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The whitewashing of New Orleans

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by C.C. Campbell-Rock



Pre-Katrina New Orleans had over twice as many Black voters as Whites. With the majority of Blacks still unable to return, will 28 years of Black political dominance come to an end?

Cartoonist: Thomas Nast, 1867

Malcolm X said it best, that if Blacks wanted equality, it would come down to the ballot or the bullet.

"If we don't resort to the bullet, then immediately we have to take steps to use the ballot. Equality of opportunity, if the Constitution at the present time [doesn't offer it], then change it. Either it offers it, or it doesn't offer it. If it offers it – good, then give it to us – if it doesn't offer it, then change it. You don't need a debate. You don't need a filibuster. You need some action!

"So what you and I have to do is get involved. You and I have to be right there breathing down their throats. Every time they look over their shoulders, we want them to see us ... In order to do this, we're starting a voters' registration drive ... It's going to be the ballot or the bullet ...," Malcolm said.

The Katrina Diaspora – the dispersal of 200,000-300,000 New Orleanians, the majority of whom were African American – has changed the political reality of the City of New Orleans. Before Hurricane Katrina passed by, 67.3 percent of city residents were Black. In post-Katrina New Orleans, it is estimated that 60 percent of the population is White.

As of Jan. 1, 2006, there were 272,937 active registered voters in Orleans Parish, according to the Louisiana Secretary of State's Election Division office. Of that total, 173,471 are Black and 82,522 are White, or 63.5 percent and 30.2 percent of registered voters, respectively.

Inasmuch as the city's predominately White communities, with the exception of the Lakeview neighborhood, escaped the levee breaks that destroyed 80 percent of the city, it is entirely conceivable that New Orleans is now a "vanilla city."

At stake in New Orleans' upcoming April 22 primary and May 20 municipal election, for mayor, city council and other offices, is no less than the heart, soul and culture of the former "chocolate city." To that end, the late, great Malcolm X's words are prophetic. The Battle for New Orleans will, indeed, be a victory won at the ballot box.

Estimates are that 80-90 percent of the city was forcibly evacuated.

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City officials are claiming that approximately 156,000 people are in metro New Orleans now. The operative word is "metro," which includes Jefferson, St. Bernard, and St. Tammany parishes.

If the majority of displaced African American registered voters do not vote via absentee ballot, April 22 will close the book on the city's 28-year history of African American dominance of local politics.

The majority usually rules in any election, but the forced dispersal of residents from the hardest hit areas of Orleans Parish -- the Black communities of the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth wards -- may usher in a predominately white city administration and City Council.

Thus far, potential candidates for mayor include incumbent Mayor C. Ray Nagin, Louisiana Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, brother of U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, Ron Forman, Peggy Wilson, James Arey, Mike Hammer, Leo Watermeier, Virginia Boulet, Bill Wessel, Jimmy Fahrenholtz, Rob Couhig, Rev. Thomas Watson Jr. and Carlos Hornbrook. Of those, Nagin and Rev. Watson are African Americans. Qualifying dates for all elections are March 1, 2, 3.

Legal challenges flying

This statistical fact is not lost on the cadre of civil rights attorneys who have gone to court in recent days in an effort to delay the election until more evacuees return. Although a Black federal judge, Ivan Lemelle, refused to delay the election or order the state to provide satellite polling places in states with heavy concentrations of evacuees, lawyers from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Advancement Project, along with local lawyers Tracie Washington and Bill Quigley, are contemplating appealing the judge's decision.

Another lawsuit, filed by attorney and State Sen. Cleo Fields on behalf of state legislators, failed to win a favorable ruling in the quest for the public release of the Federal Emergency Management Authority list of evacuees.

"Sen. Cleo Fields, D-Baton Rouge, who filed the lawsuit on behalf of New Orleans state Reps. Charmaine Marchand and Cedric Richmond, both Democrats, said he expects to take the issue to the 1st Circuit Court of Appeal. The lawmakers say the list is necessary so candidates for public office can send campaign material to registered voters," one newspaper reported.

"You can't have an election. No rational people believe you can have a public election with private voting rolls," Fields said.

NAACP joins the fight

"The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is urging the U.S. Department of Justice to block a Louisiana state election plan for New Orleans that will place a severe burden on Black voters displaced by Hurricane Katrina. The Justice Department must review the plan to insure that minority voting rights are protected," said NAACP President and CEO Bruce Gordon.

