

**Commentary: Beyond Relief and Recovery
Philanthropy's biggest challenge in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita is to
move past just doing the familiar.**

**By Emmett D. Carson
November/December 2005**

Every so often, an event occurs that changes how a society views itself. Ideas and beliefs that were universally accepted before the event are sharply questioned afterward. Hurricane Katrina is likely to be such an event. The hurricane affected a 90,000-square mile land mass (the size of England), taking the lives of more than 1,200 people, displacing tens of thousands of people, causing well over \$100 billion both in property damage and lost economic activity. Hurricane Rita only added to the human misery, increasing the costs of cleanup and rebuilding and expanding the disaster zone. Together, the two hurricanes have created an unprecedented opportunity for foundation boards and staff to look anew at why and how we accomplish our work.

The initial response of foundations to this unfolding tragedy has been to do what we normally do. As with the Oklahoma City bombing; the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, DC; and the tsunami in Southeast Asia, foundations have supported nonprofit organizations that provide immediate relief to those in need, which will be followed by support to nonprofit organizations involved in the long-term recovery effort. Afterward, foundations will issue comprehensive reports detailing how much money was distributed for the rebuilding efforts and its impact.

When faced with a paradigm shift, it is comforting for institutions to respond by doing the familiar. In the rush to help, some foundations hastily provided large grants to their existing grantees without assessing whether their work remains relevant in the new context. Foundations will, however, find it increasingly unsatisfying to blindly continue to do what they have always done without reflecting on what has occurred and what it means for their work.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita pose at least three challenges to organized philanthropy. First, we must accept the painful reality that the disasters revealed the depth of poverty within our society and the degree to which it has become intertwined with race. Second, given the broad interests of philanthropy in building social capital within communities and reducing poverty, philanthropy must openly acknowledge that our society and, by implication, philanthropy's grantmaking efforts have not achieved nearly as much progress as we had hoped or imagined in either reducing poverty or improving race relations. And third, philanthropy must accept that it has a unique burden of responsibility, along with the broader nonprofit sector, to ensure that the nation does not squander the opportunity presented by this unprecedented tragedy to improve the fabric of American society—while we still can.

A Transformative Event?

As citizens of the only remaining superpower in the world, Americans subscribe to at least two core beliefs that have been irreparably undermined by Hurricane Katrina. First, we believe that unlike nations from the old world, third world or new democracies, America stands apart in its ability to get a job done quickly and efficiently—any job, the first time. In fact, the bigger and more complicated the challenge, the better we will perform. Americans generally view the ineptness and bureaucratic confusion that often accompany disasters in foreign locales with an all-knowing smugness that it could never happen here.

For days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, the world witnessed American citizens begging for their lives and those of their loved ones. The much-vaunted American know-how never materialized, and people suffered and died as a result. Our national psyche must now reconcile the chasm between the reality we thought to be true with the reality of what we witnessed.

The second strongly held belief is that despite America's history of slavery and segregation, problems with race relations are largely a thing of the past and all citizens have access to opportunity and economic prosperity. Despite reliable data and numerous studies to the contrary, poverty in America is widely believed to result from individual behavior and failings, rather than racial discrimination or a failure of the freemarket system to provide an adequate number of jobs with a living wage income. The images we saw in New Orleans of the throngs of poor and working poor, largely African Americans, with no means to escape the hurricane's fury or the breeched levees, underscored how race and poverty have become inextricably tied together in American society.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, one, if not both, of those strongly held views will have to be radically altered, if not discarded altogether. If America does have the ability to get a job done—in this case to save the lives of Americans with days of forewarning and years of scenario planning—then race and poverty must have factored into why we did not do so. If America does not have the capacity to rescue its people in such situations, then all of us are at an unacceptable risk during any disaster, especially one brought about with no warning by terrorists.

The Nonprofit Achilles Heel

America may well be able to get any job done; however, it is a mistake to rely on philanthropy and the nonprofit sector as the primary responders to large-scale disasters. Because the nonprofit sector epitomizes individual action for the public good, it does not and cannot have the human, financial and material resources for a coordinated response to large-scale calamities. The same characteristics that serve the nonprofit sector well in reflecting the diverse individual values and interests of each foundation and nonprofit organization become its Achilles heel when responding to a large-scale disaster.

