

Center for American Progress



A PANEL DISCUSSION ON:

**“NEW HOPE FOR NEW ORLEANS: PROGRESSIVE
VISIONS FOR RENEWING THE GULF”**

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**10:00 AM – 11:30 AM
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2005**

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ROBERT GORDON: – numbers. You obviously have the pictures that words can't describe that all of us have seen in recent weeks not just of suffering, but also of the economic and racial divides that exist not just in the Gulf, but across America.

Tonight, President Bush will offer his plan to move forward. So far, unfortunately, his administration seems to be elevating ideology over common sense, rejecting proven responses to disaster, like housing vouchers, disaster relief Medicaid. It suspended prevailing wage laws, which had the consequence of giving a pay cut to people who have already lost a tremendous amount because of Katrina. The morning papers were full of stories suggesting the administration wants to use the Gulf's victims as test subjects for a series of ideological experiments that have already failed someplace else.

Unfortunately, the approach seems to be of a piece with the conservatism that contributed to the Katrina response. It's a conservatism that hates not just big government and overregulation, but any government and any regulation; that treats public jobs and public resources as goodies for friends; and that enriches the wealthy and well-heeled rather than providing basics like disaster relief for everybody.

So although that conservatism deserves to be part of Katrina's wreckage, there's a different question: what progressive vision can be born right now? This is the time for progressives to offer their ideas for how we move forward, and that really begins with a vision for rebuilding in the Gulf and renewing the lives of hundreds of thousands of our displaced fellow citizens.

What do we want New Orleans and the Gulf to look like in 10 years, and what do we need to do now to get there? How can we honor our deepest commitments, that Americans deserve the tools to help themselves and lead decent lives, that no American should be forced to live amid concentrated and debilitating poverty, and that government has a limited but essential role in achieving these goals? Those are things we'll be talking about today. One thing is certain, that the decisions made in the next few months will shape the lives of millions of Americans over the next few decades.

So without more from me, let me introduce our really terrific panelists.

Mayor Marc Morial served as mayor of New Orleans from 1994-2002. On his watch, crime dropped by 60 percent, a corrupt police department was reformed, and community reinvestment initiatives created over 15,000 new homeowners. After leaving office with a 70 percent approval rating, Mayor Morial became the eighth president and CEO of the venerable National Urban League, one of America's leading civil rights and community-based organizations. In that role, Mayor Morial has undertaken an array of new initiatives including an empowerment agenda to close the equality gaps for African Americans and other ethnic groups across American life.

Allida Black is research professor of history and international affairs at George Washington University. She's project director and editor of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, a historian of the New Deal, and the author of several books about Mrs. Roosevelt and her time. Professor Black was born and raised in Memphis, and she's also written a biography of University of Tennessee basketball coach Pat Summitt.

Steve Kest is the national executive director of ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Based in New Orleans, ACORN is another of the most imposing community organizations in America, with over 175,000 members and over 800 neighborhood chapters organizing to empower Americans who are too often ignored in the political process. Steve has been with ACORN since 1975.

Joel Rogers is a professor of law, political science, and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is, among other things, a MacArthur Foundation fellow, the founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategies, also known as COWS, a co-founder of the Apollo Alliance for Energy Independence, and a widely consulted expert on high-road strategies that he's developed for metropolitan and regional growth. His many books include *Metro Futures*.

And last, but very far from least, Congressman Artur Davis represents Alabama's 7th District, which begins in Birmingham and includes much of central and western Alabama. Although he joined Congress only in 2003, he's a member of the senior whip team for the Democratic caucus, co-chair of the House New Democrat Coalition, and a key player in enacting several new laws, including one offering down-payment assistant for first-time homebuyers. Although his district was not directly affected by Katrina, it's now home to some of its victims, and like New Orleans and other regions we've all learned so much about recently, Alabama's 7th contains some of the wealthiest areas in the South, and also some of the poorest counties in America.

We have a packed panel, so we've asked everyone to speak for 10 minutes. I'm going to disappear now. If you haven't turned off your cell phone –

MS. : Can you turn up the volume?

MR. GORDON: Can we increase the volume? Great, thank you. And without further ado, I will turn it over to Mayor Morial.

MARC H. MORIAL: Thank you very, very much. Good morning. Let me thank the Center for American Progress. It's an honor to be with all of these distinguished panelists, and for an opportunity to think about what I think is a tragedy of epic proportions; a tragedy unforeseen, unequalled in history; and it's something we're going to look back on as a seminal moment in American history.

I just want to certainly paint the picture of now a nation that has one million people who are displaced. One million people who are homeless, who've been

disconnected from their jobs; who do not know if when they return to their homes their homes will be habitable or livable, whether their community will be viable.

This discussion that we are going to have today I think should primarily center around how to rebuild the lives of the people who have been displaced. Rebuilding New Orleans, the Gulf Coast region, is more than rebuilding buildings or rebuilding physical infrastructure because New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, like any community, is much more than that. What makes New Orleans are its people: their character, their personality, their diversity, and what they've given to this nation.

I think a lot of people saw – as the vivid photos, the vivid video of people stuck at those shelters of last resort at the Dome and at the Convention Center – saw urban poverty for the first time. Some people were surprised at what they saw, but many of us who've worked to give voice to the voiceless, who've worked on those issues for generations, were not surprised. The urban poverty that people saw in New Orleans exists right here in this city; exists in Baltimore and New York and Cleveland and Chicago, in every major American city – maybe differences to some degree, to some percentage – and I think people saw that.

And I know that as we talk about the rebuilding, there needs to be, and there has to be, a broad public conversation and discussion, but I want to kind of lay out what we've been talking about and what we've been advocating for at the National Urban League. And I do it in the context of, really, a number of things.

One, obviously, I'm a native of New Orleans. It's my home; it is not where I've lived for the last two years, but a place where I still own a home, where my family is. And I don't think – all of us who are natives, and many who are not natives, but certainly all of us who are natives have been angry and tearful of what we've seen – befuddled, betrayed. The level of emotion – if you can imagine the thought of losing your city, losing your community, not knowing where your friends and family members are, not knowing if the institutions that you held dear will be there when you return.

But what I'd like to just lay out very quickly is what we've called, and what I presented to the Senate Homeland Security Committee on yesterday, the Katrina Victims' Bill of Rights. This storm – this natural disaster has left victims, survivors, people who are displaced, and I think that if we look at Katrina, then the standard for how the nation responds to a difficult human tragedy is and must be 9/11.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the nation created a victims' compensation fund to directly compensate victims. They were survivors of those deceased, they were those who were injured, they were those who suffered other losses. It was a fund that paid out over the course of three or so years \$7 billion. 9/11 created a victims' compensation fund. We should settle for no less than a Katrina victims' compensation fund to compensate those who've suffered so much.

