the city?" Rather, depending on how the rebuilding scenario unfolds linked to the unfolding conservative Republican debate on how to pay for the post–Katrina recovery, the Bush administration may discover a formula for placating its business community funders and affluent whites. This could accelerate a trend toward black urban de–concentration and dispersal while retaining the GOP's increasing white working class base. This will be accompanied by a deracializing strategy of co–opting Hispanics, Asians and other non–black minorities into what Cruse warned might emerge as a "pro–Anglo–Saxon–Protestant 'racial' coalition" if "the Negro leadership is hampered by deficient conceptualizing of American group reality." The update of this 1967 warning in 2005 is that: "The Black leadership in the cities – on which national Black power rests – was gained by default during the Great Urban Divestment. Unless new or re–educated Blacks emerge during the current period, as capital and affluent non–Blacks seek to reshape the cities, African Americans will lose their pivotal role in the national debate, and progressive politics will collapse."

As it is, progressive left–of–center politics in America is in turmoil due to the ongoing political identity crisis within a center–right Democratic party. This state of affairs is accompanied by uncertain efforts by progressive constituencies outside the party to regroup and force the Democrats back toward the left. It is within this context, in the August 2004 run–up to the November election, that a *Harper's Magazine* forum on "Liberalism Regained: Building the next progressive majority" produced some insightful comments by former National Rainbow Coalition executive director, Ron Daniels, independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader and City University of New York political analyst and author, Frances Fox Piven. The conclusion that Ron Daniels, as the lone black voice in this forum, arrived at is particularly instructive in light of Cruse's advocacy of an all–black political party.

After Nader opined that "outside groups supporting the Democratic Party don't have any leverage at all" with Piven concluding that "the Democratic Party will never change without social movements that threaten it from outside," Daniels observed that "what we don't have right now is the outside piece of that equation." He then made a telling admission: "*With the Rainbow Coalition, I think our tactical mistake was to take all that energy inside the party. You've got to have pressure from outside to keep the inside honest. And that is where some of the independent campaigns play a part. Independent campaigns can put forward new issues and compel new voters [italics added].*" Here, Daniels was referring to the Ross Perot factor in 1992.

Pointing out that Perot's 19 percent support represented a huge voting bloc outside both the Democratic and Republican parties, Daniels concluded that "we need an organization, *even if it's not a party*, that can serve as a catalyst in American politics. It could support progressive or moderate Republicans in critical situations, but could also be advancing progressive Democrats. It also would have the capacity to sponsor independent candidates in municipal or state elections, while still supporting the Democrats for national office [italics added]." This sounds an awful lot like what Cruse had in mind when he lamented the fact that "Afro–American Nationalists refuse to launch an independent political party of their own" to leverage countervailing power in "the large cities... where the decisive struggles of the Negro movement will be waged." And, indeed, the struggle is more difficult and complex in 2005 than in 1967. Any new nationalist initiative would need to confront not just "the white man's Federal power," but his corporate power as well, including the neo–liberal globalizing logic of the "compulsions of the American capitalist dynamic" that were not so apparent in the late '60s.

The complexity of the struggle, in 2005, is compounded by a number of circumstances that will challenge the intra–black politics of navigating the countervailing power imperatives of an all–black political party on the one hand, with the equally compelling imperatives of interracial coalition–building on the other. For example, the American group reality that, in Cruse's view, demands a "struggle for democracy among ethnic groups,"

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must now accommodate a growing African immigrant infusion into black America that has already upset the "African–American" identity apple cart. This was graphically displayed in the 2004 Illinois senatorial contest between winning Democratic candidate Barack Obama, of Kenyan descent, and his fellow black Republican challenger, Alan Keyes. Keyes derided Obama for not being a real African–American since he was not of slave descent.

Then there is the broader "third world" multi–racialization of America stemming from other immigrant infusions from South, East and Southeast Asia and the Middle East as well as Latin America. Thus, African–Americans – Nationalists and non–Nationalists alike – will have to muster a level of multi–cultural sensitivity that has not been amply evident from past political encounters between black political actors and constituencies and other non–white ethnic groups in the past.

