

Nonprofits' Highest Calling: Ensuring the Rights of the Dispossessed

By Rick Cohen. *The NonProfit Quarterly*
09/16/05

Despite the purported red/blue, conservative/liberal, Republican/Democratic chasms in our society, the propensity to forgive and forget in times of natural or man-made catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 is remarkable. Adversity should bring our society together, but it shouldn't make us collectively stupid.

Politicians and nonprofits of various hues are lining up outside the White House to welcome the resuscitation of the day-late, dollar-short Bush Administration's reawakening to the federal government's role in responding to Katrina after the stumbling, bumbling performance of the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA. Considering that the Bush Administration's policies essentially guaranteed a wholly lacking and completely inept government response to the disaster, the last thing the nonprofit sector should do is succumb to sectoral amnesia and contractual opportunism.

In contrast to the willing participation of some nonprofit sector leaders in the White House's political damage control events and the Potemkin Village-like expressions of the President's sudden heartfelt concern, the sector might generate some backbone and lay out a **nonprofit watchdog agenda**

for the Katrina response based on some of the lessons that were learned from government and charity responses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the devastation of the Boxing Day tsunami in Southeast Asia, the past two years of national attention to the ethics and accountability of nonprofits, and the past five years of the tax and budget policies of the Bush Administration.

Without suggesting that these principles are all-inclusive, they should be a start to remind the leadership of the nonprofit sector, beyond the valiant on-the-ground relief providers, that its role is more than being awed by the recently rediscovered sincerity of President Bush. And its role is more than backfilling the lacunae of performance left by defunded, debilitated, and dispirited federal, state, and local agencies.

Return to the community-base: Four-fifths of charitable donations have flowed to and through the Red Cross, and probably just as well. For donors around the nation and the world who don't know the local nonprofit landscape, the Red Cross is a safe, secure first choice for funneling charitable donations. How would most people a continent or more away have any idea of which local agencies merited support on the spur of the moment? But two, three, four weeks into the disaster aftermath, the lens has to shift local, to start major resources funneling into the frontline organizations that have to be involved not only in relief, but in planning and implementing the rebuilding of the region-groups like Southern Mutual Help Association

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, the Enterprise Corporation of the Delta, New Orleans Neighborhood Housing Services, and so many others.

Don't play with people's lives and futures: Beyond Fox-TV news commentators, conservatives are visibly salivating at the opportunity to make the rebuilding of the region a test-tube for the implementation of all of their back-pocket policy theories that have been generally thwarted at the national level-school vouchers, entrepreneurial zones, and more. Rebuilding programs are speeding through Congress and the public's consciousness, getting bipartisan endorsements because they look something like vigorous action in contrast to the initial lethargy that characterized the Administration's Homeland Security and FEMA responders. At the Superdome, inside the Convention Center, on their rooftops, and under highways, too many of these people were too long treated as nearly subhumans. They shouldn't be treated like social science laboratory rats in the transition from relief to reconstruction in the region. The nonprofit sector should fight against social experimentation on the backs and lives of these people, and most certainly it shouldn't offer itself as a contract-hungry tool.

Remember why this happened and do something about it: Although the President was surprised by the collapsing levees, although the nation was shocked-shocked!-by the altogether appalling performance of the underfunded and incompetently managed FEMA, although legislators and government officials suddenly remembered and bemoaned the moneys for the region's fragile infrastructure and environment that had been diverted to dubious political pork and worse, let's face it, the political makings of this tragedy occurred in the open-in broad daylight. The advocacy voice, the watchdog function of our sector was inadequate in taking on these crimes against the capacity of government to fulfill its mandate to the people of the Gulf Coast region and the public at large. As a sector, we all didn't fulfill our mandate. Sure, it's hard to find a Winston Churchill among the government officials in charge of handling this disaster. But the problem isn't just a matter of the individual leadership qualities of Bush, Blanco, Nagin, Barbour, "Brownie," and Chertoff. This was government enfeebled by the successful strategies of Grover Norquist and his allies devoted to "starv(ing) the beast" of government, shrinking it, and "drown(ing) it in a bathtub." Concerned about how it fulfills its own mission of responsibility to the American public, the nonprofit sector should be equally motivated to bolster the

mission-capacity of government at all levels, else no amount of monies funneled to the Red Cross or any other charity will make a difference in the long run.

Pay for the reconstruction: President Bush and his colleagues are supporting a reconstruction program that will cost well into the hundreds of billions of dollars, as well they should. True to their tax-slashing DNA, President Bush and his Congressional allies believe that this can be accomplished without tax increases and in fact, they still pander to the right and hint at not only no tax increases, but unaltered plans to deep-six the estate tax, the stock dividend tax, and other conservative *bête noires*. This is a great plan for plunging credibility through the floor. No one could possibly believe that anyone, including Karl Rove, can mastermind 5 years of budget cuts, starving the government of vital resources and talent, and then take on the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast with any serious intent. It would be light years more believable if the President and his bipartisan Congressional allies were to call for a tax surcharge to pay for the reconstruction. If, as a nation, we are going to join this President's plan for rebuilding after Katrina, he (and we) have to put our money where our mouths are.