And people, we can debate the details. There was a debate about details in 9/11, but we ought to affirm the principle that if it was the correct response when Wall Street and the defense establishment were attacked, then it's the correct response if Main Street in New Orleans and Biloxi and Gulfport and Waveland and St. Bernard Parish have been wiped out.

Second, I believe, and I know that the Senate rejected this yesterday, but there needs to be an independent commission to examine the mistakes. The mistakes were many, and they occurred at many levels. They occurred at the city level, the state level, and at the national level. And I say that as one that managed hurricane preparedness and response, disaster preparedness and response. There were many mistakes that were made even against the backdrop of this being the most tremendous hurricane of all time. And there has to be a commission – I support the idea of Congress having hearings, but I don't think it ought to be – that that's enough. I think that a commission is what the victims, what the survivors, I think what the nation needs because you're not going to fix the situation unless you figure out everything that went wrong and come up with the appropriate responses.

And one of the fixes, obviously, is with FEMA. At the very least, the Congress could consider writing the requirements for the FEMA director into the statute. Write them into the statute. You need more than experience with horses. You need experiences with disasters, with emergency preparedness. We'd never think of hiring a non-lawyer as attorney general, a non-doctor as surgeon general. This is an important position that requires some significant training and experience and qualifications. Write the qualifications into the statute.

Also, under the victims' bill of rights – and Congressman Davis, I applaud you for introducing legislation that is designed to provide and protect the voting rights of the displaced citizens who should continue to have a right to vote in their home state, their home parishes, in their home cities. And Congressman Davis' bill – I know he'll talk about – gives them the same sort of treatment or allows them to avail the same sort of absentee voting process as people in the military. That's important. We're in uncharted territory.

And the final component of the victims' bill of rights is that the rebuilding of New Orleans needs to be an inclusive process. I'm offended by people who say rebuild New Orleans as some sort of gated community, as some little tony outpost. That's not what created jazz music. That's not what created Mardi Gras. That's not what created the streets and the institutions that produced the beautiful music of Wynton Marsalis or Harry Connick. It wasn't some sterile environment. It was a real community in a real city with neighborhoods and the goal should be to rebuild every neighborhood.

Now, there may be some reality checks against that, but the goal ought to be to rebuild every neighborhood. And the process ought to be an inclusive process that includes everyone, with the people of New Orleans having the largest voice because it is their community, tempered by the reality that it's going to take federal resources and state

resources and the private sector to be able to orchestrate the rebuilding. So I don't know what mechanism or what process that ought to take, what strategies ought to be utilized today, but I think that if we can agree on a fundamental framework for rebuilding, I think we can do it.

The final question, the final thing I'd like to simply address, is should New Orleans be rebuilt? It has to be rebuilt. It must be rebuilt. Would one ask that question if it were Washington? Would one ask that question if it were Miami? Would one ask that question if it were Boston or Los Angeles or San Francisco or Chicago? New Orleans is not a postcard. New Orleans is not a movie. New Orleans for some may be a place they visit and have a good time, but for many, many people it is home. It is home. And today people are dispossessed. They are disadvantaged. They are displaced from the place they call home and they want to go back and they want to go home, even though many people have been just through one of the worst experiences of their lives.

So I say that and certainly thank everybody and look forward to the discussion. Thank you.

MR. GORDON: Thank you.

ALLIDA M. BLACK: My job is not just to sing the glory, if you will, of New Orleans culture. My job is to put a historical framework on this. We've talked a lot in the past few weeks about the Great Fire in Chicago, the San Francisco earthquake, but these, I think, really miss the point because the point here is what can we learn – says the shortest person on the panel as she scoots up, sorry – what can we learn from emergency programs in our past that dealt with the immense dislocation, bewilderedness, personal sacrifice, economic tragedy, and dislocation?

Now, there are lots of examples that we can pick, but I would like to go back to Roosevelt because there are great examples of what worked and what did not work. I'm not sitting here advocating a new New Deal with, you know, unregulated public spending. What I'm saying is let's look at the brain trust, let's look at the planning, let's look at the independent commissions that Roosevelt established before we had the buzzword for them and then let's have the patriotic guts, if you will, to implement the recommendations of the independent commission.

And so what I'd like to do is to run you through briefly four independent commissions that dealt with revitalizing the country during the Great Depression, link that to specific populations within New Orleans and in the Gulf Coast, and then make some recommendations for a framework that we should use to approach and design – with which to approach and design new policy.

The first is we have to – it's just fundamental that people understand that recovery also engages relief, but relief cannot last if there's not systematic reform. And that is the one thing that all of us who study the economic and the social history of the New Deal conclude.

What do we mean? How is this applicable? Well, let's take the young people of New Orleans. I talked to friends of mine last night who are natives of New Orleans and they tell me that more than 50 percent of the high school students in New Orleans drop out. Let's take that and compare that to the 250,000 youth who roamed the country in 1933 and 1934 who had nothing. Their parents had lost everything, they had no schools. So what did Roosevelt do? He set up the CCC.

I am not arguing for military-run camps. I'm talking about what worked from the CCC. What worked is a specific program that was targeted to dislocated, orphaned, independent-living young people from the ages of 14 to 25, that also gave them education at night while they worked on jobs and received a stipend. How effective was this? 55,000 people got literacy training. 5,000 people completed their high school education. 39 people even graduated college while they were working at night receiving stipends. So any – any relief program must include an education component.

The second thing: let's look at people who are already in the workplace either looking for jobs, having – barely holding on or having their jobs yanked out from under them. FDR put into play four programs, none of which worked completely. But it's important, I think, for us to look at what worked, why it failed, and draw lessons from that.

The first is the CWA: the Civil Works Administration. I tell my students it's "big bucks for big projects." Run by Harold Ickes I, the tightest budgetary man in the history of the White House. He didn't earn the nickname "the Old Curmudgeon" for nothing. He controlled nickels so hard that you could have the buffalo indented on your hand before it left. It was the most graft-free revitalization project in the history of the United States, but it was short-lived.

What did it build? The Grand Coulee Dam, TVA, the Hoover Dam. It worked in terms of recovering industry, but it did not work in terms of having wages come down to the employees because before you build a dam, you've got to have steel, you've got to have concrete, right? Well, that doesn't help the people that are building the dam. Also, it was a short-lived project so it was cyclical employment that also brought cyclical unemployment. As one part of the project finished, they lost their jobs and other people went to work. We can't do that again.

How did Roosevelt learn that lesson? Roosevelt then set up the PWA – the Public Works Administration – because he certainly understood that just having employment during the winter was not enough. So Harry Hopkins, working with a telephone and a desk outside Roosevelt's office – not even an office of his own – in two weeks put 4 million people to work.

