

Remarks on Katrina

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Today I want to elaborate upon the Katrina Bill of Rights, which the National Urban League began to elucidate in the days immediately after the hurricane. I believe that all of us—businesswomen and day laborers, shrimp boat captains and city dwellers, Black and White, Hispanic and Asian—can and must agree that all the people of the Gulf Coast should be guaranteed the following rights: the right to recover, the right to vote, the right to return, the right to rebuild, and the right to work.

These are not excessive demands, nor are they unfair. They are the basic rights of which the victims of this super-catastrophe should be assured.

First, the people of the Gulf Coast must be guaranteed the right to recover. To do so, they need immediate help to get back on their feet and rebuild their lives. That is why Congress should provide extended unemployment assistance to the half a million hard-working Americans thrown out of a job simply because of a storm.

Beyond unemployment assistance, our elected representatives in Washington should establish a Katrina Victims Compensation Fund. Let us recall that within days after the awful terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Congress passed and the president signed legislation authorizing a 9/11 victims compensation fund, which eventually provided more than \$7 billion in compensation to people affected by 9/11.

As it did then, Congress must take immediate and decisive action to begin helping American citizens whose lives have been disrupted and whose livelihoods have been wiped out by this major national tragedy.

Another part of securing the right to recover is to help heal the wounds which have torn apart the people of the Gulf Coast. Right now, people are angry and suspicious. They have seen the worst and are prepared to believe the worst. So while memories are fresh, we must begin the search for answers. Congress must establish an independent, nonpartisan commission to understand what went wrong in the response to this disaster.

Marc Morial is the president and chief financial officer of the National Urban League, a civil rights and community-based organization devoted to empowering African Americans to enter the economic and social mainstream. He has focused his attention on closing the equality gaps between African Americans and other ethnic communities in health, education, economic empowerment, civil rights, racial justice, civic engagement, and quality of life. Prior to his appointment as president, Morial served two terms as the mayor of New Orleans and also two years in the Louisiana State Senate.

The National Urban League supports this not to point fingers but to understand what happened so we can prepare every city across this nation for a natural disaster or terrorist attack. As a former mayor, I can say that this is critical work.

Second, we need to secure the right to vote for the people of the Gulf Coast. Katrina may have knocked over buildings, but we must not let it weaken the foundation of our democracy. That is why we must ensure that the hundreds of thousands of citizens displaced from their towns, villages, and precincts have full voting rights in their home states. The ballot is the best way to ensure that our displaced citizens have the voice that they want and deserve in the rebuilding of their communities.

Third, we must guarantee to every evacuee and every resident the right to return home. Whether those returning lived in affluent, working-class, or poor sections, no high-minded government officials or private officials should make the decision whether or not to return. All families should have the chance to come back to their hometowns or neighborhoods if they so choose. We need to ensure that home owners have the right to choose whether or not to reclaim property. Washed out or not, these are their homes.

I have no illusions. For many, coming home will be tough. That is why Congress should institute a three-year federal tax holiday for those residents earning less than \$50,000 a year who lived in the region and choose to return. Concerning business, we should say that if they want to enjoy a 50 percent tax holiday, they must pay their workers a living wage, for nothing will do more to lift people out of poverty and help them rebuild than a good job at a good wage.

Fourth, we must ensure that every resident of the Gulf Coast has the right to rebuild and to have a say in what the future of his or her home will be. Everyone needs a voice, and those voices must be heard. Listening to everybody's voice is the only way we can rebuild the Gulf in a way that does not benefit only the big contractors and real estate developers, in a way that does not divide us but rather unites us, in a way that does not turn New Orleans or Gulfport into a gated community but rather breaks down the barriers to success for all those who live there.

Indeed, rebuilding the Gulf Coast around the principle of equal opportunity for all means that as we rebuild, we must not tear down what has made us strong. We must not pay for Katrina by cutting Medicaid, education, job training programs, increasing Medicare premiums, or gutting rural economic development efforts. Paying for the rebuilding on the backs of those whose lives are already ruined only adds insult to injury.

Instead of burdening those already down and those already out, we should help them get back up and move forward.

That is why we must remove obstacles that can allow a family or a small business owner to put the tragedy of Katrina behind them and allow them an opportunity to rebuild. We must be vigilant in making sure that in the confusion of rebuilding, forces are not allowed to stifle their ability to succeed and that red tape does not restrain our people from thriving.

As soon as possible, I believe there should be a moratorium on collections and deficiency judgments on real and personal properties. We should prohibit negative credit reporting or the omission of negative events from credit scores when the incidents were a result of Katrina.

