



Katrina Housing Grant Looted

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Editor's Note: HUD recently approved a \$600 million grant in congressional funds to expand the port in Gulfport, Miss. while tens of thousands of Katrina victims still live in FEMA trailer homes. NAM contributing writer Michael Datcher says that the government is failing at its job to help the poor.

"A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization," said Samuel Johnson, the great 18th century English author and critic.

The U.S. government has just failed its latest pop quiz.

Last week, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Alphonso Jackson approved a plan that will divert \$600 million in congressional funds specifically earmarked for Hurricane Katrina-related low-income housing relief along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Where's the loot going? To expand the port at Gulfport, Miss., which state officials say suffered \$50 million in damage during the Category 4 storm. An uncivilized move when you consider that according to most estimates more than 30,000 people in the region are still living in FEMA trailers and mobile homes. The Rockefeller Institute of Government, during its study of the Gulf Coast region, found that, "By far, the one issue that dominates the recovery effort is housing -- that is, the lack of it. In all of the hard-hit areas -- even those where economies seem to be mending -- the problem of affordable housing continues."

If housing is the critical issue, why would the state of Mississippi and the federal government collude to take money out of the pockets of the neediest people? Mississippi officials, led Haley Barbour, a former lobbyist and Republican National Committee Chair and current Republican governor, said that the money wasn't enough to address the building needs of the approximately 170,000 dwellings that were destroyed, so they thought the one-half billion plus dollars could be best used by giving it away to business developers tied to the port.

A reasonable solution would have been to spend \$50 million to cover the repairs of the port then immediately start using the remaining \$550 million to help displaced Mississippians transition out of trailers and back into homes. Though a port expansion could eventually create jobs (state officials allege 1300 in the next 10 years), these American citizens need help now.

America is supposed to work like this: citizen pays taxes to support the government and that government provides support to citizens during natural disasters. That's fair trade. That's moral. That's civilized.

An even more unseemly aspect of this situation is that the congressional funds came through the Community Development Block Grant Program, which typically requires that 70 percent of the grant go toward people with low and moderate income. Diverting CDBG funds reserved for the poor to wealthy developers is another reminder of what's in the room with all of us -- a white elephant with a dark tan -- and short pockets.

The poorest state in the nation, Mississippi also has the highest percentage of black residents of any state -- 37 percent according to the 2000 census. The black folk in this poor state are overwhelmingly poor, and were

disproportionately affected by Katrina because of their collective poverty. This shell game where money comes up missing is about wind-jacking African Americans because they didn't have a wind-breaker. It's about taking advantage of tax paying American citizens at a time when years of paying taxes should be paying dividends -- during their period of greatest need. It's about state and federal government officials telling poor black people: If you don't like it, catch the next hurricane back to Africa.

http://news.ncmonline.com/news/view_article.html?article_id=bf4e40caca9fd3c8f8f1e6dad33a9a3a

In one of the most ironic elements of this debacle, HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson, who approved the scam, is an African American. The Bush appointee is part of a growing list of black folk willing to be more loyal to the president than to the people they're supposed to be serving. Democratic Congressman Barney Frank, quoted in the Los Angeles Times said, "Haley Barbour is a very powerful Republican politician (Barbour worked in the George H.W. administration and is a close friend of 'W'). My fear is that he went over the HUD secretary's head and the White House intervened."

Jackson, of course, would never cop to such a turn of events, especially as head of a federal department charged with the mission of supporting the housing needs of economically-disadvantaged people, especially at a time when so many members of his own race are suffering because of a national catastrophe and are in desperate need of affordable housing.

Yet, during an April 28, 2005 talk to a national minority real estate consortium, Jackson relayed a story about selecting a proposal from a minority contractor who'd been trying to secure a HUD contract for 10 years. Jackson told the audience, "He didn't get the contract. Why should I reward someone who doesn't like the president, so they can use funds to try to campaign against the president? Logic says they don't get the contract. That's the way I believe."

That's the way an uncivilized man believes when his loyalty is to the rich white man who appointed him, not the poor black people who need him.

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