Now let me tell you what those 4 million people did. After all, I am a historian and I came with numbers. They built 500,000 miles of road, 40,000 schools, 3,500 playgrounds and sports venues, and they sent 50,000 teachers into classrooms. What did

this do? It didn't pay people stipends; it paid them wages. And with wages, people were able to reclaim some of the property that they lost, but again FDR was afraid of the price tag, even though there was a strong public/private partnership, so he decided to balance the budget – well, bring the budget more into balance and in fact eliminated the PWA. That didn't work. There were still thousands and thousands – well, a million – millions of Americans unemployed.

So finally what he did, through executive order, was to establish the Works Progress Administration, which in its six-year history employed 2,112,200 people to work on building 2,500 hospitals, 500 miles of road, 1,000 airports, 5,900 schools, 3,000 miles of sewer lines, and 8,500 courthouses, police and fire stations, and football stadiums. New Orleans – the Gulf Coast.

Now, this is the project that worked, but it was also fraught with corruption. Why? Because in order to get Congress along, FDR sent federal money, but then let local communities in charge of the hire and firing, which – not local job corps people, but local corporations who, in fact, built their own bases. So it was – while it worked, it was an open door for graft, which in fact enraged FDR because FDR's whole purpose was to create employment that would, in fact, provide adequate relief – be work-based. FDR hated cash relief or the dole, and he wanted work diversified enough to help people maintain their job skills and learn and improve their employability.

I think this is the key component. Any work relief that we have must enable people to improve their job skills. We can talk about rebuilding New Orleans. I don't want to rebuild New Orleans. I don't want to rebuild the Gulf Coast. I'm Southern. I want to revitalize it. I want it back. I want it back in all of its splendor. Does that mean that we should have some huge public works project? No. What it means is that we've got to figure out a way, building on the negotiation strategies that FDR and his economists introduced was to work with private corporations with large federal money, with federal oversight, with huge inspector generals monitoring how the government should be spent – how the government should spend the money.

So what are the applicable lessons? Well, the paper that I wrote is in your packet, so I'd just like to run them down rapidly. First, build to last. More than 70 years later, most of the New Deal structures are still in play.

Second, federal dollars should go to private firms engaged in projects proposed by local governments. Third, spending on major projects helps industry before it alleviates the suffering of the displaced. Fourth, money should be earned – money earned in all degrees possible should stay within the local affected communities. Fifth – and this is the lesson from the Dust Bowl and from the Great Connecticut Flood – ecological protections must be paramount when rebuilding industries, which helped exacerbate the horrific consequences of national disasters. Sixth, revitalize, don't just rebuild. The reasons economic and physical infrastructure also increased its vulnerability.

So what do I think we should do? I think outside the public policy realm, in terms of using the – not proposing new laws, but I think that we should partner with local and national organizations who can train those who want to return to help rebuild their communities. Habitat, for example, is a perfect example. Build on the hurricane response to Hurricane Andrew and house those who wish to return on BRAC'ed military installations, communities of Quonset huts, and mobile homes, not in permanent situations like in Slidell, Louisiana, but as a way to help people have shelter while they are rebuilding their homes.

Third, secure the cooperation of those building supply corporations with branches in the regions to help train citizens with building skills who want to come back and help. And encourage communities across the country to adopt communities or institutions under reconstruction and dedicate supplies, money, volunteer and skilled labor to help them. Just as schools, churches, civic associations, professional groups responded after 9/11, a nationwide campaign should challenge them to do so again.

JOEL ROGERS: Thank you, Allida.

I think that before it was a real disaster, a natural disaster, New Orleans was a bit of a social and economic disaster, as Robert was alluding to at the outset. And as we all know, it had incredibly high rates of concentrated poverty, relatively low wages, very low rates of unionization, really bad health statistics, and a not very sufficiently diversified industrial base.

And I think in general, the task for the rebuilding of New Orleans – and I certainly agree with the mayor that it has to be rebuilt. It has to be rebuilt not just for the political reasons, but for – I don't know – geopolitical ones, if you will. New Orleans' historical stuff comes – prominence comes not from jazz and all that cultural things that people like to talk about and that is – continues to be appealing, but the fact that it is the gateway to the American river system, and water transport is a very cheap way and remains a cheap way – even as Alan Greenspan continues to remind us that the economy is getting lighter every day – for moving high weight/relatively low value – you know, high weight-to-value commodities of various sorts. A simple way to think about POSL – the Port of Southern Louisiana – and New Orleans is that it moves the agricultural commodities – the bulk of agricultural commodities out of the U.S. – the soybean, corn, and other stuff – and it moves the bulk of industrial commodities into the American industrial system. And it may be one of the most infeasible places to build a city, but it's also one of the most necessary ones in the U.S. case, so don't think of this as a tourist trap that can be dispensed with, or simply a form of life that we don't want to get rid of, or a destruction that we want to walk away from the people who've lost their homes. Think of it as a thing of significant political or economic importance as well.

That said, I think the development in New Orleans and development in the Gulf in general was an extreme instance of what I like to call “low-road” economic development practice. And this is not the fault only of the Bush administration, whose relief efforts, of

course, have been accurately characterized as both callous and inept and racist, and continue to be, I think, relatively stupid and ideologically driven, as Robert pointed out.

But the blame on economic development goes to both parties, so we can be resolutely 501(c)3 nonpartisan here and attack basically everyone. (Laughter.) You know, what's happened in America, as we know I think, since the early 1970s is that basically all the income growth has gone to people the very top of the income distribution. Workers have not seen the gains of productivity achieved since that time. We've had a massive deregulation, de-unionization which is beginning to erode our standard of living in significant ways.

We've also had a pattern of growth over the past generation or two which is essentially sprawl-based; not smart growth, but what you might call 'dumb growth,' which is both threatening to the environment and eventually threatening to the stability of the neighborhoods and those income distributions. And over the same period we haven't had a government which has moved particularly aggressively in defending the interest of the bulk of the population, a.k.a. the working class and the working poor, whose incomes, in fact – disposable incomes are lower now than it were 30 years ago. Okay.

So I think New Orleans presents the opportunity to – in one of the worst instances of this way of doing business to change that way of doing business. Begin to close off the low road which is low wages and inequality, relatively low productivity, low value capture locally, environmental degradation, and unaccountable government, and use New Orleans to try to construct – or the Gulf region generally to try to construct a high road of what? All the good stuff. High wages and a higher productivity and profits in local capture of those things needed to support those higher wages. Low waste, both in production and in general environmental footprint and something that takes into account certain natural constraints that do exist. And something which is much more accountable in its governance and it applies not only to formal institutions of governance, but in general to incorporate the social will and impose that a little bit over the economy. But that involves adding values as well as value to that economy.

