

Newsletter of the LCHR

Louisiana Council on Human Relations

James D. Wilson, Jr., Editor

Volume 45, Issue 1
October, November, December, 2008

Katrina's Hidden Race War Whites Shot Blacks with Impunity

In an eighteen-month investigation appearing in a recent issue of *The Nation* and supported by The Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute, reporter A.C. Thompson weaves together stories of both innocent victims and unrepentant vigilantes, painting a terrifying and never before told picture of a hidden race war in New Orleans in the days following Hurricane Katrina.

Most of the incidents took place in Algiers Point, a predominantly white neighborhood on the West Bank of New Orleans, which is located near one of the National Guard rescue point used after the hurricane. As black residents tried to flee New Orleans via the rescue point, white residents in Algiers Point took up arms and opened fire, shooting with impunity.

Thompson, in "Katrina's Hidden Race War" and a companion piece, "Body of Evidence," interviews witnesses on all sides of the gunfire, including shooters from Algiers Point, gunshot survivors, forensic pathologists, doctors, historians, private citizens, and law enforcement officials. Thompson reviewed over 800 autopsies and state death records, and reveals a city fractured across racial lines and evidence of brutal crimes:

- According to eye witnesses, at least eleven people were shot by vigilantes in Algiers Point. In each case the targets were African-American men, while the shooters all were white. It's unclear who all eleven victims were or how many may have died, because none of the shootings have ever been investigated.
- One shooting victim, Henry Glover (his shooter remains unknown), was found charred and burned in a scorched sedan. Glover's death is particularly suspicious, with eyewitnesses reporting that New Orleans police allowed Glover to bleed to death while savagely beating the man who tried to save him, then

covered up and destroyed evidence. The Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute had to sue for Glover's autopsy records.

- In a companion video, residents of Algiers Point admit to forming a "mini-militia," at one point saying that shooting blacks "was like pheasant season in South Dakota. If it moved, you shot it."

In spite of overwhelming evidence supporting all of these allegations, the New Orleans Police Department and public officials have refused comment, beyond a curt two-sentence email, for over eight months. To date there is no evidence a single investigation was ever opened, and law enforcement at every level was completely uncooperative with the investigation.

As Thompson, an award winning journalist now on staff at ProPublica, wrote in the piece, "As a reporter who has spent more than a decade covering crime, I was startled to meet so many people with so much detailed information about potentially serious offenses, none of whom have ever been interviewed by police."

An accompanying Editorial in the January 5, 2009 issue of *The Nation* magazine calls for a full and complete investigation.

To read "Katrina's Hidden Race War," consult the current issue of *The Nation* or visit www.thenation.com.

REMINDER:

LCHR Board of Directors Quarterly Meeting

January 17, 10am
209 Rue Chavaniac, Lafayette

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Louisiana Locks Up More Than Other States

The U.S. Department of Justice on Thursday released figures showing that the United States has more people in prison than any other country in the world. And Louisiana has more than any other state.

As of Dec. 31, 2007, nearly 2.3 million people were in U.S. prisons and according to state correction officials, Louisiana has 37,969 adults behind bars. That number does not include juveniles or those doing municipal time.

The ACLU says Louisiana has nearly five times as many prisoners than in Maine, the state with the lowest rate of incarceration. ACLU of Louisiana executive director Marjorie R. Esman said that Louisiana continues to lock up too many elderly prisoners and too many people whose biggest problem is addiction. "We still haven't learned that the solution for many of our problems do not lie in the jailhouse," Esman said. "Of course people who are violent and dangerous to society need to be taken off the streets. "But it doesn't make sense to lock up those who are not a danger."

According to figures released in June by the Louisiana Department of Corrections, 13 percent of the prison population in Louisiana is over age 50. More than 30 percent of Louisiana inmates were convicted of drug offenses.

With the current economic crisis, Esman hopes the state legislature will look into other solutions. "Other states have proven that there are more effective ways to treat the problem of crime at lower costs," she said. Those include parole and probation reforms, diversion programs, increasing good-time programs for people behind bars, and sentencing reforms for nonviolent offenders, she said.

