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Cover Story

Katrina Shock: Therapy for Black America  
by BC Publishers Glen Ford and Peter Gamble

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The national Black infrastructure has failed utterly to respond to the Katrina crisis – the wiping out of a majority Black city.

The Congressional Black Caucus, which claims to be the "conscience of the congress," has shown itself to be an appendage of the white House leadership. They slavishly followed Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's command to make the Democratic Party look good – as opposed to the Republicans – rather than directly address the crisis that was affecting their own people.

Forty-one of the forty-two Black members of congress obeyed Pelosi's edict, that the House Committee on Katrina be boycotted. They accepted the order that Democratic legislators would not attend the meetings of the Katrina committee, because it was stacked against the Democratic Party.

Of course, every committee of congress is stacked against the minority, Democratic Party. That's the way congress works. All committees of congress are controlled by the majority party. But Democrats go to committee meetings every day, faced with a Republican majority. Nancy Pelosi, however, was able to convince the Congressional Black Caucus, as a body, to stand down in the face of a horrific crisis: the displacement of hundreds of thousand of residents of New Orleans.

The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) failed to step up to the plate – to act as the legislators that folks voted them into office to be. Only Georgia congresswoman Cynthia McKinney broke the Pelosi-invoked boycott. She attended every session, and made good use of the experience, challenging the administration's witnesses every step of the way. The rest of the Black Caucus abstained from the hearings except for the occasional appearance of New Orleans Black Rep. William Jefferson, who, as a representative of the affected region, was given a pass by Pelosi.

Collectively, the CBC abdicated any semblance of leadership. They failed to make use of the forum in which the New Orleans debacle was being discussed. Why? Because they collectively had nothing to say. And, as a body, they deferred to the Minority Leader, Nancy Pelosi, who had decided that Katrina was not something that the Black Caucus should bother their minds about. She ordered them to boycott the Katrina hearings, and CBC chairman Mel Watt (NC) obliged her. Only Cynthia McKinney did her job, on our behalf.

So this is not a commentary about the minutia of legislation that has been introduced under the signatures of various Black congresspeople. None of it is going anywhere, anyway. It is about Black leadership, and its failings in the wake of the Katrina crisis. Black congressional leadership has been dragged around by the nose by Nancy Pelosi and the rest of the white folks who are indebted to corporations. They showed their true colors on the Iraq War, when only Cynthia McKinney, out of the whole Black Caucus, voted for the Murtha bill that called for an immediate exit. The Congressional Black Caucus left sister Cynthia out to dry on that one, too. She was the only CBC member to vote for the bill.

We have a dysfunctional Black Caucus. It cannot cope with the biggest crisis that has befallen our people...ever. A whole Black city wiped off the face of the map. Yet the CBC allows itself to be manipulated into towing the party line – a white line – based on the logic of a bunch of white consultants who are in search of some mythical white American heartland. That’s not where we live.

White folks live somewhere else. In their world, it is in the Democratic Party’s interest to find middling ground – which we don’t live on. So they speak to the middling grounders, who only exist in their minds.

What we must do is address our own concerns, and not become confused by the verbiage that has nothing to do with us. It is clear that our congresspersons have drunk too much of that wine. They are drunk on somebody else’s power – but it’s not ours.

It is in times of crisis that people show what they really have, and are actually about. Nobody but our congressional representatives can make billions of dollars move. That’s their job, the only reason that we bother to put them in office. But, instead, they posture and primp and don’t go to the hearings where they should be making our case, speaking our position.

Obviously, we need a new leadership. That Cynthia McKinney should be so isolated does not reflect badly on her – it shows the true nature of what we have accepted as the Black leadership class. They cannot fix their mouths to say that they are against the Iraq War, and they cannot bring themselves to make any case on our behalf, even when a whole city – New Orleans – was taken away from us. If the CBC cannot rise to that occasion, it is worthless.

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