Okay, how much to do that in New Orleans and the Gulf? I don't know the details of that situation well and I think one of the first things people in Washington and elsewhere – a city that I would, you know, consider possible – you know, on the list of destruction, but just joking. (Laughter.) You know, maybe earlier than New Orleans – should keep in mind is that we don't have a lot of those particulars but they certainly are – (cell phone ringing) – this is an amazing amount of noise here. That's not me, is it?

MS. BLACK: It's not me either.

MR. ROGERS: Okay.

REP. DAVIS: It don't sound that pretty.

MR. ROGERS: Yeah. (Laughter.) Can I just wait on this? This is not me. Whose cell phone is this? Okay.

MR. MORIAL: It's entertainment.

MR. ROGERS: Yeah. It is entertainment, but it's very distracting.

Okay. What that would mean in the reconstruction effort. Here's a basic principles of the reconstruction effort. One, don't do what the president is currently doing which is to abolish, you know, the existing and longstanding wage standards. Now, you want wage standards and you want environmental standards. You want to get people enough income for doing the work, which Allida has in part described, that the work is worth doing and that they can begin to sustain reasonable living standards.

It's amazing that in New York or in New Orleans, you know, the hospitality industry wages and the hotel wages and the tourism stuff, all of which are relatively low in general sectors of the economy in terms of wages, are really a fraction of what they are in more unionized settings like Las Vegas. I'm for not abolishing prevailing wages, but basically apply them all over. Okay? So prevailing wages, wage norms.

Second, you want to do serious industry plans to grow value within the region. New Orleans basically hasn't done this. It talks a lot about tourism and it talks about attracting the creative class, you know, the college-educated people who are drawn to its cultural stuff, but it has not done a particularly good job. You can compare it to Houston here, for example, on its management of the port in generating good, well-paying jobs for the working class. You've got to begin to do that.

We do know how to begin to do that. You can look at other port-based cities. For examples, I'd recommend the Seattle example and the Houston example. There are ways of growing cities – you know, middle-class cities out of major strategic ports. I'd recommend that that would be the place to start. But basically throughout the industrial landscape, you want to basically do deals in New Orleans that looks at the lumpiness in the economy and tries to add value within its different sectors of the economy which basically hasn't done – hasn't happened yet.

Third, as Allida has emphasized and the mayor as well, you need to connect that revived industrial system to effective systems of human capital formation, a.k.a. education. You want to build an educational system. This is what New Orleans in my idea would look like in 10 years in which you have both pre-K through 12, then also 14 and 16 education, that was basically seamless; that was done according to standards where the standards were, in fact, adequately funded for achievement in which you had credentialing of the skills at the end that were actually connected to those more organized industries. That is the second move you'd need to make.

Fourth, it would be a system – a city in which the transportation and housing options were available on equal basis to all. One of the things that was striking about

New Orleans is the incredible concentration of poverty. The fact that a disproportionate share of the population does not have access to private transportation and the solution to that I don't think is to give everybody cars, though that might not be a bad first start, but to actually build a transportation system, a transit-based development, so-called smart development and mixed-use development in which you try to use public money to leverage private development money to make sure that you ensure neighborhoods have real choice.

I'd certainly recommend a scaled application of the Hope VI principles in housing reconstruction that Cisneros tried to do to the New Orleans housing market, but I'd also recommend that you look at a variety of transportation options to reduce the cost of that, especially for poor households where it runs in like 20 percent of their current cost, and that you make it possible for people to get around – even for people to get around through walking and nearby to shopping and to employment and so on, or at least less car-reliant. You want to reduce that environmental footprint.

And then on that footprint finally, just before we get to government, there is stuff you could do on energy and the environment itself. In addition to shoring up the levees and getting the coastal gates back in order and rebuilding the outlying port things, you want to obviously let the silt begin to build up in the delta. You want to begin to reconstruct the physical environment in ways that we basically know how to do, even though we haven't done them.

But you want to also look at the built environment. Yeah, you need jobs, but you will, in fact, need a bunch of buildings and I see no reason in the world why those buildings shouldn't be built as green as possible. That will tremendously reduce their environmental footprint both in energy use and water use and other things. We know how to do this, too. It could actually be a – improbably enough, a growth industry in New Orleans where the sun beats down unmercifully on houses and we could – I don't know – in some way use New Orleans as a way of securing the market for certain sorts of renewables. In any case, that should be done. It's the cheaper way of doing housing. It uses vastly more labor than energy inefficient housing and it would be good for the environment, good for the workers, good for the neighborhood construction, et cetera. I would hope that New Orleans became a sort of Apollo city, one of the many cities that we in the Apollo Alliance, which is dedicated to achieving American – sustainable American energy independence in 10 years, are (recurring?) to its basic programs to make themselves energy-efficient. New Orleans certainly has that capacity and that could be realized.

And then finally and this is what Steve will principally be talking about and the mayor talked about and Allida talked about to some degree, there's got to be a process which has to start more or less now, which cannot be secretive and stupid and arrogantly assuming it knows the solutions before it's asked the problems – asked about the problems, but it has to proceed relatively quickly. And I would like that to be not only governed by business elites or local political elites, but informed by best practice in other cities in America; in the academic community, which in fact does have something to

offer; and also international best practice in how to do smart growth, dense development with a narrow environmental footprint and basically the wage floors and means of people advancing through those wage ladders to actually build a stable middle-class city.

Jim Jacobs used to observe that the middle class doesn't – isn't attracted to cities; cities produce the middle class. So I would like to see New Orleans as a city in 10 years that wasn't so much concerned with showing up on top-ten lists of one sort or another, but it was producing a stable middle class. I think that requires it go back very seriously to its core strengths in the port and the historic reasons of its importance and it interpret that in new millennium guise that is more tutored by norms – contemporary norms on race and one will hope in old fashion norms and equality than the past pattern of its development has had. So from high rollers to the high road is what I think should be done.

STEVEN KEST: Thank you, Joel.

So I think generally there is pretty much agreement on the types of outcomes we want to see. I mean the real challenge, of course, is how we get there and I'm going to speak for that from our perspective with ACORN and from a perspective as a community organizer.

And just to throw out something about the challenge here, ACORN has or had a very large vibrant organization in New Orleans: 9,000 families were members of ACORN in New Orleans and were very active on a whole range of issues and a number of years back decided to focus on what they saw as the primary problem in New Orleans, which was the poverty-level wages, particularly in the tourist economy where hotels and restaurants are still paying people minimum wage. So we put a measure on the ballot in the city of New Orleans to raise the minimum wage in the city which was fought bitterly by the business community, but won overwhelmingly at the polls. Nonetheless, the business community then went to the state legislature which – where they had more influence than we do and they managed to get the legislature to pass a law invalidating the will of the New Orleans voters and invalidating the minimum wage increase. We went to the court; they control the courts. We lost and wages stayed at minimum wage level rather than increasing.