Estimates put the annual cost of incarceration at about \$20,000 per prisoner, Esman said.

"That money could be used to pay for a lot of early childhood education that has been shown to have a significant effect on later problems," she said.

Report Seeks to Bring Focus on Plight of Black Men

Statistics on racial disparities in education, health care and wealth are nothing new, but a report by a foundation is being used as a call to government and business for a focused strategy on easing the plight of black men across the South.

The Foundation of the Mid South studied boys and men ages 16 to 44 in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas. Among findings of the new report: Black males are more likely to drop out of school, lack health insurance or die in a homicide when compared with their white counterparts. The report also found that only 9.6 percent of black men in the three states had earned a college degree, compared with 18.4 percent for white men.

Chris Crothers, the author of the report from the regional nonprofit, said the foundation hopes to use the findings to drive wide discussion on policy changes and new social and community strategies for black males. "A lot of these conversations are being held nationally, but not in our region," Crothers said. "We don't have an initiative that focuses just on black males. We feel that there should be a field that's developed around these issues." He said the foundation has sent copies of the report to lawmakers, nonprofits and business leaders.

Derrick Johnson, president of the Mississippi NAACP, said a discussion of the status of black men is "long overdue," adding that some legislative policies fuel the problem. For instance, Johnson said Mississippi should focus more on raising educational standards than spending more on correctional facilities.

Overall, blacks make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, but in the mid-South, the population is 26 percent black. The highest percentage of blacks is in Mississippi, where they make up more than a third of the state's population. The region's poverty rate is 17.3 percent, about five percent higher than the national average.

In Louisiana and Mississippi, the average median net worth in nonwhite households was \$5,100. That's 14 times less than that of their white peers, according to the report, which was based mostly on census data.

Rep. George Flaggs, Jr., D-Vicksburg, chairman of the Mississippi House Banking Committee, said an emphasis on tax credits and incentives has been policymakers' answer to improving economic conditions in the state. "We have to create policies that make education and health care more accessible to young black males. That has not been a priority. That's the problem," Flaggs said.

In Mississippi, 46.9 percent of black males are uninsured, compared with 25.3 percent of white males. And, 23.5 percent of black males in the three-state region don't have a high school diploma. The figure for white males was 16.4 percent. The report, citing U.S. Bureau of Justice statistics, said black male homicide rates were 8.3 times higher than white males.

Crothers said following the lead of organizations, such as the New York-based 21st Century Foundation, would be a good starting point for officials in the three southern states. The 21st Century Foundation provides grants and encourages philanthropic giving for strategies and programs geared toward issues affecting black males. A three-year program the foundation began in 2006 has already made a positive impact at a Chicago high school, said Julia Beatty, a program officer at 21st Century. Misconduct reports decreased by 46 percent between April 2007 and April 2008 at Dyett High School, and the student arrest rate dropped by 82 percent over the same period of time, Beatty said. The school's graduation rate increased by 57 percent during the second year of the program, which trained students in handling peer conflicts and disciplinary matters.

"We see education access as a starting point for the ability of black men and boys being able to have good jobs, being able to raise families and have an increased quality of life," said Beatty.

**Stories or ideas for the newsletter
may be sent to the editor at:**

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First Vietnamese-American Elected to U.S. Congress is from Louisiana

On Sunday, December 6, Republican Anh "Joseph" Cao of New Orleans ousted nine-term Democrat William Jefferson from his House seat. Although Jefferson's campaign was hamstrung by a corruption scandal, Cao's victory still took the nation by complete surprise. Here was a complete unknown, a Vietnamese American lawyer with no prior experience in public office, taking down an African American incumbent in a majority black congressional district. Moreover, he won as a Republican – something that hasn't happened in New Orleans in over 100 years.

