isn’t backward-looking but instead can seize the opportunity to address grave issues—such as the myriad ecological dangers spawned by our hydrocarbon economy—that status-quo politics neglects, like the New Orleans levees.

This new ferment is only just beginning, but the crisis is young, and the hunger for big reform is rapidly gaining momentum. The media haven’t paid much attention so far because the New Deal proposals probably sound like historic relics. But the aptness of the ideas—aggressive government intervention, integrated across many fronts—will become clearer to people if Democrats re-educate the electorate. That re-education can begin if progressives first provoke a big argument among Democrats themselves. What do they now believe about government’s obligations to society? This is a good fight to have and, besides, intramural political spats are always newsworthy. This one will be substantive as well. Terrible events have handed Democrats the material for a strong and enduring governing agenda.

George Bush, meet “Dr. New Deal.” Reactionary Republicans loathed FDR and sneered at his corny slogans, while he wickedly ridiculed them in return. The voters understood his spirit and forgave the mistakes. They laughed with him and loved him for caring.

**Classifying the Hurricane**

I was in New Orleans visiting my mother and other relatives less than a week before Katrina hit. Even though we already had an eye on the approaching hurricane, I had no thought, when I boarded the plane to leave, that the city I’ve known all my life would never be the same again.

I don’t have space or words to catalogue the horrors and outrages associated with the plight of New Orleans and its people. In any event, the basic story is now well-known, and we’re entering the stage at which further details mainly feed the voyeuristic sentimentalism that will help the momentarily startled corporate news media retreat gracefully to their more familiar role as court heralds. The bigger picture will disappear in the minutiae of timelines and discrete actions.

What will be lost is the central point that the destruction was not an “act of God.” Nor was it simply the product of incompetence, lack of empathy or cronyism. Those exist in abundance, to be sure, but they are symptoms, not ultimate causes. What happened in New Orleans is the culmination of twenty-five years of disparagement of any idea of public responsibility; of a concerted effort—led by the right but as part of a bipartisan consensus—to reduce government’s functions to enhancing plunder by corporations and the wealthy and punishing everyone else, undermining any notion of social solidarity.

I know that some progressives believe this incident will mark a turning point in American politics. Perhaps, especially if gas prices continue to rise. I suspect, however, that this belief is only another version of the cargo cult that has pervaded the American left in different ways for a century: the wish for some magical intervention or technical fix that will substitute for organizing a broad popular base around a clearly articulated, alternative vision that responds to most people’s pressing concerns. The greater likelihood is that within a month Democratic liberals will have smothered the political moment just as they’ve smothered every other opportunity we’ve had since Ronald Reagan’s election. True, Nancy Pelosi and others finally began to bark at the Bush Administration’s persisting homicidal negligence. But my hunch is that, as with Iran/contra, the theft of the 2000 election and the torrent of obvious lies that justified the war on Iraq, liberals’ fear of seeming irresponsibly combative and their commitment to the primacy of corporate and investor-class interests will lead them to aid and abet the short-circuiting of whatever transformative potential this moment has.

This will also obscure the deeper reality that lies beneath the manifest racial disparities in vulnerability, treatment and outcome. The abstract, moralizing patter about how and whether “race matters” or “the role of race” is appealing partly because it doesn’t confront the roots of the bipartisan neoliberal policy regime. It’s certainly true that George W. Bush and his minions are indifferent to, or contemptuous of, black Americans in general. They’re contemptuous of anyone who is not part of the ruling class. Although Bush and his pals are no doubt small-minded bigots in many ways, the racial dimension stands out so strikingly in part because race is now the most familiar—and apparently for many progressives the most powerful—language of social justice. For roughly a generation it seemed reasonable to expect that defining inequalities in racial terms would provoke some remedial response from the federal government. But for quite some time race’s force in national politics has been as a vehicle for reassuring whites that “public” equals some combination of “black,” “poor” and “loser”; that cutting public spending is aimed at weaning a lazy black underclass off the dole or—in the supposedly benign, liberal Democratic version—teaching blacks “personal responsibility.”

