

The Militarization of New Orleans. From Victims to Vandals: Mass Media and New Orleans

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Introduction

Briefly, but dramatically, the political failures that turned New Orleans and many other Gulf cities and towns into a human catastrophe, shattered the bonds of conformity between the mass media and the government. Critical reporters described the failure of the government's Homeland Security to evacuate vulnerable poor people and the absence of basic food and water for the victims. The media contrasted Bush partying with Republican cronies in California, Vice President Chaney on the golfing green, Secretary of State Rice shopping in Manhattan and Homeland Security boss Chertoff claiming that disaster relief was in excellent shape with the cries of desperation and destitution of tens of thousands of poverty-stricken and hungry African Americans and poor whites barely surviving in a dark, filthy convention center and sports arena.

By Day Four of the disaster, the critical impassioned voices were replaced by measured voices of official compassion. Photo opportunities of Bush abounded; the National Guardmen were arriving and the Government was responding. The "news" was about the heroic aid workers with photogenic white guards and nurses cradling black infants, bringing relief to the "refugees" and ending the growing lawlessness, violence and "looting" among the survivors. Interviews with top military officials focused on the threats to the soldiers from violent elements among the "refugees". Visual images of armored troop carriers, heavily armed Special Forces against a backdrop of angry desolate people, resonated with the war propaganda from Iraq. What was an exercise in humanitarian aid was converted into a counter-insurgency operation. By the end of the sixth day the mass media converted the national government's political failures to protect citizens into a successful military occupation.

The Militarization of New Orleans

Nothing captures the "revised line" of the media better than the prominent place given to the government's order to "Shoot to kill looters". Not a whimper of protest, not a critical voice: The media converted the destitute city into a war zone: New Orleans became Fallujah. The media dredged up every rumor, hearsay, un-substantiated third hand report of child rape and murder to provide a "context" for the "new reality" – the militarization of a devastated American city. The media are well prepared for that scenario: Embedded journalist featured soldiers handing out concentrated military field rations (totally useless for small children and dehydrated elderly) while the beating of blacks carrying groceries (blacks 'loot' food; whites 'find' food) was omitted. Over a hundred thousand people without homes,

jobs and savings, water, food and sanitation, were first and foremost subject to military occupation... to protect the banks, boutiques and jewelry stores from “looters”. Sixteen thousand troops and Special Forces backed by armored carriers and helicopters have taken over the city.

There were no announcements or plans for civil reconstruction – jobs for those without jobs and plans to re-house the tens of thousands of families left homeless. Instead the media repeatedly played on white paranoia: black rapists terrorizing neighborhoods, shelters, anywhere they could flag a rumor... It is surprising that ‘cannibalism wasn’t included in the medias list of ‘outrages’ committed by the “Africanized” destitute. There was hardly any mention of the “looters” who braved the swirling floods and military snipers to bring bottled water to the elderly, dry cereal to children and cans of sardines to the hungry. Ninety-nine point percent of the poor blacks were destitute but the media focused on the 1% of criminals. “Zero tolerance” declared Governor Blanco of Louisiana to titillate the President and to prime the automatic rifles of the Special Forces. The black mayor of New Orleans, caught between the majority of blacks confined to filth, living amidst the decaying dead and the sewage of the living and the militarization of the city, appealed to the outside world.

The daily rape of a city, of an entire population of the most vulnerable, is condoned. While the media pursue a witness to the rumored rape of a 14-year-old several days earlier they ignore reports of mass death, fecal contaminated waters and listless, dehydrated babies. The mass state propaganda machine focuses on the President signing an aid bill and promising Law and Order.

Criminalizing the Victims

Given the government’s total abandonment of tens of thousands of poor, starving and homeless blacks, it was obvious that many people would scavenge for food and water. By deliberately linking the survivors with “looters” and “rapists”, public officials set the stage for the subsequent militarization and de-facto martial law – fertile terrain for the killing fields. The first reports that filtered out from (unembedded) eyewitness reports mentioned groups of Guardsmen beating the self-help survivors. Military reports cited the killing of several ‘snipers’.