Don't take away from those already in need: The consequences of the President's no-tax reconstruction package are already taking shape. In Washington, D.C., Montgomery County, Maryland, and elsewhere, people displaced by Katrina are already being put ahead of local residents on waiting lists for government-subsidized housing such as Section 8 voucher apartments, public housing units, and vacant HUD-subsidized foreclosures. As one local official said, put yourself in the shoes of the Katrina victims and you'll know why they should be jumped to the front of the queue. But the Katrina victims were casualties of poverty and neglect as much as the Hurricane. All people in poverty-level households have been waiting years for affordable housing and other government benefits. They should get what they deserve and so should the Katrina victims. It would be a cross between crime and travesty if the aid to Katrina victims were to pit the nation's poor and underclass against the Gulf Coast's. On August 30, 2005-as New Orleans was flooding and (mostly poor) people were dying-the US Census Bureau announced that 1.1 million people slipped below the poverty line rate in the US in 2004 and that the number of Americans without health insurance rose by 800,000 to 46 million that year. This is the empirical evidence of what the Bush Administration's tax cuts have meant to date and will mean in the response to the Katrina rebuilding.

Close eye on corporate profiteering: As odd as it sounds, the plans for rebuilding the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast resemble the corporate contracting scrum that followed the purported cessation of hostilities in Iraq. Lo and behold, while a half million people have been temporarily or perhaps permanently displaced by the Hurricane, the stock market is booming, led by firms already scarfing up the little or no-bid contracts from FEMA and other agencies. No surprise, Halliburton's stock price is skyrocketing, no doubt in part due to its legions of lobbyists that hit the pavement faster than Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin were able to declare a

state of emergency. There is enough evidence of war profiteering in Iraq involving the same firms that are lining up at the trough for Katrina contracts. In the case of a disaster, you can be sure that they'll recruit revenue-hungry nonprofits as partners to provide a veneer of respectability and compassion for their disaster contracting frenzy. The nonprofit sector, particularly the foundation sector which invests as much as two thirds of its half trillion dollar endowment total in the stock market, has been woefully reluctant to watchdog their potential corporate benefactors and partners. The nonprofit sector must declare that it will not turn a blind eye to the potential of corporate excesses in the response to Katrina.

Riding the Hurricane for the charity agenda: Already, mainstream and faith-based charities have participated as scripted participants in the White House's belated effort to reverse the political damage from the President's, Homeland Security's, and FEMA's lackluster performance in Katrina's early moments. The *quid pro quo?* They got to pitch the President for support of the federal nonitemizer charitable tax deduction. In the Senate, Rick Santorum (R-PA.) convened a cheerleading session for Katrina-responding charities such as the Salvation Army, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Brother's Brother Foundation, whose testimony pitched support for Santorum's faith-based agenda Velcroed to disaster relief. Senate Finance Committee chieftains Grassley and Baucus produced a disaster relief bill with provisions to incentivize corporate charitable giving overall, as though the corporate sector needed yet another rabbit-hole to duck the taxman, and various niche incentives such as enhanced corporate deductions for donations of books. The Hurricane should not be the vehicle ridden by special nonprofit sector interests to get dubious, paltry tax revenue-losing charitable incentives into law when so much more is needed.

Rediscovering philanthropy in the swirl of charity: No one need confuse the disaster-related giving of corporations with philanthropy. At best, it reflects a mix of sincere caring and corporate branding. But foundations can and should do less charity and more philanthropy. The wish of some foundation leaders that the foundation sector had been faster with money devoted to Katrina relief confuses charity and philanthropy-or substitutes foundation resources for government expenditures. In the transition to reconstruction, that too is not the role of foundations, it is the role of government. But what philanthropy can and should do is fund the watchdogs who will scrutinize the probity of the government, corporate, and nonprofit players who will be entrusted with the implementation of reconstruction plans.

Rebuilding democracy: Halliburton wasn't elected to rebuild the Gulf, it merely lobbied its way into the pathways of ascendant profitability. But a half million or so people who once constituted the electorate, the popular voice of New Orleans, Biloxi, Gulfport, and innumerable small towns and rural communities have been displaced and, in the process, disenfranchised. The people of the Gulf have a democratic right to have a say, a major say, in the reconstruction of the region. The first priority of the nonprofit sector, ostensibly motivated by the ideas of voluntary

associations described by Alexis de Tocqueville, should be to fight tooth and nail for the democratic rights of the population of the Gulf. As the scenes in the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center demonstrated, much of the region's population has long been disenfranchised through poverty and neglect. Rebuilding the local, community-based organizations that represent and potentially mobilize this population should be a core component hard-wired into the reconstruction process and plans.

For some public officials who have been quoted chortling about Katrina's removal of the low-income communities-and their inhabitants-that didn't quite fit the image of the French Quarter and other tourist attractions, Katrina was a godsend wrapped in a disaster. It is not hard to figure out who stands to benefit in a redevelopment plan that excludes and potentially expels the low-income and minority communities that were most visibly devastated by the Hurricane. The corporate sector appears hungry to reap a windfall from the windstorm. Mississippi's Governor Barbour, accustomed to the less than transparent operations in his previous job at the Republican National Committee, seems to be operating with a backroom deal-making mentality, and his state's casino operators appear to be favored beneficiaries. Already the Bush administration is slicing off a large piece of education funds for private schools and creating a bevy of tax abatements and incentives for business development along the lines of the long-dysfunctional Empowerment Zones, but little in the White House reconstruction plan looks like it will directly benefit the people who need the reconstruction assistance most-and have needed that assistance long before the occurrence of this Category 5 disaster, living in some of the nation's most troubled, distressed urban and rural neighborhoods.

It's time for the nonprofit sector to live up to its democratic potential. If the Gulf Coast is to function as an experiment, let it be an experiment for ethics, probity, and the revival of the nonprofit sector's ability to call government and corporations to account.

1. Sister Helen Vinton, an NCRP board member, is the assistant executive director of SMHA.

Rick Cohen is the executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (www.ncrp.org).