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Cover Story
Fighting the Theft of New Orleans
The Rhythm of Resistance
by BC Publishers Glen Ford and Peter Gamble

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"I don't think it's right that you take our properties. Over my dead body. I didn't die with Katrina." – Lower 9th Ward resident Caroline Parker.

"Joe Canizaro, I don't know you, but I hate you. I'm going to suit up like I'm going to Iraq and fight this." – New Orleans East resident Harvey Bender, referring to the author of the city commission's "rebuilding" plan.

The overwhelmingly Black New Orleans diaspora is returning in large numbers to resist relentless efforts to bully and bulldoze them out of the city's future. "Struggle on the ground has intensified enormously. A number of groups are in motion, moving against the mayor's commission," said Mtangulizi Sanyika, spokesman for the African American Leadership Project (AALP). "Increasing numbers of people are coming back into the city. You can feel the political rhythm."

Mayor Ray Nagin's commission has presented residents of flood-battered, mostly African American neighborhoods with a Catch-22, carefully crafted to preclude New Orleans from ever again becoming the more than two-thirds Black city it was before Hurricane Katrina breached the levees. Authored by Nagin crony, real estate development mogul and George Bush fundraiser Joseph Canizaro, the plan would impose a four-month moratorium on building in devastated neighborhoods like the lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East. During that period, the neighborhoods would be required to come up with a plan to show how they would become "viable" by reaching an undefined "critical mass" of residents.

But the moratorium, itself, discourages people from rebuilding their neighborhoods – just as it is intended to do – thus creating a fait accompli: residents will be hard pressed to prove that a "critical mass" of habitation can be achieved.

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"It's circular reasoning," said the AALP's Sanyika. They talk about "some level of neighborhood viability, but no one knows what that means. What constitutes viable plans? What kinds of neighborhoods are viable? Everywhere you turn people are trying to rebuild, but there is this constraint."

The commission is empowered only to make recommendations, but with the help of corporate media, pretends their plan is set in stone. "They keep pushing their recommendations as though they are the gospel truth," said Sanyika, who along with tens of thousands of other evacuees has been dispersed to Houston, five hours away. "There is confusion as to all of these recommendations, issued as if they are policy. The Times–Picayune contributes to that confusion. None of this is a given."

Activists believe the way to play this situation is for residents to forge ahead on their own. "Trying to figure out the logic of that illogical proposal is a wasted effort – all you're going to do is wind up going in circles," said Sanyika. He emphasizes that the commission's recommendations are not binding on anyone – certainly not on the majority Black city council, which claims authority in city planning matters. They're not buying the nonsense. "The city council has rejected it. Nagin says 'ignore it.' I think it's dead in the water," said Sanyika.

The city council has attempted to block Nagin's collaboration with corporate developers – a hallmark of his tenure – voting to give itself authority over where to place FEMA trailers. (Only about 5,000 of a projected 25,000 trailers arrived, say community activists.) Nagin vetoed the bill, but the council overrode him. The council has also endorsed equitable development of neighborhoods, rather than shrinking the city. "We [the African American Leadership Project] are developing a resolution to that effect," said Sanyika. Odds are that it will pass – but the question is, who wields power in post–Katrina New Orleans, where only one–third of the city's previous population of nearly half a million has returned?

It is in this context that one must view Mayor Nagin's statement to a mostly Black crowd gathered at City Hall for a Martin Luther King Day march, on Monday: "I don't care what people will say – uptown, or wherever they are. At the end of the day, this city will be chocolate.... This city will be a majority African American city. It's the way God wants it to be. You can't have New Orleans no other way. It wouldn't be New Orleans."

Ray Nagin is probably the most disoriented person in the country, these days – the fruit of his own venality, sleaziness, and opportunism. A corporate executive, sports entrepreneur and nominal Democrat, he contributed to the Bush campaign in 2000 (Democrats dubbed him "Ray Reagan") and endorsed a Republican candidate for governor in 2003 (see *BC* November 20, 2003). Now he doesn't have a clue as to where the power lies or where his base is centered. "Nagin is playing a game, trying to have it both ways," says the AALP's Sanyika – but his options are shrinking as fast as the city envisioned by his buddy, Joe Canizaro, with whom he habitually worked hand in hand, but whom he now tells Blacks to "ignore."

Who's in charge in New Orleans?

Canizaro is clearly the center of gravity on the "mayor's" commission which, although integrated, is essentially a corporate concoction. The commission's slogan, "Bring New Orleans Back," is a euphemism for bringing the city "back" to the days before Black rule by erecting multiple barriers to the return of Black residents. Of course, even when Black mayors hold titular office in New Orleans, Canizaro's crowd runs the show. His bio, posted on the commission's website, shows Canizaro to be the major domo of the city's real estate, development, banking, and pro–business political machinations. Canizaro is also a Trustee and former Chairman of the Urban Land Institute, the planning outfit that is determined to turn Black neighborhoods into swamp.

Since shortly after New Years, the commission has been feverishly working to appear to be an empowered governmental entity, tasking subcommittees to present reports and recommendations several days a week on

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Government Effectiveness, Education, Health and Social Services, Culture, and Infrastructure. What Black New Orleans had been waiting for was presentation of the Urban Planning Committee Final Report, Wednesday, January 11. An overflow crowd at the Sheraton Hotel hissed Mayor Nagin and booed the hated Canizaro. Others cursed and vowed that they would be exiled only over their dead bodies.