So that says to us something about the power of business elites in New Orleans and generally around the country, but certainly in New Orleans, and the challenge that we have to put residents' needs first. So what we have been trying to do – and there are other community organizations that are involved in this as well, but what we have been trying to do is build an organization of residents, former residents of New Orleans, primarily low-income, working class residents who are the folks we represent in all of the communities now of the New Orleans diaspora. And we have organizers now on the street in Houston, in San Antonio, in Dallas, throughout Arkansas, throughout Louisiana, now in places as far afield as Gary, Indiana, where a whole set of survivors showed up recently; in California; in other places around the country.

Our goal really is to build that organization so that the residents of New Orleans actually have a voice in this process. And we all know – I think in this room particularly we know that without organization, without being organized people don't have a voice, particularly low-income, working-class folks. So that is our goal.

So in the first days after Katrina hit, we first tried to assemble our members, find out where they were. With communications down and people scattered everywhere, that was difficult but actually it turned out text-messaging managed to get through even when cell phones didn't. And so for all those members whose text – whose cell phones we had, we sent out mass text messages and gave them the addresses and the phone numbers of the nearest ACORN offices in Houston and Baton Rouge and other places where people were and people came trickling into our offices. And out of that, we were able to assemble the initial infrastructure of an organization with people who had been in New Orleans and now were refugees, but were actually desperate to connect with fellow ACORN members, fellow New Orleans residents, and begin the process of trying to figure out where to go from here.

So we helped people with their immediate needs, of course, and of course that was paramount, but people had a hunger and have a hunger to be involved in figuring out how to rebuild their city. So we then started doing one-on-one conversations in all of these places. We have organizers in the Astrodome. We had organizers in other facilities in Houston. We had organizers in shelters around the country and we started asking people what they wanted, what they're concerned about. And there were a lot of immediate concerns and issues ranging – dealing with relief that I won't speak about much here, but we connected people up to Red Cross and other agencies to take care of that.

But people started talking to us about what they thought were the most fundamental things that were important to them, and that was: "We do want to return. We do need living-wage jobs and we need affordable housing." That's what was on people's minds immediately, and of course in a safe environment where this type of tragedy doesn't occur again. But those are the types of things people were telling us about.

Now, we started holding community meetings. We've held one just the other night in Houston with about 300 former residents and the mayor was there and the congressman from Houston, whole set of state representatives, and people start gaining a little bit more sort of strength in their situation or confidence in their situation, trying to sort of rebuild a structure of community and an organized vehicle to start accomplishing some of their goals.

We're now holding similar meetings in all of these locations around the country, but fundamentally this is about providing a vehicle for low and moderate-income New Orleans residents wherever they are to organize and to ensure they have a voice. And out of that what we hope to do is develop a platform that our members are insisting on, and then we are going to need your help – everyone in this room's help and plenty beyond

outside this room – in making sure that that platform is at the forefront of any sort of process for redevelopment.

And I think there's actually in some ways a unique opportunity here out of this tragedy in the same way – you know, not to be too crass about it, but in the same way that the 9/11 survivors and families had a tremendous moral legitimacy and out of which grew a huge amount of political power. I think that, too, is an opportunity that we need to think strategically about in relation to the survivors – the families of Katrina. Lord knows we're not going to have political power or we're not going to have political power handed to us and as our folks and I'm sure the congressman here is more aware even than we are as we've been running around D.C. trying to insert ourselves in the conversations going on now about what's happening and the legislation is moving, the appropriations that are moving, we – you know, we have no influence. None of that's happening. It's all being done at the – by the administration and the Republican leadership and maybe, you know, a few of the senior Dems are having – you know, brought into those conversations at one point or another, but that's not our forum; those aren't our forums.

So what we need to do is figure out ways to use what we hope will be the organized voice of the low and moderate-income residents of New Orleans to wedge our way into that political process. There are some steps that we think we can do to take this – to move us forward. I mean, we'd like to convene meetings – we're convening meetings in all of these communities. We'd like – you know, we'd love for members of Congress to come to those meetings and other political leaders and journalists and opinion-leaders and to write about and speak and amplify the voices that are coming out of those meetings.

We'd like to develop a representative survivors' group that actually has a little bit of legitimacy because it came out of a process of residents electing their own leaders who then form a steering committee that can speak with some legitimacy and some moral sense for the role of their residents. We'd like to create opportunities for significant resident involvement in all of the institutions that are being created or will be created to – on reconstruction, so there's talk about various commissions and public authorities and so on. We need to make sure that organized groups representing residents – this is not just community organizations, but also labor unions – have seats at those tables. We need to insist that at least the Democrats work with us on this and, you know, that's a challenge too, but I think the Democrats need to understand that they're going to have more influence in this process if they ally with organized groups of residents and think through ways to sort privilege and support the organization – the self-organization of residents. There's huge moral and political power that comes through that, and we can imagine an alliance between progressive Democrats in Congress and organized residents that can break through some of what currently is a Republican and business stranglehold on this whole process.

What are people saying to us? Just briefly – I mean, they are saying the same things that you've heard, but first source hiring. All hiring needs to – that goes on in the community – residents should be hired. There should be training. There should be living

wage jobs. There should be permanent housing built that is affordable. Those are the things that are most on people's minds. The education system, building a high quality education – those are what's on people's minds, but we're not going to get there unless we figure out how to harness the political power of the residents. And that, I think, is a community organizing challenge, but also an area where I think community organizers have a critically important role to play.

Thanks.

CONGRESSMAN ARTUR DAVIS: Let me begin by thanking the Center for convening this forum. One of the things I sometimes point out to my colleagues is that liberals have many differences with conservatives, but one of our differences is that when we are out of power – when progressives are out of power, we tend to spend that time sulking. And when conservatives are out of power, they spend their time plotting and planning and figuring out how to use power. And that I think the Center is very much at the forefront of trying to turn that trend around, so I thank them for organizing this event today.

I want to make two or three observations. The first one is more of a historical observation and it's an effort to kind of capture the moment around Hurricane Katrina and to see if it will in fact become an epical moment in American politics and American culture.

For our grandparents' generation, their epical moment was 1941 and 1942, the fight with the Nazis, and that was an important moment because it illustrated that freedom was still an insecure concept on this globe. It indicated that there were all kinds of threats to freedom from around the world and it exposed us to the idea – we very moral Americans got exposed to the idea that there's just plain evil in the world. There are people who do not share our political values at all. So 1941 and '42 was a similar moment.

For our parent's generation, 1968 was a similar moment because we learned just how angry we were at each other as a country. We learned that overnight almost we had gotten divided on generational lines, ideological lines in ways we didn't fully understand until we saw cops knocking on the heads of kids on the streets of Chicago, and until we saw two of our leaders, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, get assassinated in a span of just 60 days.

