

Laura Bush takes umbrage: racism and the Republican Party

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In an interview with American Urban Radio Networks on Thursday, First Lady Laura Bush waxed indignant about recent suggestions that racism may have played a role in the government's slow reaction to the Hurricane Katrina disaster. "I think all of those remarks were disgusting," she declared, adding, "President Bush cares about everyone in our country."

Bush's "compassion" for American working people and the poor has been on display over the past two weeks, during which he remained on vacation at his Texas ranch even as the flood waters of Lake Pontchartrain were pouring into New Orleans, leaving more than 100,000 people, mostly poor and black, stranded without food, water or medical care. Hundreds of thousands more, white and black, living along the Gulf Coast saw their homes obliterated and their livelihoods destroyed by the storm.

Even now, nearly two weeks after the hurricane struck, the most basic services, such as medical care, are lacking, while New Orleans has been turned into an armed camp and evacuees are being herded into the equivalent of detention camps.

When Bush finally did get around to visiting the New Orleans area, stopping briefly at the airport, he cracked jokes about his footloose days as a young carouser in the South.

Bush and his top aides have refused to accept any responsibility for this catastrophe. They have revealed a level of indifference and contempt for the American people that have evoked revulsion and disgust around the world.

It is no wonder that millions of African Americans have seen in the events of the past two weeks grim reminders of the Jim Crow South of previous generations. Images of tens of thousands of poor blacks left to starve, corpses of babies and old people floating in putrid flood waters, and thousands more people, mostly black, herded like animals into stadiums surrounded by police cordons naturally strike a deep chord and provoke angry charges of racism.

Laura Bush is evidently oblivious to such feelings. Rather than taking umbrage over charges of racism, she would do well to look at her own family.

The former first lady Barbara Bush, Laura Bush's mother-in-law, earlier this week made a statement that can only reflect the outlook of a well-heeled bigot. Speaking of the thousands of flood survivors crammed into the Houston Astrodome, she said, "What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them."

"Scary?" Aside from the monumental insensitivity to the tragic plight of the evacuees and ignorance of the conditions of life that they face even in "normal" times, Barbara Bush's remarks reveal the outlook of those who find the prospect of living in the vicinity of poor blacks frightening and repulsive.

The fundamental social divide that has been laid bare by the hurricane disaster is that of class, not race. The decades of social reaction carried out by the American ruling elite and both of its major parties have produced a level of social and economic inequality unparalleled in modern US history. All sections of the working class have seen their living standards stagnate and decline, while the financial elite has funneled trillions of dollars into its own coffers through tax cuts, deregulation and the gutting of social programs.

The failure of the government to prepare for the hurricane and respond to the desperate plight of its victims is a failure of the profit system itself. It is rooted in the incompatibility between an economic system based on private ownership of the basic levers of economic life and the profit motive, and the needs and requirements of modern mass society.

However, such statements as those of Barbara Bush reflect one of the dirty secrets of American politics, which is the prevalence of racist sentiments within considerable sections of the American ruling elite, and the deliberate cultivation of such backward views for reactionary political ends. The Republican Party, in particular, has sought support among racist elements and allied itself to extreme right forces for whom racism is an essential ideological component.

In the wake of the hurricane, right-wing news programs

and radio shows allied with the Republican Party and the Bush administration have sought to foist blame onto the victims, hyping allegations of looting and violence. The news media as a whole in the first days of the crisis sought to tar those who remained in New Orleans under desperate conditions with the brush of criminality, and a distinct odor of racism pervaded much of its coverage.

White supremacist organizations with ties to the Republican Party, such as the Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC), have been more overt in their promotion of racism, reporting on its web site that whites in the Louisiana Superdome were being targeted by blacks. According to the CCC, the whites “had to band together to protect themselves from racial attacks.”

At the height of the Republican impeachment campaign against Bill Clinton, in December of 1998, it was revealed that two leading Republicans who played major roles in the attempt to bring down the Clinton administration, Georgia Congressman Bob Barr and then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi, had close and public ties to the CCC.

The news publication *National Review Online* on Friday published a comment by Jonah Goldberg (the son of another key player in the anti-Clinton crusade) that focused on the “cultural” factors behind the tragedy. In the course of a denunciation of Democrats who spoke about race, Goldberg enumerated some of the standard racist conceptions voiced by the right wing, including the view that welfare programs had created among blacks a culture of irresponsibility. Over the last 40 years, Goldberg wrote, “social and personal customs have been rewritten.” This has led, he said, “to an enormous cost for those without the resources to cope when the bill for risky behavior comes due.”

The same theme was to be found in a column by David Brooks, published in the *New York Times* on September 8. There is a “silver lining” to the hurricane disaster, Brooks wrote, which is that “Katrina was a natural disaster that interrupted a social disaster.” By separating tens of thousands of the most impoverished sections of the city from their homes and old neighborhoods, the hurricane “disrupted the patterns that have led one generation to follow another into poverty.”

The people who have been displaced must be “culturally integrated” if the same pattern is not to emerge again, Brooks declared. “The only chance we have to break the cycle of poverty is to integrate people who lack middle-class skills into neighborhoods with people who possess these skills and who insist on certain standards of behavior.”

There is a direct connection between the Republican Party of today and the cultivation of racist and segregationist forces in the South. For most of the first half of the twentieth

century, the Democratic Party incorporated the southern political establishment and defended its Jim Crow policies. However, as the national leadership of the Democrats moved to support civil rights legislation during the 1960s, the Republicans implemented a conscious strategy to capture the segregationist vote in the South. The 1964 Presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater openly appealed to these sentiments. While Goldwater was defeated overwhelmingly, he won five southern states, including those most affected by the hurricane: Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana.

In 1968, Richard Nixon ran for president on the basis of his “southern strategy,” which was a thinly disguised appeal to racism. Many prominent Democrats switched over to the Republicans during this period, without changing their racist views. These included figures such as former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, from Mississippi, and the former North Carolina Senator, Jesse Helms.

In the following decades, the Republican Party worked to expand its right-wing base by cultivating alongside racist forces the most reactionary forms of Christian fundamentalism. There was and remains a large degree of overlap between these components of the most active elements of the Republican Party’s base.

This does not alter the essentially reactionary role played by black Democrats such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, and various liberal and “radical” forces who seek to portray race as the determining factor in American social and political life. All such racial politics play into the hands of the American ruling elite and its unending efforts to divide the working class. They obscure the essential class divisions in America and play a critical role in the ideological and political subordination of the working class to the Democrats and the capitalist two-party system.

Racism, nevertheless, remains one of the political weapons of an American ruling class in deep crisis, of which George W. Bush is a particularly disgusting representative.



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