Cao (pronounced "Gow") is the first Vietnamese American elected to Congress. A child of refugees, his father served as an officer in the South Vietnamese Army, fighting communism alongside American troops. Cao is not simply a Vietnamese American with conservative views that stem from a legacy of anti-communism. Here, the obvious comparison could be made with right-wing Cuban Americans of southern Florida. But Cao's New Orleans East – home to the largest concentration of Vietnamese Americans of Louisiana – is no Little Havana. And Cao is no conservative ideologue. A political independent until only recently, Cao, who once trained as a Jesuit seminarian working with the poor in Latin America, described his politics as "walking the middle line" in a recent *New York Times* article.

But by holding fast to the middle, Cao isn't merely playing it safe as the first House Republican to represent New Orleans since Reconstruction. The middle line is proxy for the nuanced political and racial location that Vietnamese Americans of New Orleans occupy, a location that doesn't quite conform to traditional left-to-right political ideologies. Indeed, the Vietnamese Americans of New Orleans pride themselves on self-reliance, yet they also demand government accountability, especially when confronted with injustice. They seek to advance themselves politically and economically, yet seem to do so without sacrificing solidarity with other racial groups, particularly neighboring African Americans. Nowhere were these values more clearly on display than in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Less than six weeks after the storm, the Vietnamese Americans

of New Orleans East returned to their homes, doing so over the objection of local and federal officials. Their leader was Father Nguyen The Vien, a political firebrand and head of Mary Queen of Vietnam church (MQVN). "Before the storm, I guess you could call us libertarians," Father Vien said. "Our attitude toward government was: 'you don't bother us, we won't bother you.' But Katrina changed all that. We had a responsibility to speak out." Through it all, the priest was surrounded by a coterie of experienced community organizers, policy wonks and attorneys. The star among them was Cao. An immigration attorney with a private practice in New Orleans East, Cao led the legal fight to have utilities turned on in the Vietnamese American neighborhood. Along with other MQVN leaders, he also worked to shut down a controversial landfill that was to hold nearly one-fourth of Katrina debris in New Orleans East.

As the first anniversary of Katrina approached, MQVN became a force to be reckoned with, and it soon launched a community development corporation to further advance its rebuilding plans, as well as to expand Vietnamese American political power in New Orleans. Cao was named to the organization's board of directors, and MQVN would serve as a vital political base during his congressional campaign. Yet at the same time, MQVN's post-Katrina activism was largely associated with (and celebrated by) the liberal-to-left of the city – those who considered the community's defense of New Orleans East a rare victory for the grassroots. Cao never downplayed his involvement in these efforts. To the contrary, his campaign highlighted such activism in order to bolster an otherwise slim political record. So too, Democratic African Americans leaders in New Orleans lauded the work of MQVN. African American councilmember Cynthia Willard-Lewis, a Democrat, referred to its efforts as "a model for other communities." Meanwhile African American organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Southern Poverty Law Center and Advocates for Environmental Human Rights emerged as political allies to MQVN in the post-Katrina era.

As Cao enters his first term, these alliances may prove strong enough to hold him accountable to an agenda that prioritizes the rebuilding of New Orleans, especially within communities that have yet to receive their fair share of federal support.

Some Claim Obama will NOT be the First Black President

Will Barack Obama be the first African American President? “No” insist author Leroy Vaughn, who’s book *Black People and Their Place in World History* claims that there were at least five previous U.S. Presidents with African American ancestry. Vaughn’s research suggests that Thomas Jefferson was indeed the first black president, followed by Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge.

Jefferson was described as the “son of a half-breed Indian squaw and a Virginia mulatto father,” according to Vaughn, who also suggest that Jefferson was said to have destroyed all documentation attached to his mother, even going to extremes to seize letters written by his mother to other people.

Vaughn cites an article in the *Virginia Magazine of History* which claimed that President Andrew Jackson was the son of an Irish woman who married a black man and that Jackson’s oldest brother had been sold as a slave.

Abraham Lincoln was said to have been the illegitimate son of an African man, according to Vaughn’s findings. Lincoln had very dark skin and coarse hair and his mother allegedly came from an Ethiopian tribe. The sixteenth president’s heritage fueled so much controversy that Lincoln was nicknamed “Abraham Africanus the First” by his opponents.