To paraphrase historian Barbara Fields, race is a language through which American capitalism’s class contradictions are commonly expressed. Class will almost certainly turn out to be a better predictor than race of who was able to evacuate, who drowned, who was left to fester in the Superdome or on overpasses, who is stuck in shelters in Houston or Baton Rouge, or who is randomly dispersed to the four winds. I’m certain that class is also a better predictor than race of whose emotional attachments to place will be factored into plans for reconstructing the city.

Of course, in a case of devastation so vast as this, class position provides imperfect insulation. All my very well connected, petit-bourgeois family in New Orleans are now spread across Mississippi and south Louisiana with no hint of when they will return home or what they’ll have to return to. Some may have lost their homes and all their belongings. But most of them evacuated before the storm. No one died or was in grave danger; no one was left on an overpass, in the Superdome or at the convention center. They were fortunate but hardly unique among the city’s black population, and class had everything to do with the terms of their survival.

Natural disasters can magnify existing patterns of inequality. The people who were swept aside or simply overlooked in this
making around reconstruction. But which black people? What plans? Reconstruction on what terms? I’ve seen too many black- and Latino-led municipal governments and housing authorities fuel real estate speculation with tax giveaways and zoning variances, rationalizing massive displacement of poor and other working-class people with sleight-of-hand about mixed-income occupancy and appeals to the sanctity of market forces.

The only hope we have for turning back the tide of this thuggish Administration’s commitment to destroy every bit of social protection that’s been won in the past century lies in finding ways to build a broad movement of the vast majority of us who are not part of the investor class. We have to be clear that what happened in New Orleans is an extreme and criminally tragic coming home to roost of the con that cutting public spending makes for a better society. It is a shocking foretaste of a future that many more of us will experience less dramatically, often quietly as individuals, as we lose pensions, union protection, access to healthcare and public education, Social Security, bankruptcy and tort protection, and as we are called upon to feed an endless war machine.

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**Bread, Roses & the Flood**

This time the Bush Administration could not hide the dead bodies—or the walking wounded whose abandonment by American society began not in the hurricane’s wake but many years earlier.

The only bright spot in this man-made disaster has been the wave of public outrage at the Administration’s abject failure to provide aid to the most vulnerable. Indeed, it is hard to think of a time, other than at the height of the civil rights movement, when the plight of poor black Southerners so deeply stirred the conscience of the nation. Perhaps Hurricane Katrina will go down in history alongside Bull Connor’s fire hoses in Birmingham and the Alabama Highway Patrol’s nightsticks at Selma as a catalyst for a new national self-awareness regarding the unfinished struggle for racial justice.

But a better historical analogy, although not one that immediately springs to mind, may be the Lawrence, Massachusetts, strike of 1912, best known for giving the labor movement the slogan “bread and roses.” Thousands of poor immigrant workers walked off their jobs in the city’s giant woolen mills to protest a wage reduction. Bill Haywood, leader of the Industrial Workers of the World, who had been invited in to help direct the strike, devised a plan to send the workers’ children to live with sympathetic families in other cities for the duration. The sight of the pale, emaciated children marching up Fifth Avenue transformed public opinion regarding the strike (leading the governor of Massachusetts to pressure the mill owners to accede to the workers’ demands). More important, even though by 1912 the Pro-

*(Continued on Page 24)*

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**FURTHER WORDS FROM GEORGE W. BUSH AFTER HE SAID TO FEMA CHIEF MICHAEL BROWN, ‘BROWNIE, YOU’RE DOING A HECKUVA JOB.’**

A qualified guy, I wish I had added.
Your résumé’s super, even if padded.
We wanted the best to lead FEMA’s forces.
And who would know more than a man who knows horses?
You saw that the storm was more than some showers.
And sent off a memo in four or five hours.
You found out that life in the Dome was not Super—
And only a day after Anderson Cooper.
A heckuva job! You know how to lead ’em.
We hope to award you the Medal of Freedom.
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