I think that there is the potential – it is not a certainty, but there is the potential that Hurricane Katrina and all the things that flow out of it will be an epical moment for this generation of Americans for a very simple reason: Katrina and the images of the aftermath of it may remind us just how separate our fortunes are from each other in the United States of America; just how separate and disparate our fortunes are from each other.

The images of people in the Superdome are not unique to New Orleans. If Washington had to be evacuated tomorrow, if New York had to be evacuated tomorrow, if Chicago, if Baltimore, if Dallas – go on down the list of great cities of America – had to be emptied out tomorrow for any reason, whether it's natural disaster, terrorist occurrence, you name it, the people who would be left behind, the people who would be stuck in this immovable core at the middle of the city would be the people that the Testament calls the least of these: the most vulnerable, most isolated people in our society. And I think the people in this room knew that before September 2nd and 3rd of 2005. I'm not so sure the casual American observer fully appreciated it.

And as we go about reconstructing New Orleans economically, we ought to understand: everyone is not going to be situated equally in this process of being rebuilt economically. The people whose lives will be reconstituted from an economic standpoint the easiest are the people with assets. If you have a home, a mortgage – well, that's what insurance is for. The people who do not have the assets – the people whose asset is their job – it's going to be a lot harder to reconstitute their economic lives. This gap that we have between Caucasians who have assets around \$78,000 in this country and African-Americans whose assets are around \$8,000 – that gap will play out in full force as we watch the economic rebuilding of people's lives in New Orleans because the people on the \$8,000 side of the ledger, many of whom are black, many of whom are Latino – it will be very hard to reconstitute their economic profile. So I think that is a question, if you're a progressive person, can we take what may be this fundamental, epic moment in America, a time when we learn just how divided we still are, and can we make some use of it?

The second point that I want to make has to do with the question that I have been asked as an African-American politician many times in the last two weeks: do I think that the administration's slow response during the first days of Katrina was motivated by race? This is the answer that I want to give you on that. I don't think that the Bush administration and the FEMA director and the homeland security secretary sat in a room thinking, "You know what? These are poor, black people so we're not going to do anything." Give them a little bit more credit than that.

But this is what I think happened: this administration, and by extension modern conservatism in America, have gotten so accustomed to being skeptical to claims from people who are wounded and who are at the bottom of the totem pole that that skepticism is the primary filter they bring to events. I think that they saw the images from New Orleans on TV, but you know what I think they thought? I think in the back of their mind they thought, we are always seeing exaggerated images of poor people. We're always hearing these heated cries about the plight of people in America, but those of us in the know really understand it's not such a simple story. And, you know, we don't trust the media. I think the Chertoffs, the Bushes, and the Browns were thinking, we don't trust the media to get it right, so therefore these images from the video – we don't trust them either.

I would submit, ladies and gentleman, that what you saw during those three critical days when lives were lost in and around Louisiana was the skepticism that modern conservatism brings to people who were wounded. It played out in a very corrosive way for those three days.

And I remember the last time I saw a Center for American Progress event was when the former president of the United States came here to speak to a youth group that was convened by the Center, and I'm going to shamelessly steal a story that Bill Clinton told because it is so fundamental to this. President Clinton talked about a village he made or a visit he made to Rwanda. And most of you in this room know that Rwanda – Bill Clinton cites as the biggest mistake of his presidency the failure to even form a policy to engage the destruction of 800,000 people by their neighbors. And he mentioned that when he went to this particular village, and this country is trying to rebuild itself, there's a particular phrase that the people that community have when they run into each other and it doesn't translate as "Hello," "how are you?," "What's going on?" – all the various American slang idioms that we use. The phrase translates to "I see you." I see you.

Ladies and gentleman, I would submit that there are so many people in America that we do not see and that, most corrosively, people in power do not see. There is this incredible moment when Michael Brown went on Nightline, one of his last known public appearances, and minds who are not cluttered by too much knowledge can sometimes be surprisingly clear when they speak. (Laughter.) Michael Brown was asked why there was an underestimation of the crisis in the Superdome and he spoke gospel truth without meaning to. He said, "You know, I think the problem, Ted, is we found out that there were people that we didn't even know existed." That may have been the most salient moment of the week because I think Michael Brown spoke absolute truth at that moment.

I think that our country has found out – the people who didn't already know it – that there are classes of Americans that we didn't even know existed and if we care about reconstituting the Gulf and if we care about learning lessons from the reconstitution that will inform our larger domestic political agenda, we have to see a wider class of people.

And that leads to my next observation. Another major capacity of modern conservatism is this very sunny way of looking at the world. George Will wrote a column two days ago and, you know, I like what George Will has to say about baseball, not so much about politics, and he does not do very well when he talks about questions of poverty, but he prides himself on being an enormously intelligent man. (Laughter.) And he said in his column yesterday that there is a strategy for combating poverty is this country. It consists of people not having kids out of wedlock and graduating high school.

Ladies and gentleman, saying that people are poor because they do not graduate high school and have kids out of wedlock is like driving down the streets of D.C. in the morning and seeing people walking to work and saying that because all the people on the streets are walking to work, all people working are walking – are walking the street. That's just not accurate. That is not logical. And for someone who's smart to say that means that there is an ideological filter there that doesn't accept that there are people who

are working very hard in this country, who are sacrificing a great deal in this country, who play by every rule that we define, and who were still falling beneath the cracks.

And that's the only vision – final point I would make, that's the only constructive vision progressives can really offer America that will be bought into by large groups of people: the notion that if you work hard, if you play by the rules, that there will be a foundation beneath you.

If we want to be relevant as progressives, we have got to articulate and fight for that vision because modern conservatism doesn't even see it that way. They have this notion that the people who are hurting have hurt themselves, and they see this as a matter of choices.

So in my final ten seconds, I think your title gets it right: "Progressive Visions for Renewing the Gulf." There are some very unprogressive visions that are lurking around Washington right now that, for lack of a better term, amount to nothing more than stale resettlement policies for these folks. We haven't even figured out a strategy to even sit down and identify the evacuees and ask them a basic question: where do you have family? What kind of work do you do? What kind of work do you want to do? We haven't figured out a strategy for doing that.

And one of the previous panelists made this point: there is a difference between renewal and rebuilding. Rebuilding is the reconstitution of structures, some of which failed our people and some of which don't. Renewing is figuring out a way to bring values to this process, values of equality, egalitarian values, and figuring out a way to reshape this Gulf in a way that makes it more progressive and more decent place than ever.

(Applause.)

MR. GORDON: Thank you to everyone for five really terrific presentations.

Happy to take questions. Yes? There'll be a – a microphone is coming to you, if you could just state your name first, please.