President Warren Harding apparently never denied his ancestry. William Chancellor, a professor of economics and politics at Wooster College in Ohio, writes in his book on the Harding family that the president had black ancestors through both sets of parents. Chancellor points out that Harding attended Iberia College, a school founded to educate fugitive slaves as further evidence of his racial heritage.

Calvin Coolidge was supposedly proud of his heritage and even claimed that his mother was dark because of mixed Indian ancestry. Coolidge’s mother’s maiden name was “Moor,” a designation often applied to blacks in Europe much the way “Negro” was used in America.

“Jena 6” Youth Tried to Commit Suicide, Police Say

A Louisiana teenager whose 2006 arrest in the racially charged “Jena 6” assault case drew thousands of protesters tried to commit suicide days after a Christmas eve arrest, a police report says. Mychal Bell, who was arrested for allegedly stealing clothes worth \$370 from a department store, told investigators he shot himself Monday evening “because he was tired of all the media attention,” the report says.

The high school senior’s mother and his grandmother also told an investigator that he’d indicated “he did not feel like he could live anymore” because of media coverage of the shoplifting allegations, according to the report.

In December 2006, Bell was one of a half-dozen black teenagers who faced felony charges in the beating of a white classmate in the town of Jena, Louisiana, an incident that followed months of racial tensions in the community of about 3,000 people. The case of the “Jena 6” drew national attention from civil rights groups that said the charges were excessive, and an estimated 15,000-plus people turned out for a September 2007 rally in Jena on the youths’ behalf. Bell eventually pleaded guilty to battery in a juvenile court and later moved to Monroe, about seventy miles north of Jena.

On Christmas Eve, Bell was arrested at the Pecanland Mall in Monroe and charged with shoplifting, simple battery and resisting arrest. Bell’s attorney insist that the young man went to the mall with someone to return a shirt, for which he had a receipt. The person with Bell did the shoplifting, and Bell was caught in the middle, the attorney said.

In April, after his move to Monroe, Bell indicated that he wanted to keep his life on the straight and narrow in part because of the support he received during the Jena case. “I feel like [after] all the people came down and supported me [and] gave money to the defense fund, I feel like . . . if I would do something now, I would let the whole country down,” he said.

Happy Days Are Here Again!

In matters which concern our Council on Human Relations, history shows a series of ups and downs, progress followed by set backs, but over time a general improvement. It is like those graphs that show peaks and valleys on a generally rising line. The first valley was a very deep one—the arrival in America of the first slave ship, which landed in Jamestown, Virginia, one year before the Mayflower arrived at Plymouth Rock.

The first stirring of Abolitionist activity was among the Quakers, themselves a persecuted minority. John Woolman began the movement by refusing to write bills of sale for slaves. Gradually the movement spread and grew, eventually even among some respectable and prominent white people, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Sage of Concord, and his neighbor Henry Thoreau. Laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act seriously radicalized both of them. Emerson was moved to denounce Senator Daniel Webster, Massachusetts' favorite son: "The word liberty in his mouth is like the word love in the mouth of a whore." As for the new law, "By God, I will not obey it!" wrote this most temperate of men in his journal. Thoreau wrote an essay, "Slavery in Massachusetts," going far beyond his most famous "Civil Disobedience." For him peaceful, passive resistance was no longer enough. Both he and Emerson admired and supported John Brown, whose raid on the Federal armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, got him convicted of treason and hanged. In a passionate speech, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau said, "Two thousand years ago, they crucified Christ. Today they are hanging John Brown."

It took a tragic and bloody Civil War to end slavery; then, after a brief progressive period of Reconstruction, nearly all the gains were erased. The 20th century dawned with the seriously flawed doctrine of "Separate but Equal" the law of the land.

The next "re-birth of freedom" came with the Civil Rights movement. In his "I have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded America that it had

been a century since the Emancipation Proclamation. The dream had been deferred too long. Leaders like Dr. King, Rosa Parks inspired Americans from all over the country and of all races to join the struggle. They did so with great courage, many paying with their lives. Another sort of courage was shown by President Lyndon Johnson, saying as he signed the Civil Rights Act, that his action would cause the Democratic Party to lose the South for a generation, maybe more.

