

IS THE GULF COAST NOT PART OF OUR UNION

BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX - USA Today 1/26/07

There were few surprises in President George W. Bush's State of the Union address. He opened up with domestic policy, and was predictably myopic about our quagmire in Iraq, seemingly immune to the pressure that comes from both parties to get out of the ill-advised war. The President gets points for taking time to talk about immigration policy, and for putting new ideas for health care financing on the table. But how dare he talk of the State of the Union without mentioning the Gulf Coast, and especially New Orleans. Has our President decided that one of our nation's greatest devastations does not merit a mention?

To be sure, the federal government has set aside billions of dollars for Gulf Coast recovery. But sixteen months after Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coast and the levees broke in New Orleans, tens of thousands of people are still displaced. Some people are desperately trying to get home, but Governor Blanco's "Road Home" program has been paved with good intentions and poor delivery – just a fraction of the thousands who have applied for relief have received it. Habitable housing projects are being torn down to make way for "mixed use" housing, and no provisions have been made for the poor people who used to live in those projects. Children are being turned away from schools because there are not enough schools to accommodate them. Citizens have marched on City Hall to "stop the violence" of a current wave of murders, but the social infrastructure that might prevent youth crime is essentially nonexistent.

All of the challenges in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast can't be solved by federal government action. At the same time, a more sensitive president might at least acknowledge the slow pace of recovery and pledge to do whatever he can to help the citizens of the Gulf Coast. A more sensitive president might acknowledge the pain that people still feel in New Orleans and surrounding areas, but then again this is a President whose mother observed that people who fled New Orleans for the Houston Astrodome were "doing very well for themselves".

After the levees broke in New Orleans, wealthy New Orleanians openly said that the city's footprint needed to shrink, and that the city should look different "economically and demographically". At least one member of Congress said that Katrina had done what public policy could not do. And Loyola Law School professor Bill Quigly, who is litigating on behalf of New Orleans' poor, has noted that recovery policies have been so biased that "you might as well put up a sign that says poor people do not enter."

What ever happened to the notion of a nation? How could president Bush say that the state of the union is "good" when New Orleans has not yet recovered? If we can attempt to rebuild Baghdad but not New Orleans, what does that say about this country? And if Mr. Bush can spend half his State of the Union address talking about Iraq, while Katrina recovery doesn't merit a mention, what does this say about his priorities?

Julianne Malveaux is an economist and author.
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