Q: Okay. Yes, hello, my name is Kit Turen, and my question is, when – after these visions have been articulated my concern is the timeframe seems so short and so narrow right now, and this is an administration that really is about excluding those who they don't want to participate in any discussions or anything like that. I've heard some talk about how to even get at the table, but I would just like to hear more how a progressive vision can even get into the discussions within the timeframe that's necessary.

MS. BLACK: Could I take a stab at that?

MR. GORDON: Sure.

MS. BLACK: I'd like to build on what the congressman said because I think this is a watershed moment, and I think that we all have to say fundamentally that we are all on trial to show what democracy means, and part of that can be done outside the halls of Congress by insisting that the media continue to do the job that it did when it was in – when Katrina was in New Orleans. I think that our attention span in the country is not very long and we've got –

Q: (Off mike) – I mean, what does that mean tangibly?

MS. BLACK: I'm sorry, I didn't hear you.

Q: I said what does insisting mean tangibly –

MS. BLACK: Okay.

Q: – in terms of action.

MS. BLACK: Okay. I think there are several. Let me just say what – I think there are three things immediately that people can do. First, they can assist the local organizations like ACORN and others that are on the ground trying to do that. The second thing is they can continue to leverage pressure on their local reporting organizations to keep it out there. The third is to talk about it every day, every minute, in every situation that you are in to develop enough public leverage to work in a public arena that the other members of the panel have already established.

I don't think we have to wait. I think our big problem has been proactive, and we need to be out there and continue to push, push, push on every front, not just in organizations, but in every public arena, whether it's your classroom, your churches, your neighborhoods, your dinners.

MR. GORDON: Other responses?

MR. ROGERS: Well, I think your point is spot on or dead on or something on. One thing it would imply for progressives is, well, I'm all for a victim's bill of rights and that should be enforced, and I'm all for investigation, I'm all for restructuring FEMA, you know, blah, blah, blah. I'm also for – and, indeed, in some ways this is more central and more time-urgent (aside?) from the victim's rights, demanding a planning process that is not secret, which is what's now going on; that's not overtly ideological and ignorant; and that is not admitting evidence. All right, that's what's going on now, okay. They've got an agenda. We should demand an open, informed, and capable of learning, and representative, and intelligent planning process on a very short timeline.

I mean, I would like to see the mayor or some other very respected person from the region or Wesley Clark or I don't know who, but somebody of real stature or a couple of such people to head – appointed the co-czars or something or the heads of such a

planning committee. I want to see representatives from, yeah, the local political elites and business, but also as Steve was emphasizing, labor, and I think there's a lot of people who have technical expertise in this area who should be in the process. I mean, I know architects who are bumbling – you know, who built entire cities in the past, and there are transportation people. You know, call up Bruce Katz at Brookings and say, what are the 30 people from your experience at HUD to tell you how to rebuild – you know, how to do the housing thing right, how to do the transportation thing right, how above all, I think – and this is the danger that we're in – not to make early decisions stupidly that preclude later choices.

So, concretely, it would mean spending maybe a little bit less time on investigation and little bit more time on demanding an open planning process that's time-limited with our specifications on what that means. We have models of this, too. I mean, it's not as if cities have not gone through this at different points. We just have to do it quickly. We're going to call for, you know, public spirit and intelligence and not just Tulane, but other universities and the planners and the architects and the businesspeople.

The point of leverage is, yes, it's a moral one and a political one of perhaps surpassing importance. It's also, given the people we're dealing with, a pretty crude material one. You know, there's going to be a \$175, \$200 billion on the table here. Bargaining with the business community in New Orleans looks little bit different when you've got \$200 billion on your side and you're talking about prevailing wages and reasonable transportation systems and communities of choice and housing than when you don't – when you just have a bankrupt government, and we should use that power. Right now, it's just being basically squandered away or used on these experiments that have proven bad elsewhere.

REP. DAVIS: Let me quickly follow up in 30 seconds or less. One of the major consequences coming from this relates to how conservatives and Republicans have been winning elections in this country. I'm convinced in 2002 and 2004 that conservatives and Republicans won elections because they convinced people that, you know what, you may not like our ideology, but we're competent and we can keep you safe. That “we are confident and we can keep you safe” mantle will be pretty darn hard to invoke in 2006, and because of that it will create a sharper and focused debate on ideology the American people do not buy.

MR. GORDON: Yes, sir?

Q: My name is Carl Berg (ph). I'm with the National Association of Neighborhood. It's ironic that we are not focusing on people that are displaced that are not poor. Everyone displaced was not poor contrary to the media. Mayor Morial, Steve Kest, and the congressman have done a lot to lift people through homeownership out of poverty. And we have not been addressing the fact that the fate of the city may be determined not in Washington, but on Wall Street because of the mortgages that are held and people's payments right now are being stopped for 30 days, maybe 90 days. They are not reporting to credit bills for the next 30 to 90 days, they are not doing any

foreclosures, of course, but also people are maxing out their credit cards, so their credit scores are going down.

So if we do not look at this as a – not just a Washington problem, but a financial problem, the next tsunami to hit the city is that we may have a nucleus of poor people that are less capable of coping with their situation, and hopefully, we can rebuild the city with the diversity and not make this the full employment bill for consultants and academics.

MR. KEST: I want to – I think that's it.

MR. MORIAL: I think that Carl's point is very well made. What people saw – what you saw on television was the poorest of poor New Orleanians who sought refuge at what we call shelters of last resort. What you've not seen on television are people who evacuated because they, in most cases, had cars, money for a plane ticket, and some place to go – a family member in Baton Rouge or Houston or some place they could get to. What you haven't seen is that St. Bernard Parish – predominantly white, predominantly working; Plaquemines Parish – predominantly white, but mixed, predominantly working – are communities and parishes of 30,000 to 40,000, 50,000 people each wiped out, too. What you haven't seen is that Katrina was an equal opportunity destroyer.

Why is that important? Because there's a lot more leverage for the discussion about rebuilding if people understand that the victims and the survivors are broad, multiethnic, multi-class. Clearly, those with the least suffered the most: the poor, the disabled, those that did not have automobiles or anywhere to go. If we allow the picture to be created and painted that this is just about helping poor people, then we've not done a service to those poor people because the people affected – my own family, three siblings and a mother who live in New Orleans today not knowing if their houses have been destroyed, dispossessed of their jobs – my family, they're professionals: a lawyer, a doctor. They haven't had a paycheck in three weeks. This has affected a broad number of people.

And Ricardo was right, one of the great concerns is whether this will turn into a dispossession and a land-grab situation where new homeowners that I worked eight years to create – 15,000 to 20,000 – were no longer – because people say that neighborhood is no longer safe, you can't go back. What happens to their land? Will they be compensated? What happens to their equity? There are a lot of difficult issues related to people that are present here.