Now, in the 21st Century, we are experiencing a very low point in human relations: two wars (of dubious justification), a growing gap between the rich and the poor, a global economic meltdown, with genocide, famine, epidemics, and crushing poverty nearly everywhere.

However, things are looking up. Remember how recently nobody liked America, once a glowing icon of freedom and justice. Change is in the air as the world is amazed, delighted, and proud of us for having the good sense to elect an African American to be our President. Barack Obama has brought hope to us and the entire world. Even the usually proud French are saying we have opened their eyes to the need to get serious about seeking more diversity in their own government.

This is a truly historic moment. *Common Cause* calls it "Reclaiming our Democracy." In the words of John Gardner "Leaders come in many forms, with many styles and diverse qualities Some find strength in eloquence, some in judgment, some in courage." We need a leader right now to give us hope and bring us together. Can Barack Obama do it? Yes he can. Keep the faith and celebrate.

Patricia Rickels

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Joseph Dennis

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Newsletter of the BRCHR

Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations

Volume 44, Issue 1

Voters Reject Proposal

On November 4 a majority of Baton Rouge voters rejected Mayor-President Melvin “Kip” Holden \$989 million dollar capital improvement proposal. The bond measure included a half-cent sales tax increase and a 9.9-mill property tax. Projects covered in the proposal included a new parish prison and juvenile detention center, a public safety complex, upgrading the Governmental building, replacing fire stations, synchronizing traffic signals, overhauling drainage channels and replacing bridges, expanding the River Center and downtown parking garage, a new downtown aquarium for tourists and a 4-D theater and large music hall.

Noticing that there seemed to be nothing in the publicity about this near-billion dollar proposal to improve Baton Rouge’s ailing public transportation system, Paul Y. Burns, former president of the Baton Rouge Council on Relations, made numerous inquiries to the Mayor’s office and to MetroCouncil members about the matter, but received no replies.

Burns suggest that Baton Rouge voters and politicians recall the Horizon Plan which was adopted by the Metro Council in 1992 and updated in 2007 “as the comprehensive land use and development plan for East Baton Rouge Parish.” “Transportation” was one of seven key “Elements” of the plan, with the goal to “provide recommendations that will enhance the development of an efficient transportation system through the year 2010.” Goal T5 of the Horizon Plan was to “design the overall transportation system to include integrated mass transit, carpools, bicycles, and pedestrians, and encourage the use of alternative modes of travel to support a balanced transportation system.” The Horizon Plan also included a recommendation to develop criteria and priorities for expanding or improving transit service in areas which have a high concentration of transit-dependent citizens such as low to moderate income, low auto ownership, and a high proportion of elderly population.

BRCHR Members Participate in Lincoln Celebration

Two members of the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations, the Rev. Steve Crump and LSU professor David Madden, were featured in an October Bicentennial Celebration that highlighted President Abraham Lincoln’s Louisiana connections. Crump, who was honored with a humanitarian award in 2002 from the BRCHR, was Abraham Lincoln and Madden directed the play. Madden, director of the Louisiana Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, commented, “The Louisiana connection is totally unique among all the states in that from early in his presidency, he began a sustained effort to make Louisiana the first state to re-enter the union, simultaneously trying to develop it as a model for his benign vision of Reconstruction for the whole South.” Madden also said that another event is planned for Lincoln’s birthday, Feb. 12, 2009.

BRCHR Member Receives Award

Longtime BRCHR member the Rev. Miss Mary Moody was honored in September, along with five other women, by the Silver Magnolias organization. And, in October Moody was honored by the House of Refuge Ministry in Baton Rouge “for her life as an extraordinary community leader.”

BRCHR Member Dies At Age 100

Baton Rougeans were saddened by the death on December 9 of Mrs. Inez Verna Wiggins Chrisentery at age 100. She was a member of St. Mark United Methodist Church and was an active volunteer in the church, as well as in the BRCHR and several other civic organizations. She taught elementary school in St. Helena and East Baton Rouge Parishes and was an Elementary School Supervisor in Greensburg.

Membership Information

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