Responding effectively to disasters requires uniformity, consistency, a high degree of organization, a clear command and control structure, and significant personnel and supplies. Even more problematic is the individualistic nature of the nonprofit sector. It ensures that people who have been equally affected by a disaster will be treated differently, depending on the interests, approach and organizational capacity of the individual foundations and nonprofit organizations that help them.

Neither the American Red Cross nor The Salvation Army will ever have the resources to be the first or only line of defense during a major disaster. After all, The Salvation Army is not a standing army with helicopters, trucks and supply lines. Given what we witnessed with Hurricane Katrina, it is not a partisan statement to say that there really are some things that only state and federal governments can do and large-scale disaster relief is one of them. The mobilization of our nation's military in response to Hurricanes Rita and Wilma reinforces this reasoning.

Foundations also must use their unique role to explain to government, business and even some in the nonprofit sector that there are unintended consequences to making unqualified endorsements, especially during an emergency. When the president of the United States identifies a single charity—in this instance, the Red Cross—as the primary recipient of domestic and international donations, we have a responsibility to make sure that everyone understands that the thousands of people who are being assisted in the crisis by many other worthwhile nonprofit organizations will not have access to those funds. The multitude of shelters, churches and other nonprofit organizations that opened their doors during this crisis do not receive funds from the Red Cross. However, most Americans and foundations that have made donations to the Red Cross—without doubt a worthy organization—believe that they have assisted all of those affected by the disaster and not just those fortunate enough to be assisted by a Red Cross shelter. As with the September 11, 2001, disaster, questions are again being raised as to whether all of the funds contributed to the Red Cross will be spent for the current disaster.

The Disaster before the Storms

To fully understand why so many poor African Americans were affected by Hurricane Katrina and were seemingly disconnected from the fabric of the broader society, we have to understand the disaster that was evident before the storms. Poverty, especially in the South, has been steadily increasing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's population report, "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2004" (www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p60-229.pdf), while the median U.S. income (2002–2004) was \$44,473—the median income was \$33,659 in Mississippi, \$35,659 in Louisiana and \$38,111 in Alabama. Although 12.4 percent of the nation lives in poverty, the poverty rates are higher in Alabama (15.5 percent), Louisiana (17 percent) and Mississippi (17.7 percent). Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama rank second, third and fourth in terms of infant mortality. Finally, according to the National Bureau for Education Statistics (www.nces.ed.gov), the three states lag behind the national average in the percentage of 18–24 year olds who have completed high school. In 2001, the U.S. national average was 86.3 percent, compared to 82 percent in Alabama, 82.6 percent in Louisiana and 84.3 percent in Mississippi.

In general, there is also limited philanthropic capital within the affected states and a relatively weak nonprofit infrastructure. Based on data from the 2005 edition of *Foundation Yearbook: Facts and Figures on Private and Community Foundations* (The Foundation Center, www.fdncenter.org) giving per capita would rank Alabama 39th, Louisiana 42nd and Mississippi 50th.

Abandoned Because They Were Black and Poor?

Simply posing the question of whether race and poverty played a role in the poor response to rescuing people from Hurricane Katrina is considered a taboo, incendiary topic. And yet, this is the very issue that is being openly discussed around the world. Those who suggest that such questions

not be asked do our nation a disservice. If race and poverty played no role, our nation can only be strengthened by this knowledge. If race and poverty *did* play a role, our nation is at risk of losing everything we value unless we address those issues.

In attempting to understand the tragedy that occurred in New Orleans, it is not useful to attempt to disentangle the impact of being African American from that of being poor. In pre-Katrina New Orleans, they were largely one and the same thing. True, not all of those who were abandoned were African American or poor; however, poor African Americans were the overwhelming majority of those left to fend for themselves in deteriorating conditions.

The question of whether race and poverty played a part in how we approached the rescue can never be answered definitively. However, there are some clues that may help us find some answers, if we have the courage to look. If race and poverty are no longer problems in American society, why in cities across the country where evacuees were relocated did gun stores experience a rise in sales? Did race and poverty play roles in why nonprofit organizations that were willing and able to help in the early days of the crisis were refused entry to New Orleans? What roles did race and poverty play in why some of those escaping from New Orleans were turned back from neighboring communities by police officers who confiscated their food and water before firing warning shots that forced them back to face the disaster anew? (See Gardiner Harris, "Storm and Crisis Battling the Storm," *New York Times*, September 10, 2005.)