I just want to just make one final point to go back to this idea of the how, the specifics, the mechanism. You know, Roosevelt created new governmental structures to deal with a crisis. He didn't leave it up to existing structures and departments. In this regard, we may need a new governmental structure. And people have to be prepared that it could be attacked as a new bureaucracy, but Roosevelt created a new governmental structure. Lincoln created new initiatives like homesteading to provide land for people.

This is going to need a planning process of the best minds around the table and it may be that a new governmental structure, a new authority that has an inclusive – what does that mean? That’s a nice word, but what does it really mean? An inclusive, inclusive governing structure or board is going to be necessary.

Last week, the *Wall Street Journal* had a piece on the front page. It featured a handful of New Orleanians whose houses had no flooding, who were from the upper class of the city, and one of them literally bragged about the fact that they had the Israeli Security Forces helicopter in to protect their home. This person is also the chairman of the transit authority whose buses were under water. Another bragged about how they got fancy foods like caviar drop shipped so that they can survive and eat. And they, in the *Wall Street Journal*, between the lines, began to articulate a vision of New Orleans without poor, without this, without that.

What New Orleanians, people of the Gulf Coast, need from the progressives, from people at this level is a very strong affirmation that the city and the rebuilding has to be inclusive in process and have inclusiveness as a goal, and that the goal should be to build a better city and make life better for the people who’ve been victims; not to just replace the same poverty, the same difficulty, the same racial divide.

Look, I love the city. The last two to three years in the city have been a time fraught with political and racial conflict. What people saw was an outgrowth of that. They saw anger directed at city, state, and federal officials that had been brewing. A lot of people who want to put civic good face on things may not be able to say that. Why do I say that? Because underneath this, the poverty rates in this nation have been rising, the condition of the urban poor has been deteriorating. Let this also be a big, giant alarm clock and wakeup call for this nation to recognize that this is not only a hurricane crisis, but it’s also a crisis of inequality, racial justice, racial injustice for the poor in this nation. And that has to be affirmed, but it can’t take over the discussion that has to focus on the immediate needs of one million people.

MR. GORDON: Okay. Steve and then Allida?

MR. KEST: Just a specific example, picking up on what you said. You know, we spend a lot of time talking about obligations of government, particularly federal government, but the corporate obligations here too are critical. Let me speak about Wall Street. We reached out – you know, everyone knows how important credit scores are to determining everything about people’s lives these days, but we reached out last week to the people at Fair Isaac who – FICO, who do those FICO, that’s – they do the FICO scores. And so, you know, what the – what are you going to do? People aren’t going to paying their bills, they’re not going to be paying the mortgages. Is everyone’s credit going be ruined? Therefore, people won’t be able to get mortgages when they come back, et cetera. This is going to be a tremendous problem for people is this new economy.

They don’t have a clue. Their first instinct was, well, we’ll set up a 800 number and people can call in and inform us that they’re not able to pay their bills and give some

evidence why, you know, et cetera, et cetera, and we'll put them on to some sort of special list.

MR. MORIAL: People can't even find their bills.

MR. KEST: Exactly, exactly, exactly.

MR. MORIAL: The bills are under water, the records are under water, the checkbooks are under water.

MR. KEST: Exactly.

MR. MORIAL: I mean, there's a lot of basics about people not even getting their bank statements, credit card statements or bills. Where is it going to go? To the Astrodome in Houston?

MR. KEST: So this – so when we speak of responses, part of our response really needs to be directed as well at entities like that, at the lenders, at the mortgage holders, at Wall Street, and that's a critical piece of the response as well.

MR. GORDON: I'm just going to take – I think we have time for one more question.

Q: Okay. Hi, I'm Bryan Collinsworth, I'm an intern at Faith and Progressive Policy here at the Center, and my question – there has been a lot of talk about the conservative ideology of big business favoring big business is the means to clean up this disaster today, but there's a flipside, which I think is a more grassroots sense of individualism that allows a lot of people to look the other way – a lot of conservative people to look the other way as the conservative leadership focuses on business because you've got probably a lot of very good religious folks down there in Texas right now who are doing their best to help people out who've been displaced by this storm, who are mobilizing from their churches and saying, "Look, we're taking care of these people. What do we need to worry about the federal government for?" And at the same time, the stuff I've been seeing suggest that even in African-American communities – there's a huge amount of distrust not only of the government, but even relief agencies like the Red Cross because there's very little reason to trust the government as it stands now, and so there's the same urge to look to churches or local communities.

MR. GORDON: Congressman?

REP. DAVIS: Let me go first since I'm probably going to have to leave to go vote. One of the interesting things, and I touched on this earlier is, how we generate moral urgency around questions of class in America. Nobody in America right now, unless it's the extreme lunatic fringe – and some of those call my office every now and then – but nobody outside that fringe questions that we have a moral commitment to helping these displaced Americans. Nobody questions that.

MR. MORIAL: Great.

REP. DAVIS: Interestingly, next week, as soon as we get back about the normal business of government, you will have conservatives in this town who routinely question our obligations to help people who are displaced for reasons that don't have to do hurricanes, such as globalization or such as a poor educational structure or such as a lack of capacity or infrastructure in their communities, and we'll get right back into this notion that we only have limited, finite sense of moral responsibility in America.

That's ultimately what this conversation has to be about because there's going to be a lot of false goodwill in essence in the next few weeks; people saying, "Oh, don't we have to go and do all these things to help the Gulf?" How do we take that goodwill and draw it into these questions of displacement all over American society?

Final point I'll make today, Mayor Morial alluded to this earlier and I appreciated him doing it, we introduced a bill two days ago that will protect the voting rights of people who are evacuees. It will allow them to declare by affidavit, if they wish, that they will intend to return to Louisiana when they can. And it will let them vote in the federal elections in 2006 and 2008. This is important because right now you have some people in Louisiana who I believe are contemplating going to the Fifth Circuit and asking the Fifth Circuit to order that the Congressional lines be redrawn on the theory that, well, the state no longer looks the same from a population standpoint. If that happens, that will be one of the most shameless things I've ever seen and I would say – I know this is a 501(c)3 and I'll walk the line here. I would call on Democrats and Republicans – I'll let you guess who it's more relevant to – to denounce that happening. It would be unconscionable, frankly, if the president of the United States and the national Republican Party do not stand up and denounce any litigant who goes to court and tries to argue that the political lines in Louisiana ought to be redrawn right now. We have an obligation to not have these people, who've lost so many things economically, also lose their right to participate in reshaping the politics of New Orleans and Louisiana with their votes.

(Applause.)

MR. GORDON: Thank you to all the panelists and to everyone for coming. And by the way, some of these remarks will be posted on the web. There are a couple of couple of articles about this and this is really the first of a series that we're going to do about what to do after Katrina, so keep an eye out. Thank you so much.

(END)