Gordon spoke with Attorney General Alberto Gonzales on Tuesday, Feb. 14, and expressed the association's strong desire to require the state to meet the burden of approving a plan that will not disenfranchise displaced African American citizens.

"The Justice Department should reject the plan as it is currently written by the Louisiana Legislature unless substantive improvements are made to guarantee equal participation of minority voters," said Gordon. "How can anyone take issue with making it possible for citizens to vote?"

"Shouldn't people involuntarily relocated outside of New Orleans be capable of voting for candidates in their hometown? We shouldn't penalize people who were forced to relocate to temporary homes, whether in Louisiana or in cities like Houston and Atlanta."

The plan, Act 40, approved by the state legislature allows for changes in parish voting locations as well as the use of election personnel from outside of the parish, but the NAACP and the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus believe that more should be done to accommodate displaced voters. The lawmakers agreed to hold the emergency elections on April 22 in New Orleans for mayor, city council and other city offices. Early absentee balloting will take place from April 10 to April 15.

"This is an aggressive schedule," said Gordon. "The state and Justice Department have a great deal of work to do to ensure the elections are fair."

"The NAACP will consider filing a lawsuit, or joining existing parties seeking court relief, to protect the voting rights of Black voters," said NAACP Chief Policy Officer John Jackson. "The NAACP favors out-of-state satellite voting sites and charges the state to meet the burden of making sure that African American voters receive accurate voter information."

The New Orleans Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta is also encouraging members and others to vote in the election. The sorority has posted absentee voting information on its website.

Voting information

Although there are none outside of Louisiana, there will be satellite locations in the largest cities in the state.

Evacuees who want to vote by mail in the April 22 election will have to request a mail ballot by April 18 and send it back to the Secretary of State by April 21. There also will be an early voting period from April 10 through April 13 and on April 15, when voters outside New Orleans can cast ballots at 10 satellite locations in the state.

The list of FEMA applicants was obtained by the secretary of state's office to send out information about absentee voting, satellite polling stations in Louisiana and election dates to evacuees.

Jennifer Marusak, a spokeswoman for Secretary of State Al Ater, told the press that the office is beginning to send out the information, including a form that voters can use to request a mail

ballot. The effort could take about two weeks, she said.

If you are a registered voter of Louisiana who has been displaced as a result of Hurricane Katrina or Rita, you are still eligible to vote in your home parish if you have not registered to vote in another parish or state.

There are presently three ways to vote in Louisiana: (1) absentee by mail ballot, (2) early voting in person in the Registrar of Voters office six to 12 days before an election and (3) in person at the polling place on Election Day.

For more information on how to check your current registration status, register to vote, or vote, contact the Louisiana Secretary of State Elections Division by email at elections@sos.louisiana.gov or at (800) 883-2805. You can also request an absentee ballot by mailing a written request to P.O. Box 94125, Baton Rouge, LA 70804-9125 or downloading the request form online at www.sos.louisiana.gov and mailing it to the post office box above. Orleans Parish Registrar of Voters Louis Keller recommends that voters add their phone number in all requests, in case verification of additional information is necessary.

CC Campbell-Rock, a native New Orleanian, veteran journalist and Katrina evacuee, is now the editor of the Bay View. Email her at campbellrock@sfbayview.com.

Hurricane evacuees need your help

On Wednesday, March 1, dozens of Katrina survivors will be kicked out of their hotels in Oakland, joining tens of thousands around the country.

The Hurricane Evacuees Council-Bay Area (HECBA) and Global Women Strike have been helping evacuees to find housing in Oakland and pressuring the Oakland city government to do its part. However, more pressure needs to be brought to bear to provide housing plans for all Katrina survivors who are facing eviction.

What can you do about it?

Call your Oakland representatives today and urgently push them to step up and ensure housing for Katrina survivors! Tell them the city must have a plan to deal with this crisis! Tell them that city representatives and/or case managers need to go directly to the hotels immediately to assess people's needs and work with them to ensure housing!

If possible, call everyone on this list. If you just have a moment, commit to calling Mayor Jerry Brown's office, (510) 238-3141, and Karen Boyd at the City Administrator's office, (510) 238-3301. They can make something happen immediately.

Other City Council members' numbers are: Vice-Mayor Henry Chang, (510) 238-3742; Jane Brunner, District 1, (510) 238-7001; Pat Kernighan, District 2, (510) 238-7002; Nancy Nadel, District 3,