

US housing official: rebuilt New Orleans will have fewer poor blacks

By Jerry Isaacs
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President Bush's secretary of Housing and Urban Development acknowledged the administration's real vision for New Orleans when he told reporters last week that the city would have far fewer poor black residents once reconstruction is completed.

In an interview with the *Houston Chronicle*, HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson predicted New Orleans would slowly bring back as many as 375,000 people, but that only 35 to 40 percent of the population would be black. Prior to Hurricane Katrina the city had nearly 500,000 residents, more than two-thirds of whom were African-American.

"Whether we like it or not, New Orleans is not going to be 500,000 people for a long time," Jackson said. "New Orleans is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again."

Jackson, who was appointed by Bush to aid in the reconstruction of the city, made it clear that such an outcome was not simply the product of the hurricane and flooding, but the desired policy of the Bush administration and the city's political and financial elite.

Because the worst hit areas were low-income minority neighborhoods, Jackson added, they may never be repopulated. "I'm telling you, as HUD secretary and having been a developer and a planner, that's how it's going to be," he said.

Jackson also acknowledged he had told New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin not to rebuild the city's predominantly poor and black Ninth Ward neighborhood. "I told him [Nagin], I think it would be a mistake to rebuild the Ninth Ward. I said I'm not sure what we do with it, or if we decide to build in the Ninth Ward we have to look at different ways of building."

The HUD secretary suggested that the Ninth Ward

was too flood-prone to rebuild, repeating suggestions from local officials that it should be bulldozed. Jackson made no similar proposals, however, about more affluent areas of the city which are just a vulnerable, including Lakeview, a predominantly upper-middle-class white neighborhood that was overwhelmed by floodwaters from nearby Lake Pontchartrain.

Simply put, the majority of the poor have been forced to evacuate, Jackson said, and they are not coming back.

The federal government has done nothing to provide shelter or low-cost housing for the majority of the 350,000 families displaced by Hurricane Katrina, and many are little more than refugees spread across the US. Two weeks before President Bush's mid-October goal for moving victims out of Red Cross and other emergency shelters, more than 100,000 people still reside in such makeshift lodging and another 400,000 are in hotel rooms costing up to \$100 a night, according to an October 2 report in the *Washington Post*.

Plans to provide housing assistance vouchers and to set up large-scale trailer camps have not materialized. To date, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has set up less than 1,400 mobile homes in Louisiana for displaced people, with about 1,100 occupied by workers engaged in the New Orleans recovery effort.

Well aware that the lack of affordable housing and employment will make it impossible for most poor people to return to New Orleans, FEMA officials are now openly encouraging low-income workers to move elsewhere. Evacuees, said FEMA spokesman Eugene Kinerney, "need to consider long-term housing in areas where there is available rental stock and prospects for employment to take care of other needs, such as food."

Alphonso Jackson's comments that New Orleans

would no longer be a black-majority city have certainly been welcomed by the most bigoted elements. At heart, however, he expresses the contempt for the working class shared by all layers of the wealthy elite, black and white. Jackson, who is black, was the president of American Electric Power—Texas, a \$13 billion utility company, before his nomination by Bush to be HUD deputy secretary in 2001.

Indeed, Jackson only said publicly what the business and political establishment in New Orleans and throughout the US have been discussing privately. For these elites the hurricane is seen as a golden opportunity to rid the city of “undesirable” elements—through a sort of “class-cleansing”—and a chance to reshape New Orleans in their own interests, with further tax cuts and billions in government rebuilding contracts.

This retrograde sentiment was captured in the comments of one real estate appraiser cited by the New Orleans *Times Picayune*, who said, “This may sound mean and rotten, but if we can get rid of 100,000 of the lower class that are takers and not givers to the community, we’ll be much better off.”

Victimized already by the neglect and incompetence shown by every level of government, hundreds of thousands of displaced working class families in New Orleans will have no say-so in how the city is rebuilt.

This was made clear in the personnel selected by Mayor Nagin for the 17-member “Bring New Orleans Back” commission which will direct the city’s reconstruction. Included are multimillionaire real estate developer Joseph C. Canizaro and shipbuilding mogul Donald T. Bollinger, major Republican donors with close personal relationships to President Bush. After writing a quarter-million dollar check to the Republican National State Elections Committee in 2000, Canizaro said, “You have to participate in government if you want to get something out of it.”

Speaking about the disaster which has befallen hundreds of thousands of New Orleans residents, Canizaro, who lives in a European-style mansion that took four years to build, said the hurricane had created a “clean sheet to start again” and “some very big opportunities.”

Also included on the commission are representatives of the city’s black elite, including Alden McDonald Jr., the chief executive of Liberty Bank and Trust

Company, Daniel Packer, the chief executive of the New Orleans subsidiary of Entergy Corporation, and David White, a former business associate of Mayor Nagin.

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