No doubt the Government’s first pre-occupation is to saturate the city with the military to prevent the survivors from organizing for justice and to channel all communications about the state of the city through officially approved sources. Even more significantly the military defines the nature of the situation as a problem of criminality and the repressive “solution” through maximum control and minimum aid.

The Magical Powers of the Mass Media

On the seventh day after the human catastrophe, the mass media were flooded with the faces, voices and compassionate rhetoric of all the major and minor spokespeople of the Bush Administration. Every major television network, every featured program presented Bush, Rumsfeld, Rice, Chertoff and various Generals speaking in mutual admiration of the Herculean efforts, of the courageous and generous Guardsmen, aid workers etc.

The mass media commentators and interviewers wholeheartedly co-operated in decriminalizing the state. The officials guilty of crimes against the humanity of poor and destitute citizens were transformed into humanitarian saviors. Not a single word of self-

criticism from the officials and none suggested by the media moderators. The few dissident critical voices of the first few days were chastened and disappeared from the television screen. The US media was the only place in the world in which the guilty officials were exonerated.

Media-State mass propaganda had its impact: Public opinion polls indicated that more (70%) of the public were hostile of the President's petroleum policy and high gas prices than of the gross political neglect which caused the death of thousands of their, mostly black, compatriots (66%).

By publicizing the President's belated and inadequate aid and amplifying the extent of criminality among the destitute, the mass media has racially polarized the catastrophe between generous compassionate white humanitarians and ungrateful, hostile black "refugees" – a term stripping the victims of their citizenship and rights.

Washington's "Shoot to Kill" order applied to water bottle snatchers and the real or imagined snipers. Negative labeling of the victims by the media heightens the public's distrust of the testimonials of dehydrated children and frail grandmothers. Criminalization, demonization and militarization is what Washington does best. Repeating official propaganda and censoring dissident interviews is what the US mass media does best. Not a single mass media outlet, not a single one of the major television outlets mentioned the highly critical reports of the most prestigious overseas media. Reports from Le Monde, the Guardian, El Pais, Der Spiegel, La Jornada were never mentioned.

Photo propaganda and captions in big print are especially effective in our boobocracy and it is what our mass media does best. Photographs of Bush hugging a cleaned-up, photogenic 'survivor', excluded the bodies floating in the debris. Ubiquitous photos appeared of Bush signing the aid bill...seven days after the fact, but not photos of Bush at a Republican fund raiser on Day One of the hurricane. No photos of Vice President Chaney golfing on Day Three, while cadavers floated down Main Street in Biloxi, Mississippi. No photos of the President and CEO of the Red Cross depositing her over \$640,000 salary, while 40,000 people lacked clean water in "refugee sites". No photos of Secretary Rice at a Broadway comedy on Day Four while the bodies of old black ladies decomposed near their outraged and destitute relatives and neighbors.

Conclusion

The mass media made an abrupt turn, adapting and shaping the images of the Administration's catastrophe. In seven days the magic of the media transformed the Bush team from incompetent and ignorant leaders to decisive and caring officials. At the same time the desperate, dying and furious were converted into an unruly, crime-ridden, ungrateful and chaotic mob. The political message was clear: Repression and militarization were priority conditions for survival and humanitarian aid. The city had to be under de facto martial law before it could be saved. Viet Nam and Falluja come to mind. After all, counter-insurgency is what we do best.

According to the President, his Cabinet members and the media: "America is rising to the occasion." We won't forget the 10,000's of dead and injured, we'll even lower the flag for a few days – that is if the Congressional Black Caucus raises the issue. As the President would say, "Let's move on. We've got a war to win in Iraq."

In the other America, the victims, their friends, their brothers and sisters are not deceived. Certainly the Europeans, Africans, Asians and Latin Americans have images etched in their collective memory: of frantic, desperate New Orleans poor with faces staring angrily at an indifferent government.

But will white America remember who are the criminals and who are the victims?

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