Assuming that this growing "third world" multi–ethnicity can be navigated with reasonable deftness, African–American Nationalism via an independent political party would need to craft a limited objective strategy of mobilizing an urban black political, economic and social reconstruction agenda. It would need to be geared, first and foremost, to local municipal and metropolitan electoral politics; then, moving up the chain to state and national election campaigns. This would be much as depicted by Ron Daniels: supporting progressive or moderate Republicans in critical situations as well as advancing progressive Democrats while sponsoring its own candidates in municipal or state elections while leveraging its "countervailing force" in supporting Democrats for national office. Such a coalitional all–black political party strategy would, of necessity, need to be coupled and calibrated with interracial coalition–building to give voice and momentum to a broad urban progressive reform "social movement" of renewal for America's cities; a movement that could expand into a national agenda for generating an American infrastructural renaissance.

One plausible scenario could revolve around a proposal that the Coalition of Black Trade Unions (CBTU) spearhead an urban corporate social accountability movement directed at forcing black mayors and corporate boardrooms into a new compact for cities that safeguards and advances black and minority interests. The formation of an all–black or black–led independent political party around such a campaign, with the CBTU as its nucleus, could motivate the consolidation of a range of disparate progressive initiatives into a nationally coordinated social movement that could operate within and beyond the framework of such a party. These include the CBTU's Living Wage Movement, the Washington, D.C.–based Good Jobs First, the Institute for Policy Studies' Cities for Progress and the "church, labor and community groups" alliance comprising the Growth With Justice Coalition which mandates "community impact reports" for corporate urban investments.

On a broader plane, such a consolidated social movement could help shape a broader, interracial and multicultural Urban Progressive Alliance that would engage interactively, in tandem, with an independent black political base. More immediately, there is an urgent need for the mobilization of a national black political oversight over post–Katrina Gulf Coast recovery efforts; something that could be undertaken by the Congressional Black Caucus working closely in conjunction with state and local black elected officials throughout the Gulf region.

Ultimately, however, an independent black political party initiative, in coalition with non–black progressive forces, will have to craft into its urban renaissance and infrastructural renewal agenda a more ambitious constitutional reform strategy. This strategy would revolve around the need for major reform in the electoral system linked to a federalist "New Deal" for America's major cities and urban states. There needs to be a consistent and focused pro–democracy campaign for changing the Electoral College if not abolishing it altogether. Although the Electoral College favors Republicans, the Democratic party establishment is ambivalent on this issue. So an independent political party would have to take this up. One reform option on the table would eliminate the two extra votes given to each state on the basis of Senate representation in favor of the Electoral College being allocated on the basis of House seats alone in proportion to state–wide popular vote.

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With respect to Senate representation, Tom Geoghagen has proposed that there be five classes of states, based on population, allocating senators accordingly. Another alternative could be to allocate an additional senator to states with the nine or ten biggest cities and/or the District of Columbia, thereby reducing rural, small–town/small–state overrepresentation in the Senate. Enhancing urban representation in the U.S. Senate could, in turn, be coupled with exploring constitutionally entrenched urban "Home Rule" and/or major revenue allocation formulas for major cities in their relationships with their states, on the one hand, and Washington on the other. This is the kind of pro–democracy electoral and federalist restructuring agenda that could inform the political and policy thrust of an all–black political party interacting with a broader Urban Progressive Alliance – in addition to a focused urban renaissance/infrastructural renewal investment agenda.

What is needed now, in the wake of Katrina, and to safeguard the rebuilding of New Orleans as the southern cultural capitol of black America, is a broad–based national study commission on issues pertaining to the future of the cities, the future of blacks within them and options for electoral reform by a consortium of black interests. Would that Harold Cruse were here, with his insights and honesty, to help mold this consortium. In his tribute to Cruse titled, "The Left: Fade to Black – Harold Cruse and the untimely demise of the American left," cultural critic Norman Kelly had this to say: "With the passing on March 25 of Harold Cruse, one has to take note of the post–civil rights black intelligensia and ask, What has it developed in the last 40 years? Interestingly, not much of anything except a great deal of attitude in the works of Cornel West, bell hooks and Michael Eric 'Why I Love Black Women' Dyson. Cruse, however, was a true public intellectual, not a market intellectual."

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