

**WHO WILL GIVE VOICE TO THE VOICELESS?  
BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX**

Senator Edward M. Kennedy was a voice for the voiceless. He was passionate about health care, about children, about education. He understood poverty and often spoke of it. The fact that he touched so many lives was evidenced by the thousands that lined the streets of Boston simply to watch his casket drive by, or the lines that snaked toward his gravesite at Arlington Cemetery just a day after he was buried. It begs a cliché to say that he will be missed. More importantly, who in the senate will give voice to the voiceless?

Though Senator Kennedy was tremendously popular among democrats and republicans, his kind of liberalism was rare. Too often, now, when people speak of social programs, they are prepared to blame the poor, at least somewhat, for their plight. You hear the "hand up, not hand out" type of rhetoric coming from the lips of so-called liberals who have jumped on the "what's wrong with poor people" bandwagon. In a recession, the same thing is wrong with poor people as rich ones, but poor folks just have fewer reinforcements – jobs are disappearing, people are not spending, and if the economy is recovering it is doing so at a snail's pace.

And we are leaving people behind. Senator Kennedy was buried on the same day that a group of New Orleans activists put "hands around the dome" to commemorate the people who died in the Superdome as Hurricane Katrina raged in 2005. The commemoration, led by the African American Leadership Project and Mtangulizi Sanyika, is one way of reminding us that nearly 1900 people died in Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and that the city is still not back to normal. Thousands are still living in FEMA trailers, many have not received their "road home" money, and few have really been made whole. We spent \$700 billion to bail out bankers last year, but we have yet to fully assist New Orleans. Indeed, some say they have "Katrina fatigue" and don't want to hear about the event that took place four years ago. Move on, they say, stuff happens.

President Obama and his disaster recovery chief, Craig Fugate, have been instrumental in moving recovery along in New Orleans, approving as many as 75 projects – including libraries and schools – that had been bogged down in red tape because of complicated intergovernmental relationships, where boards, commissions, and elected bodies all have overlapping authority. In his Saturday radio address, the president said that red tape should not get in the way of progress in New Orleans. Eleven Cabinet officers have visited New Orleans to learn how they can help the city move to full recovery.

What does full recovery look like? What about those who were left behind? Through Hurricane Katrina and the broken levees (let's not forget that the levees did not have to break) we began to have a conversation about race, poverty and politics, a rather painful conversation that was fraught with denial, even as former President George Bush promised Senator Trent Lott a new home, and delivered far more dollars per capita to Mississippi than to Louisiana. We are still having uncomfortable

conversations about race, conversations that may be less, not more comfortable since President Obama's election.

Full recovery in New Orleans might include the rebuilding of Charity Hospital (maybe even the renaming of it), the hospital that was destroyed during Hurricane Katrina. Where do poor people go for health care now? Are they better off or worse off without the hospital they once relied on? Would they be assisted by the national health care plan the Obama administration has developed? A voice like Senator Edward Kennedy's is missing in this conversation. Who will replace him and, more importantly, who will speak out for the voiceless?

The Congressional Black Caucus will hold its annual Legislative Forum just a few weeks from now. There are sessions, I know, on the economy and the environment, on the status of women, and on the economic stimulus package. It would be a tragedy if there were not planned sessions on the status of the recovery in New Orleans, with reporting from some of the voices on the ground that we so rarely hear from. The CBC can be an effective voice for the voiceless, and they can also offer the Katrina voiceless a platform.