

I found myself glued to the Weather Channel and CBS News watching and listening to video and reports of the devastation in New Orleans and Biloxi left by Hurricane Katrina. While social theorists write that people come together during times of disaster, what I observed of New Orleans strongly contradicted theorists' claims. In day 3 of the disaster, people were sitting on rooftops waiting for help to arrive; people were wading through waters in the town with expressions of wonderment in their faces; hundreds of people, young and old, were sitting on a bridge in the hot, sweltering sun and heat waiting for help to arrive. One woman holds a baby reportedly two weeks of age. The infant is clearly parched from the heat and lack of water. Two infants are huddled together in a stroller. Elderly people with Alzheimers and family members concerned about their care. No one on the bridge has had food or water for over two days. One man reportedly jumped to his death preferring death to this unknown existence. The husband of an elderly woman dies at her feet as she tries desperately to seek police help. She says she was told by officers in a passing police unit that they couldn't help her. They kept going. Police cars and military trucks pass by but do not stop. A woman and a man walking alone wave one down and are able to hitch a ride. Back to the area of New Orleans where functioning stores once operated. A policeman aims a rifle at a man telling him to drop the bag of goods he allegedly looted from a store. The goods appeared to be clothing. The mayor of New Orleans has reportedly reallocated police resources to control the looting of stores rather than continuing rescue efforts.

As I watch these scenes throughout the day I can't help but wonder: where is the nation's leadership. The mayor of New Orleans and governor of Louisiana are visible at podiums and appear worse for the wear, downtrodden and nearing the breaking point. They appear fatigued, emotionally distraught, yet they seem to be doing everything in their power to manage the problem. Clearly it is much to bear and help is needed. Houston's Mayor XX is shown at a podium announcing that Houston will "step up to the plate" and do its part to help its neighbors. The mayor opened the Houston Astrodome to the estimated 25,000 people who sought shelter in the New Orleans Superdome before Hurricane Katrina tore off the parts of the roof and flooded the facility, leaving no running toilets or electricity. Governor Blagojevich of Illinois is shown telling the news media that he has ordered 300 Illinois guards to New Orleans along with 50 trucks to help in the recovery efforts. Yet I am still wondering 'where is everybody?' Where are the offers of help from other neighboring cities and states? Where are the national guards with food, water, transportation and medical assistance? Where are the U.S. senators and representatives for Louisiana, and where is President Bush given the magnitude of this disaster. The scene strikes of sheer chaos and benign neglect.

I am not naïve. I understand that it takes a while to mobilize resources for a disaster of this magnitude. But we are purportedly the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth in terms of the quantity and quality of its human, organizational and economic resources. Yet we do not seem to be putting these to use. I wonder if this apathy has anything to do with the race and social class of the overwhelming majority of people affected by this.

The video images clearly depict poor African Americans as the victims of the New Orleans travesty. It contrasts sharply with the images streaming from Biloxi of middle

class White people whose businesses and homes were destroyed by the hurricane. Some of whom have already begun to rebuild. In contrast to New Orleans citizens, the people in Biloxi appear relatively well-rested, cleaned, fed, and able to exercise the options that class privilege allows for them.

President Bush is finally shown speaking from a podium about the years it will take to recover from the disaster and pledging with his head down that “we will do all we can to help.” I found his statement to be flat and both his expression and gesture as passive and insincere. As President Bush is shown walking to the Air Force One helicopter with his dog under his left arm, his facial expression seemed to be one of ‘I don’t want to be bothered’ and ‘I am pissed that I had to leave my vacation early.’ This hurricane disaster seemed to be more of a nuisance to the president rather than one of responsibility and determination to address the needs of the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by it. This from the nation’s leader. This from the President who speaks repeatedly about freedom for the Iraqi people. I am quite confused about the president’s commitment to U.S. citizens. Does our health and freedom matter? Are WE truly free? What about the health and freedom of American people Mr. President?