



Out of

BY LARRY TEITELBAUM

Marc Morial, C'80, is a mainstream politician with spit-shine polish. Moderate and temperate, he's mastered the soothing patois of healing. He moves with ease between the black and white communities like the head of a blended family.

He doesn't do impolitic or provocative. Yet here was the president of the National Urban League on *Meet the Press*, on the Sunday after Hurricane Katrina inundated his beloved New Orleans, pointing fingers. Morial, in full Ralph Ellison mode, implied that the federal government would have acted with more urgency had a disaster struck power centers such as Los Angeles, Washington or New York instead of the Bayou. His plaint stemmed from frustration and the recognition that poverty has gone underground – out of sight, out of mind.

The upper and middle classes do not see the poor, says Morial, the former mayor of New Orleans, because they don't live in their neighborhoods, and the poor don't get a fair hearing in the media. Nor, he adds, speaking from experience, do civic leaders wish to shine a spotlight on their city's problems, much preferring to herald the progress of a glistening downtown development.

But this myopia does not obscure the bitter truth long banished from the national conversation: poverty

is crawling out of the shadows once more. Hurricane Katrina gave us a helicopter's-eye view of it on the rooftops of New Orleans. "On the one hand, yes, we've seen progress since the 1960s," says Morial. "On the other hand, there's still deep economic disparities. The last three years have shown a slippage. More people are in poverty in 2005 than were in poverty in 2001."

In its 2005 report on the State of Black America, the National Urban League cited big economic gaps between whites and blacks. The rate of unemployment among blacks was double that of whites, median income of blacks was \$20,000 less (as of 2003) and less than half of blacks owned homes compared to three-quarters of whites.

Still, statistics also show that poverty has been cut in half since the 1960s, the legacy of historic government programs such as Medicaid, Head Start, food stamps and the earned-income tax credit. Which is cold comfort to Morial, who finds it unacceptable that a quarter of African-American families still live below the \$20,000-a-year poverty line. (The rate is even higher in New Orleans – 30 percent.) Morial, an economics major who returned to campus last fall to participate in the Fox Speakers Forum, where he spoke about the fallout from Katrina, refuses to accept piecemeal gains in the War on Poverty. He wants

I AM AN INVISIBLE MAN...
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PEOPLE REFUSE TO SEE ME.

—RALPH ELLISON, *INVISIBLE MAN*

Sight...

nothing short of conquest and uses the language of shared sacrifice and national commitment to lay down his challenge to Americans.

“A country is governed by its aspirations,” he says. “What kind of country do we want to have? What kind of communities do we want to build? We should never be satisfied if any element of the country is suffering. I think that a country that has many of its people working at full productivity is going to be a better country.”

Buried within the incremental rise in poverty is a most disturbing statistic, one that plants the seeds for future dissolution: more children, 17.8 percent, are living in poverty now than in the 1970s, when the figure never exceeded 17.1 percent, according to the U.S. Census. This is where Morial really gets up on his soapbox. To reverse this trend and eliminate what he calls the “preordained destiny” of failure, Morial proposes going to the root of the problem. He and the National Urban League advocate early education. They want children to start school at age 3.

“I don’t view it as a cost,” explains Morial during an interview in his New York office, which is decorated with street scenes of New Orleans and posters of Louis Armstrong, Jackie Robinson and Muhammad

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Ali. “I view it as an investment. ... What’s the return? Better test scores, better school attendance rates, lower rates of social misbehavior and crime, and higher graduation rates.”

“It’s not sexy,” he continues, “but it works. It’s more important to me than doing another mission to the moon. I love space. I want to see men on Mars. But I don’t know why NASA’s going back to the moon.”

Morial understands that the dynamics have changed. It is no longer fashionable – or feasible from the standpoint of public policy – to sink massive federal dollars into “curing” poverty. Morial hails from the teach-a-man-to-fish school of government. He champions economic empowerment and favors the new grail of public-private partnerships. And he doesn’t have to look far for a model. Last year, the National Urban League launched the Urban Entrepreneur Partnership. The initiative brings together business, government and philanthropic and community organizations in five cities – Atlanta, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Jacksonville and Kansas City, Mo. – to help

more minorities start their own businesses. (Interestingly, there are no plans to add New Orleans to the mix. Morial says his hometown lacks the leadership and business community buy-in to participate in such a program.)

Although Morial finds salvation in private investment, he remains a true believer in government. He knows its cadences and has seen its power to move people. Son of the legendary Ernest “Dutch” Morial, the first African-American mayor of New Orleans, for whom the city’s convention center is named, Marc Morial inherited the mantle of leadership. He ran New Orleans for eight years (1994-2002), and the city prospered, with \$400 million in infrastructure improvements, 7,000 new hotel rooms and community reinvestment initiatives that created 15,000 new homeowners. At the tail end of his term, he also served two years as president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, traversing the country and learning about the hard realities that all cities face. His education has continued at the National Urban League, which has

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more than 100 chapters, the majority of which he has visited.

“The situation in New Orleans is not unique,” says Morial, who blames post-9/11 economic doldrums, an inadequate minimum wage, a drop in the dollar’s value and above all, outsourcing as contributors to the rise in poverty. “The economy is not producing the numbers of entry-level jobs that it once did,” he says.

Does Morial, who is credited with turning around New Orleans, have the mojo to affect the national dialogue and raise the profile of poor black people?

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Hugh Price, Morial’s predecessor at the National Urban League, believes he does. “[Marc] has a keen, pragmatic understanding of what makes cities tick and how minorities and the poor are faring in them,” Price says. “Even prior to Hurricane Katrina and certainly in the wake of it, he positioned himself as a formidable advocate for addressing poverty in this country.”

But many worry that the renewed emphasis on poverty is receding more rapidly than the floodwaters in New Orleans. “Post-Katrina, the hope that the country would focus on poverty and the nexus between race and poverty is dimming,” laments Mary Frances Berry, the Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought and former chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. “Proposed budget cuts in Congress, foot-dragging in the administration at all levels and the short attention span of the public and the media have made a focus on remedying poverty problematic. Those who believe in the cause, however, must continue to push.”

Michael Eric Dyson, the Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities, whose latest book is *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, also sees Katrina-fatigue setting in and amnesia taking hold. “The refusal to see can still render even the most visible figures quite invisible,” declares Dyson. “There is not a lot of empathy in American culture for the poor. ... They get dismissed, they get marginalized, they get demonized. They get seen as the carriers of a particular virus of pathology.”

Even Morial conjectures that the soul-searching brought on by Katrina could prove “fleeting,” more like a “120-day fascination” with a big storm than a seismic policy shift or change in heart. In which case, as Ralph Ellison wrote, poor blacks will return to being “a phantom in other people’s minds.” ■

Larry Teitelbaum is editor of the Penn Law Journal.

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