Were race and poverty the reasons why when the military was finally mobilized to "help" in New Orleans, unlike other areas, its actions were framed as more of a police action than a rescue operation? Why did the media portray African Americans as looters and whites as lucky foragers when both groups were struggling for survival? Why were media stories of rape and murder by poor African Americans exaggerated and accepted by the public so easily? (See Jim Dwyer and Christopher Drew, "Fear Exceeded Crime's Reality in New Orleans," *New York Times*, September 29, 2005.) When help finally arrived, why were selected groups of people evacuated sooner than those who were poor African Americans?

Finally, arguments have been advanced about why New Orleans should not be rebuilt, notwithstanding proven engineering solutions to protect cities below sea level from susceptibility to hurricanes. Would these same arguments be advanced in other cities that face destruction from natural disasters, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego and Las Vegas, which sit on earthquake fault lines?

The answers to those questions suggest that being African American and poor is likely to have played some role in how our nation responded to the disaster in New Orleans. Moreover, it helps to explain why for days the survivors were portrayed as immoral and unworthy of the nation's sympathy or financial support. As George Penick, president of the Foundation for the Mid South noted, "Philanthropy can no longer ignore or avoid the harsh reality that poverty, especially among minorities, lies at the heart of the most unseemly aspects of the Hurricane Katrina debacle."

The harder realization is that the same interplay of race and poverty that was on display in New Orleans is right below the surface in communities across America. (See Abn Berube and Bruce Katz, "Katrina's Window: Confronting Poverty Across America," October 2005, www.brookings.edu.) If Penick's observation that philanthropy can no longer ignore race and poverty is true, then taking the

next difficult step to effectively address this issue will require philanthropy to think and act in different ways.

Foundations as they are currently constituted and operate may be especially ill equipped to address issues of race relations. For foundations to be credible catalysts for positive change in this area, we will need to reconsider how we view ourselves and reassess many of the assumptions that guide our work. In particular, foundations must have boards and staff that reflect the diverse views of the communities they wish to serve if they are to successfully build communities that avoid the concentrations of poverty and isolation that were so evident during this crisis. Moreover, foundations need to move beyond their traditional insecurities to support nonprofit groups that rely on advocacy and public policy reform to help create and sustain communities that work for all residents.

Rebuilding for Whom and Toward What?

The issue for foundations is not whether the nation should rebuild the devastated communities throughout the Gulf Coast. As authors Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella make abundantly clear in *The Resilient City*, virtually every major city that has been destroyed in modern times by either war or natural disaster has been rebuilt. This includes Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Dresden destroyed during World War II; Tangshan, China, which was destroyed by an earthquake in 1976 that killed more than 240,000 people; and the Congolese city of Goma, which was destroyed by lava in 2002.

The harder question is: For whom will New Orleans and other devastated communities be rebuilt and to achieve what end? How do we design communities that provide an acceptable quality of life for people at all income levels? How do we ensure that the thousands of displaced citizens have a voice in the design of the communities where they worked and lived? How do we re-think the educational, healthcare, land planning and public safety systems so that successful outcomes are no longer correlated with race and ethnicity?

The challenge for philanthropy in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita is to go beyond relief and recovery to focus on betterment. Relief addresses the immediate needs of food, clothing and shelter. Recovery entails restoring things to where they were—in this case, re-establishing the disaster before the storm.

Betterment means acknowledging that race relations remain a central tension within America. Betterment requires accepting that the strategies foundations have pursued in their efforts to alleviate poverty have been largely unsuccessful. Betterment requires that foundations be willing to try new things, articulate and advance a new social contract within a market economy. Betterment will require the willingness to dream big, take risks, support nonprofit organizations with unconventional ideas, work in new ways with the government and business sectors, and recruit a more diverse work force of people and perspectives for our boards and staff to influence our direction and priorities.

It would be far easier for foundations, as well as the larger public, to forget the images of death and suffering that we saw in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and to do the things we have always

done. If we do so, however, we will have failed at our primary task, our reason for being—improving the well-being of humankind.

#