

# Racist “Shoot to Kill” Policy in New Orleans: White versus Black “Looters”

In the US, white people can't imagine black people who are just like them

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*Kathleen Blanco, the Democrat governor of Louisiana, threatened looters with a shoot-to-kill policy. “These troops are battle-tested. They have M16s and are locked and loaded,” she said. “These troops know how to shoot and kill and I expect they will.”*

There were a number of white looters involved in the LA riots, a fact ignored or suppressed a decade ago. And so, as a black viewer, I was relieved yesterday when Channel 4 News [UK] finally found a white face among the victims of Hurricane Katrina pushing shopping carts through the water. The woman insisted to the camera that it was the police themselves who had told people to go into stores and get what they needed. She hadn't taken any clothes, she said. She was surviving, not shopping.

The only other white faces I saw during the report were those of national guardsmen, pleading officials and helicopter rescue personnel. I was so busy hoping that the news would get across the commonality created by the emergency that I completely missed the point. There is a reason everyone whom reporters found on the beach front in Biloxi, Mississippi, was white and in some cases low-income: US-style residential segregation.

And there is a reason why the people left behind in New Orleans were black: they make up the majority of the population within the city limits and among them are the city's poorest citizens. However, they don't make up the majority of the greater New Orleans area. Black people are not in the majority in any metropolitan area in the US, though they do outnumber white people overall in the state of Mississippi, where there has never been a black governor.

Black people watching in the rest of the country understood right away what was happening. The poor had been left to be washed away, then to fend for themselves. Maybe pockets of rich people will be discovered, guarding their possessions, but most likely there will be stories of the poor defending what they had. Those with money, white and black, got out.

Maybe a number of people paid little heed to the warnings to evacuate, because there had been such warnings in the past and the storms turned out not to be as furious as had been predicted; but maybe large numbers didn't leave because they had no way to get out, no car, no bus ticket, and because they had nowhere to go if they did get out, no money for a motel. It was not a nice experience watching helpless blacks, the elderly, pregnant women, and children, being winched to safety by helmeted white guys.

Fortunately, a black guy, a volunteer, was filmed using an axe to chop through rooftops to help people escape. They were soaked, and the dread they'd just escaped in those attics of ever rising water was suggested by the expressions on their faces. The rest of the US could see their fear, but they couldn't see the country's fear of them.

In the US, white people are able to conceive of black people who are better than they are or worse than they are, superior or inferior, but they seem to have a hard time imagining black people who are just like them. Officials in the affected areas are already beginning to have their say about the inadequacy of the measures the federal and state governments had in place to cope with the catastrophe, but maybe one of the reasons the rest of the country sat around and didn't seem able to take hold right away was their fear of the black people left behind.

When I heard that relief workers had been told not to go on the New Orleans streets I had to ask if they were white. One story quoted a black woman who complained that the truckloads of national guardsmen wouldn't make eye contact with the people in the streets. Maybe they are under orders determined by emergency priorities, but in the south the national guard is overwhelmingly white. These are the new policemen, with shoot-to-kill orders. The images of black people emerging from broken glass fronts with armloads of clothes or cigarettes bring to mind the LA riots, as if to say: this is what black people do at the first breakdown of public order. They, or the criminals and opportunists among them, can turn even a natural disaster into civil disorder. So far only Jesse Jackson has complained about the racist display the US is putting on for an international audience.

Louisiana has a large poor white population, but where have they gone? Where are the white people? New Orleans sits in a basin and hasn't the same pattern of suburbs as other US cities, but it does have them. Ninety percent of the houses in the town of Slidell, just over the bridge across Lake Pontchartrain, have been ruined. The west-lying towns, on higher ground, all have a river side, their backs to the levee. Where are those residents? They got out.

Novelist Richard Ford, who lived in New Orleans for many years, observed that Mayor Nagin had been brave to tell everyone to leave. People in the Superdome are alive, he said, because they were there, not somewhere else, but then the conditions quickly deteriorated. Of the 25,000 people shipped to the Houston Astrodome the vast majority are black. The crowd at the convention centre includes white people, but the feeling among black people seems to be that the media have once again found an occasion to portray black people as lawless and that were an equal number of whites stranded in a destroyed city, federal government help would have been dispatched more quickly.

The army bases that have been closed recently in the south as economy measures should be opened up. It is a scandal that at the time of writing there have been no air drops of any kind. The recovery will be difficult, because of who has insurance and who doesn't, to start with. And then there is all that mud. Maybe Bush can't respond convincingly to the calamity because to do so would require thinking along New Deal lines, in terms of the kind of governmental agencies that he is ideologically opposed to.

After years of not investing in the country's infrastructure, this could be the first consequence of misspending. The US telephone systems, bridges, railroads and highways are in poor shape. The authorities were told 25 years ago that the New Orleans levees could not withstand a storm of Katrina's magnitude, but a city that votes Democratic wasn't going

to get the necessary allocations to refortify the works. Bush turned down foreign aid because America is the giver, not the receiver, but they are also not talking much in the US news media about what we can't afford and what resources aren't available because of the war in Iraq.

We are becoming like the countries we criticise and pity, places where the state and the society have less and less to do with each other. We are on our own, but then black people have always known that.

*Darryl Pinckney is the author of a novel, High Cotton*

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