



# *Wake Me When It's Over*

Race, pride, and poverty

by Gerald Early

**i**t is sometimes the case with political factions in this country that their most pronounced failures occur at the time of their greatest opportunity to succeed. The latest example, of course, came in the form of a natural disaster called Hurricane Katrina, which wrecked significant portions of the American Gulf Coast—most notably New Orleans.

New Orleans is a city filled to the rafters with poor blacks, who are sometimes embraced as a sort of fleeting grace note in homage to the great music this city has produced, despite an ignorance of the conditions in which most blacks in New Orleans live. From the points of view of politicians in the United States, blacks long ago ceased to be people; instead they've become mere objects of curiosity or bewilderment. Alas, the difference between liberalism and conser-

vatism in America is that liberals cry about their poor blacks and wish they didn't suffer so, while conservatives ignore them, thinking they don't suffer enough. But each side is consumed with itself (the liberal with his guilt and the conservative with his virtue) and its image of the poor (the liberals see structural victims, and the conservatives see the personally maladjusted). In media images, blacks, set free from the moorings of "civilization," are seen as helpless and hapless, sickeningly and powerlessly crying for help, and as threatening and menacing, going on crime sprees and descending (or reverting) to social pathology.

*New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, in his September 19, 2005, piece, suggested that the poor are held in contempt in America because they are not white, that the European is more likely to help his poor neighbors because they, after all, look like him. This is only partly right, at best. First, help did arrive for blacks in New Orleans—and it was inevitable that it would, as the country could not afford (if only for PR reasons) not to help them. Second, it is not true that Europeans have a more advanced view of the unfortunate than we do, although the left and liberals love to think that, genuflecting to a more "civilized" Europe as their forebears did more than a century ago. Consider that fifteen thousand elderly French died in August 2003 during a heat wave, when most were abandoned by their younger relatives who went on holiday. (Our death numbers from Katrina, far more destructive than a heat wave, won't come anywhere near that!) But Krugman's implied point is true: As long as we continue to see poverty in racialized terms in America, as long as we see it as a race problem, a black problem, it will never be solved or dealt with effectively.

When we learned of what Barbara Bush, Linda Chavez, and other conservatives said during the aftermath of Katrina, it became obvious that conservatives hold the black poor in contempt—something most of us already knew, because we already knew that they were convinced that the black poor are poor because they want to be. (Of course, no one can despise the poor black as much as someone who has been one and is now afflicted with the thin pretensions of the parvenu, the self-consciousness of being a fraud. I lived among the poor for most of the years of my childhood and young adult life and often found them contemptible—a vexing combination of inertia, stupidity, and petty cynicism. My mother, a very poor and undereducated woman, had nothing but contempt for our poor neighbors when I was growing up. They were the ones who were making it hard for the race. Of course, I knew many of them were more than that or different from that. And I knew how much of them, good and bad, I had in me. I learned a lot from the poor people I knew. "The poor" is, in fact, a quite

varied group of people. Alas, it is hard to remember anything complex about a group of people from whom all one wanted to do was to escape.)

But the liberals, with their view of hapless or noble victims, were hardly any improvement. They hold the black poor in a sort of sweet contempt, a romanticized haze of condescension and fake empathy. After all, the liberals blame the Bush administration for its slow response—and rightly so—but where were the liberals, the left, and the Democrats all those years when the poor simply festered in New Orleans as an underclass? With Democrats firmly in place in the state, was this the best it could do for its citizens? Why didn't the local NAACP advocate for a better evacuation plan for the black poor, the supposed constituency for whom they speak? Why didn't they think such a thing was important for this group in a city that is continually threatened by storms? Why does New Orleans have such an enormous high-school dropout rate and such a high rate of single-female-headed households? Because liberals weren't really trying, or because they actually found this situation, on the whole, a good arrangement? Isn't it a little late to talk of income redistribution plans to help the black poor that will produce exactly ... what? Pretty much what you have now. Where were the liberals and the left and all their precious organizing and intellectualizing when the poor could have used them? I learned from living with the poor that they believe deeply and desperately in conspiracies, and perhaps they are right. Only a conspiracy on the part of the left and the right in this country could have put them in the condition they are in: removed, isolated, hidden behind an industry of cheap tourism and a maze of fiber-sapping philanthropy.