"Four Months to Decide" read the headline of the Times–Picayune, on the day of the official unveiling of the commission's recommendations, a blueprint for the displacement of hundreds of thousands. In the packed hotel spaces, residents alternated between rage and deep anxiety at the ultimatum. "I don't think four or five months is close to enough time given all we would need to do," said Robyn Braggs. "Families with school–age children won't be able to even return to do the work necessary until this summer."

Cities with 25,000 or more displaced New Orleans residents include Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, Memphis, and Baton Rouge. Others are scattered to the four winds. Their children will be enrolled in far–flung schools until the June deadline.

Former New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial, currently president of the National Urban League, called the commission's scheme a "massive red–lining plan wrapped around a giant land grab." With the situation so uncertain, and time so short, homeowners will have difficulty settling with their insurance companies in time. Said Morial:

"It's cruel to bar people from rebuilding. Telling people they can't rebuild for four months is tantamount to saying they can't ever come back. It's telling people who have lost almost everything that we're going to take the last vestige of what they own."

And what about renters, who made up well over half of residents? Such people have no place in George Bush's "ownership society" – especially if they are Black. Bush put his smirking stamp of approval on the corporate plan during an oblivious visit to New Orleans, last week. "It may be hard for you to see, but from when I first came here to today, New Orleans is reminding me of the city I used to visit."

Apparently, the president doesn't read newspapers because he is blind – except to the cravings of his class. Bush's Gulf Opportunity Zone Act provides billions in tax dodges for (big) business, while the threatened permanent depopulation of Black New Orleans would eliminate the possibility of return for the nearly 8,000 (small) Black businesses that served the neighborhoods.

Self–styled Black capitalists take note: this is the nature of the beast. Bush fronts for a class for which Katrina is not a catastrophe, but an opportunity. They believe devoutly in "creative chaos" – the often violent destruction of the old, so that new profits can be squeezed from the rubble. Through their Catch–22 ultimatums, they are deliberately inflicting additional "creative chaos" on the displaced people of New Orleans. The fact that the victims are mostly Black, makes it all the easier. Or so they assume.

The Resistance

Grassroots community groups, along with platoons of non–native volunteers, are refusing to acquiesce to the greatest attempted urban theft in American history. At a conference organized by Mtangulizi Sanyika's African American Leadership Project and affiliated organizations, progressive urban planners explored ways to make the new New Orleans a better place for the people who live there, rather than for ravenous corporations and new populations. The experts included Dr. Ed Blakely, of the University of Sydney, Australia; MIT's Dr. Phil Thompson, housing aide to former New York Mayor David Dinkins; and Abdul Rasheed, who helped rebuild the flood ravaged Black town of Princeville, North Carolina after a hurricane in the Nineties.

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The coalition also held a Town Hall meeting attended by leaders of 15 national organizations, including Dr. Ron Daniel's Institute of the Black World, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, and movers and shakers from the Progressive Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Convention USA. National co-sponsors included the Hip Hop Caucus, Black Voices for Peace, the Black Family Summit of the Millions More Movement, and the National Black Environmental Justice Network (NBEJN).

(Dr. Robert Bullard, of the NBEJN-affiliated Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark-Atlanta University, has published the grim but very useful report: "A Twenty-Point Plan to Destroy Black New Orleans.")

Neighborhood groups are mobilizing to confront the racist/corporate onslaught. "Every other day some major event is happening," said Sanyika. Various groups held marches during MLK weekend, carrying signs such as "We're Back," "Stop Displacement," and "Rebuild With People."

On February 7th, a National Mobilization of progressive forces will descend on the U.S. Capitol in Washington to pressure Congress to halt the juggernaut of expulsion and give substance to the people's Right to Return. Although there are literally thousands of large and small Katrina-related projects operating throughout the nation, many of the New Orleans organizers are handicapped by the fact of their own displacement. A great moral and political challenge presents itself to Black and progressive America: Will they rise to the occasion in the face of a real, imminent, well-defined crisis – as opposed to the general conditions addressed by the Million Man and Millions More rallies? February 7th will be a test of Black political resolve and cohesion. And there will be many more.

Meanwhile, New Orleans in some ways resembles a poignant scene from bygone wars, when lists of the dead were published on public walls. The "Red Danger List" is posted in local papers, designating properties that are "in imminent danger of collapse" and, therefore, subject to demolition without the consent of the owners. To date, over 5,000 buildings have been red tagged.

The "Flood Map" is a kind of municipal schematic of a cemetery, delineating the parts of the city that will be caused to die. Residents on the wrong side of the lines will be unable to get flood insurance, which certainly means no meaningful investment can occur in those areas. The map was last published in 1984, and is now being updated.

You can be sure that Black folks are not in charge of the mapping.

Katrina has shown us many things. One, is the hollowness of the purely electoral Black strategy (and its cousin, lobbying) that followed the shutdown of mass movements after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. It is a great irony that, while we rant at FEMA's inability (or unwillingness) to respond to the Katrina crisis, Black America finds itself desperately searching for the "people power" tools to effectively counter the post-Katrina aggression.

The citizens of New Orleans are paying the cost for the mistakes of the late Sixties and early Seventies, when aspiring electoral and corporate officeholders convinced Black folks that mass movements were no longer necessary. Progress would trickle down from the newly acquired heights. Popular political capital could be wisely invested in the few, the upwardly mobile.

What we got was chicken-with-his-head-cut-off Ray Nagin and his many counterparts in plush offices across Black America. We must invent Black Power all over again, under changed conditions. New Orleans in its present state is the worst possible place to start – but that's where we're at.

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BC Publishers Glen Ford and Peter Gamble are writing a book to be titled, Barack Obama and the Crisis in Black Leadership.

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