

KATRINA AND REALITY – October 2005

— By Richard L. Kiniry

The horror of it all was incomprehensible. It was so frustrating to watch - "just find buses and get those people out of there." How incompetent can government be?

The immediate response, which actually needed time to get over the shock, was, send money. Sending money will, at least for a while, relieve the feeling of helplessness. After a couple days all that money seemed to be producing little effect, and people started to try direct action - finding ways of sheltering refugees, organizing caravans of food, equipment and building supplies. Then all of us with hearts to see, saw the reality behind the crisis. The immediate reality started to reveal the hidden one. In the sea of frightened, hungry, thirsty, sick, dying, and angry Black faces, the hidden reality was displayed. All of America's dirty laundry was on display.

These days everything we learn about our world is filtered through some form of electronic media and those filters produce a version of reality that can deflect us from the real. This time it was different. Very quickly the "liberal media" became true to its name and honestly reported what they saw - the Black people were left behind to die. Fox remained true to form and tried to deflect reality - some people stayed in New Orleans to have a chance to loot and if they choose to live beneath sea-level, why should the taxpayer pick up the bill.

This is a moment in history that just might get citizens out of their self-absorption to an appreciation or disgust at the world they have built. Everyone is doing their part to meet the immediate crisis, from responding with Lemonade Stands to the million here and there from huge corporations like Wal-Mart (that have already taken billions out of those very citizens' pockets). But will we respond to the reality behind the crisis?

For a hundred and fifty years we have been unsuccessful in coming to terms with the effects of slavery, and the bill is still outstanding. And all those poor white folks who lost what little they had in Mississippi and Alabama are evidence that American capitalism too often punishes the ordinary person. Freedom and justice may be noble American values but the actual foundation of the country seems to be search for the good life. The losers in that search become invisible as we step over our neighbors to get our little bit of heaven.

Will we rise out of this catastrophe and build the same kind of world or will we face the reality that is? We live in a racist world built on economic inequality. We already knew that the neo-conservative world view was a fraud, a smoke-screen to disguise greed and selfishness, but it is also an excuse for people to avoid their better selves. That neo-conservative view has been very successful in clouding the national political discussion, but now the chickens have come home to roost. It is now plainly apparent: you cannot build a society, a community, that is fair and offers a healthy environment for its people if you let the rich take the lion's share of the wealth and not be taxed accordingly.

As long as CEOs and others way on top of the pay scale can make exponentially more money than the average citizen, we will never have a just society. We must draw the line and find ways

of getting some of the money back. I think we have to tax income more than a hundred thousand at a rate of 90%. That ought to leave the rest of us with enough to start building a just society that we can all enjoy and make sure the levies are built high enough.