I hated seeing the images of the blacks in New Orleans. It is probably because I am so much my mother's child. My mother is a very dark-skinned woman and a very proud woman. This pride explains why she had the attitude she had about other poor blacks: She felt they lacked pride. Why could they not be clean? Why could they not carry themselves with dignity? Why did they not wish to work hard? Even their anti-white moments of rage did not impress my mother, because she felt most poor blacks were the worst sorts of Uncle Tom—fearing whites, which is why they went into periodic racial fits, but lovingly admiring their looks and their possessions. "All they really want is for white people to like them," she would say sneeringly when I was a child. "Only the bourgeois niggers want it more." It was during the New Orleans debacle that my assistant, speaking to me about something that was entirely unrelated to it, told me that I was a very proud man. I don't think I had ever been described in that way by anyone before, not to my

face. And it had, when she uttered it, a kind of revelatory effect. Pride explained so much of who I am and was. I was surprised that, in any sort of self-analysis I had ever undergone, I had never even thought of it.

Watching the disaster unfold in New Orleans angered me perhaps as few things in recent years have. Of course, among my black and white liberal colleagues, I mouthed the usual political platitudes about the failures of the Bush administration. But secretly I seethed about how those black people had no pride. How could they allow themselves to be seen in such a way? How could they permit themselves to be seen not being able to take care of themselves? "You are not a man if you cannot take care of your family," my mother told me over and over again as a child—and I believed that more firmly, more irrationally, than I did any religion. Where were the black men in New Orleans, and why weren't they taking care of their families? I found it unbearable to see blacks accepting emergency aid. It shamed me nearly to the point of tears. Why, goddammit, are we always being helped by white people? Why are we always, always, always in need of help? I hated New Orleans!

And during those days of Katrina I realized that I had always hated New Orleans, since I was a boy and Louis Armstrong was for me the face, the sole face, of that city. Indeed, Armstrong was not a performer merely, but a way of life—not an image but an embodiment of a depraved reality. "I don't ever want to be that," I said. "A goddamn minstrel. A phony nigger. What kind of a black man is that?" People think I grew up liking jazz, but actually I grew up hating any aspect of it associated with Armstrong and New Orleans. It was a music of shame, corny and corrupt. But the pathology of my pride was simply a form of self-hatred, for I was trapped in a contradiction. To be proud of being black was, in fact, to hate what blackness had come to represent for me. It was by no means a disorder unique to me, but its manifestations are, I think, purely individualistic.

Katrina and the destruction of New Orleans brought out in me something I thought I had buried long ago: an even deeper shame that was masked by my anger, the shame of being a worthless parvenu, a Sambo puppet who danced for whites while thinking that I pulled the strings. At least I understood now why I finally gained a real respect for Louis Armstrong—because he was so comfortable within his own skin. I listened to his music quite a bit during the Katrina days and found it something of a relief and, more profoundly, something of an achievement. Paraphrasing the old standard, for poor blacks and myself as well as all the parvenus, some extremity of the mind called New Orleans will always be the place where it will be so nice to come home to.

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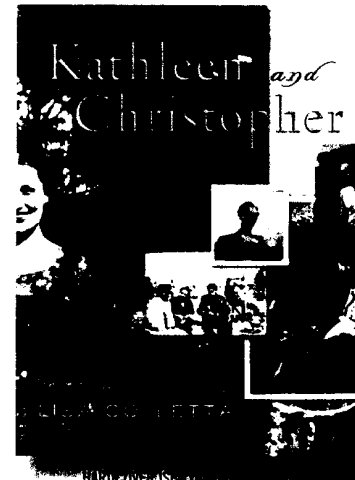
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