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Framing Katrina

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Whoever succeeds in framing Katrina will have enormous power to shape America's future. Progressives started out with the framing advantage, because empathy, responsibility, and fairness are what progressives are about. Conservatives started out with a big disadvantage, because they promised to protect us and they failed.

But the conservatives filled the framing gap so quickly and effectively that, if progressives don't respond immediately, conservatives may be able to parlay this disaster into an even greater power grab than they made out of September 11.

Here's where the Katrina framing war stands.

Conservatives understand full well the importance of framing. They are busily framing Katrina to advance their right-wing agenda and expand their power. Their message is simple: The hurricane proves that conservatives were right all along.

- Katrina showed what happens when state and local officials become dependent on the federal government and fail to take responsibility for making security their top priority. Conservative commentators have, additionally, used Katrina as demonstrating the inadequacy of government in general and as providing a rationale for shrinking it further.
- Katrina reveals the dangers of environmental organizations that sue to stop levee-raising projects in order save an obscure species. Katrina proves that we must expand our domestic oil and gas production by opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and eliminating environmental protections.
- Katrina showed that the nation needs capable corporations like Wal-Mart and Halliburton to take responsibility for delivering services, massive cleanups, and large-scale rebuilding. Prevailing wage laws and environmental regulations must be suspended so

private companies can do their work.

- Katrina showed the importance of individual responsibility. Those who failed to take individual responsibility to get out suffered greatly or even died. Those who stayed behind to loot or act in otherwise unlawful ways revealed the underbelly of urban liberalism and government welfare.
- Katrina sets our priorities straight: rebuilding homes and businesses rather than spending on government entitlement programs like the Medicare drug benefit, Medicaid, the Centers for Disease Control, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, global AIDS funding, and so on.
- Katrina's drain on the economy makes tax cuts all the more necessary as a spur to economic growth.

Whenever conservatives have their back to the wall, they redouble their efforts and turn disaster -- literally and figuratively -- into ideological and political gain. Right-wing leaders are using this moment as another chance to solidify power by appealing to the general conservative principles that have been developed and disseminated for decades.

By contrast, progressives for the most part don't understand deep framing -- framing at the level of values and principles. Progressives are trying to win but they are fighting on the wrong battlefield altogether. They are telling truths -- lots of them, of all kinds. A buckshot load of truths, mostly aimed at Bush.

- Bush lacked leadership.
- Bush was told in advance and didn't respond in time.
- Bush had sent the National Guard to Iraq when its ranks were needed at home.
- Bush loaded the Federal Emergency Management Agency with incompetent political hacks like Michael Brown.
- Bush took money from levee reconstruction and used it for the war and to render tax cuts.
- Bush failed to preserve the wetlands that would have mitigated the storm surge, reversing Clinton policy.
- Bush has refused to address global warming, which contributes to the frequency and severity of hurricanes.

These truths might temporarily tarnish the Bush administration, perhaps making his ratings go down a few points for a while. But without the power of deep frames to hold them together and back them up, these truths will disappear from the public debate and they will fail to advance the broader truth: that Katrina proves the failure of conservatism.

What have we learned that can help progressives frame the discussion going forward?

Government is not the problem. Conservative government is the problem. The Bush administration's actions have only reinforced the need for smart government that protects the public good, not an anti-government ideology that puts private interests above common needs. Relentless budget cuts and misplaced policy priorities left vital government response capabilities uncoordinated, stripped of critical funding, and in the hands of political novices. These were the results of deliberate decisions by our nation's conservative leaders following the failed principle that less government is always better. When America needed its officials to step up to the challenge of a massive disaster, conservative government let us down.

Conservatives claim to be the promoters of a strong defense, but ended up delivering only weakness and uncertainty. For years, conservatives have championed their supposed strength and resolve, but then withered in the face of a calamitous national event. They have failed to protect our nation and prepare it for adversity. Four years after 9-11, the nation's Army is severely overstretched and under-recruited. The nation -- and our National Guard and Reserves who are supposed to help us here at home -- is bogged down in Iraq. Terrorist networks are growing across the globe. Chemical plants remain unguarded. And our newly created Department of Homeland Security can't handle the aftermath of a hurricane. Even leading conservatives are voicing concerns about what would happen to our people if the nation were to suffer a biological or chemical attack in the current security environment. This is not what the country thinks of as a strong defense.

Taking care of the wealthy first does nothing to ensure shared sacrifice and mutual responsibility for America's future. For the first time in history, a wartime president and his allies in Congress have sacrificed

the nation's well-being to their ideology by asking nothing from those that have prospered so much from the collective work of all Americans. After cutting taxes for the wealthy after 9-11 and before the war in Iraq, conservatives now have the audacity to claim that Katrina should actually speed up the move to repeal the estate tax for millionaires. The culmination of 30 years of conservative dreams and proposals has produced little more than a destabilized economy racked by corruption and misplaced priorities that favor the needs of the few over the national interest.

To help Americans think about values, progressives must place these truths in the larger context. We must use them to demonstrate the strength of progressive philosophy compared with the failings of conservatism. We must communicate these truths as part of a positive, values-based vision of government and society, not just to prevent another Katrina tragedy but to stop the conservative juggernaut in its tracks and save our nation from the far greater disaster of conservatism itself.

What should progressives say?

The tragedy of Katrina was a matter of values and principles. The heart of progressive values is straightforward and clear: empathy (caring about and for people), responsibility (acting responsibly on that empathy), and fairness (providing opportunities for all and a level playing field from which to start). These values translate into a simple proposition: The common wealth of all Americans should be used for the common good and betterment of all Americans. In short, promoting the common good so that we can all benefit -- and focusing on the public interest rather than narrow individual gain -- is the central role of government. These are not just progressive values. They are America's values.

Katrina shines a light not only on the failure of conservative values but especially on their fundamentally un-American character. Since the days of the colonies, when the

commonwealths of Massachusetts and Virginia were formed, Americans have pooled their common wealth for individual aspirations.

Today's right-wing conservative values are just plain un-American in this context. This is a country where people pull together in the face of disaster. They don't just tell one another to sink or swim. Sink-or-swim conservatism is not in the American tradition, or the American heart. Empathy, mutual responsibility, fairness, and community -- all progressive values -- are part of this heritage. As Katrina showed, Americans hold a deep sense of shared fate and want an effective government that represents these values, does its job, and serves the people valiantly. Americans want to act responsibly and contribute. Katrina proved it. Those are the central progressive values. Americans have them.

It is time for progressives at all levels -- from our political leaders and policy-makers to our public intellectuals to our activists to ordinary Americans who care about their country -- to articulate our values, fundamental American values, and repeat them proudly and consistently. The truth is that conservative values have failed America and are threatening the well-being of our nation.

America is, and has always been, a progressive country. We care. We act responsibly. We want a level playing field for all to succeed, and a sense of national community. That is what makes us progressives.

These are the deep truths that need to be told starting now. There can be no delay. Conservatives from the administration to Congress to think tanks to FOX News are busy framing Katrina their way. Once it is framed, it is hard to reframe. Now is the time to speak out.

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