We should encourage our financial institutions to forebear on loans and mortgages until people can really move back and actually live in their homes. We must protect the people of the Gulf Coast from predatory lenders and those that would use their tragedy for sheer personal benefit. And we should freeze all foreclosure proceedings against property in affected areas for a minimum of twelve months.

The final and perhaps the most important right that every resident of the Gulf Coast must be assured of is the right to work, for there is no better antipoverty program than a good job that pays good wages.

With reconstruction and rebuilding, there will be many, many, many new jobs created in the region, and it is our duty to ensure that these jobs go to people from the Gulf region.

We should give local residents first choice on recovery and reconstruction jobs and first choice on contracts. We should aim for 50 percent of all contracts to be secured by local contractors and 25 percent of all contracts to be secured by minority contractors.

To honor their work, we must ensure that fair wages are paid and fairness in the workplace is upheld.

Ladies and gentlemen, civil rights and equal opportunity are not “red tape” to be cut when times are tough. They are who we are as a nation. They are what generations of Americans fought for. Indeed, our parents and grandparents gave so much to ensure that equal opportunity and civil rights were the fabric of American life.

For that reason, to the President of the United States I say, “Mr. President, I support the idea of your commitment to a broad rebuilding initiative. Mr. President, the workers rebuilding the Gulf are heroes. They deserve a fair wage. They deserve a fair shake. I ask you today to do the right thing and restore affirmative action and the Davis Bacon prevailing wage laws.”

Plain and simple: there should be no more federal contracts granted until these guarantees are put back in place.

These guarantees were not waived for 9/11. They were not waived for Wall Street. So I do not think a great nation should waive them when the streets affected are the Main Streets in New Orleans, Gulfport, Biloxi, or St. Bernard Parish. High standards for Wall Street, high standards for Main Street.

Once the rebuilding is finished, we need to have an economy in the Gulf Coast that can sustain good-paying jobs for the people of the region and that will lift this area out of the swamps of poverty.

The Katrina Bill of Rights is not a not a detailed plan, but a set of principles that should guide us as we put back the pieces of this devastated part of our nation. It is a lodestone directing us toward the Gulf Coast we want to build and the nation we want to become.

Keeping us on this path will not be easy. With so many different jurisdictions—from cities and towns to counties, parishes, and states—it will not be hard to lose the forest for the trees. That is why the president and Congress should establish one single authority that will transcend and unify the region’s political borders and direct the rebuilding effort. I envision a Tennessee Valley Authority-style agency. I propose today the establishment of a Gulf Coast Authority with the charge and the power to lead and implement the Herculean task of rebuilding.

I hope that this Gulf Coast Authority would have a dedicated multiyear budget, for in this current fiscal climate with taxes for the wealthy still being cut and commitments overseas unending, it is critical that we secure funds separate from the federal budget to rebuild these towns here at home.

Talking about the right to a good job and good schools, affordable housing, and priceless legal rights may sound bold to some. After all, some may say, we have many other priorities.

During the ninety-five-year history of the National Urban League and its affiliate movement, we have heard that argument before. But we have never waited. Why? Because expanding opportunity for all must never be an afterthought in this great nation. Because alleviating the poverty of our fellow citizens is a responsibility we must never forget. Because liberty and justice for all is not an empty slogan but rather a pledge we make to our neighbors and our children.

Forty-one years ago, Coretta Scott King called her husband, who was recuperating from a viral fever and exhaustion from hard work in an Atlanta hospital, to tell him that he had won the Nobel Peace Prize.

When Dr. King accepted that prize the following winter, he did so with an unyielding belief in this nation. Even though he was jailed and abused and even though African Americans were being set upon by hoses and dogs, King believed in America. He told the dignitaries in Oslo that he was accepting the prize “with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept despair,” he said, “as the final response to the ambiguities of history.”

Today at Georgetown University Law Center, I too refuse to accept despair as the final response to this cruel twist of history.

I refuse to accept that a whole region of a great nation can be written off.

I refuse to accept the poverty and absence of opportunity that were laid bare for the whole nation to see.

I believe that the Katrina Bill of Rights will ensure that we rebuild a treasured part of this nation in a way that lives up to our nation’s highest ideals.

While the days just after Katrina were a painful example of how we do not want our country, our states, and our cities to be run, the years of rebuilding can and must be an example of what we want our nation to become. I thank you, I appreciate you, and I encourage your continued work. The Katrina Bill of Rights, ladies and gentlemen. Let us put the Katrina victims first.