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Squeezing Public Education: History and Ideology Gang Up in New Orleans

By Ralph Adamo



New Orleans, June 2006. Photo: Paul Baker

WHEN HURRICANE KATRINA (or, more accurately, the failure of the levees) washed away the New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) at the end of August 2005, there was relief in many quarters. Within days of the storm, the acting public school superintendent, Ora Watson, declared that the “fiscal crisis of the New Orleans Public Schools” was now over. In hastily assembled meetings, members of the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), state and local politicians, and leaders of the state’s education bureaucracy convened to examine the situation. Representatives of the charter school movement, as well as providers of ancillary education services and materials, also convened. The chance to recreate public education in New Orleans from the ground up was an irresistible consequence of Katrina, as well as a dream come true. Before the first waves of refugees began returning to the drowned city, these newly energized social engineers had decided that no public school would reopen (though public schools did open relatively quickly in the neighboring parishes of Jefferson and St. Bernard); that all 7,500 employees of the system (the majority of them teachers) would be terminated; and that whatever schools did open would be charter schools, operating under the aegis of either BESE or NOPS, depending on the type or timing of the charter application.

But that goal proved problematic on many counts, necessitating the creation of something called the Recovery School District (RSD), an arrangement by which the state took direct responsibility for running the 107 (far fewer were actually reopened and run)—out of

approximately 120—schools deemed to have been “failing” at the end of the last testing period. The Recovery School District would wind up being the educator of last resort, an infant stepchild of the new order.

Some Background

Many elements came together to create the crisis that everyone agrees embroiled the public schools in the years leading up to Katrina. Lacking aggressive oversight and consistent leadership, the administration of the public schools seemed unable to do its job on many levels. (And one would have to return to the bad faith, racist politics, and failures of sense and civility that surrounded the racial “integration” of the schools in the 1960s to begin the story of their demise.)

Even in the public schools that everyone has agreed to call “failed” (though the catastrophe was system-wide), some teachers taught well, working beyond their pay grades, providing supplies out of their own pockets (to make up, ultimately, for what was being stolen at the administrative end), refusing to allow those students whom they could reach to fail. Some principals displayed heroic character in standing up for their students and teachers. Some students displayed a heartbreaking thirst for the immediate and long-term benefits of education.

Of course, there were teachers who had either never been well qualified for their jobs or who had given up and retired in place. That there were venal principals and craven administrators is also obvious. That many students were beyond ordinary teaching before they even arrived at their desks may also be true, many in this community having been diminished and discarded by the economic and social collapse of so many families since the realignments of the Reagan era. The much-maligned union (United Teachers of New Orleans or UTNO) may have enabled some poor teachers to continue; but it also provided insulation from the caprices of the powerful, as well as welcome benefits to the hardworking teachers. The destruction of the union following Katrina remains a vexing problem for many of those who have returned to the classroom, under whatever aegis they operate. Without it, there is no recourse, no objective standard for defending against harassment or unfair labor practices by charter or RSD administrators or the remaining NOPS administration, now in charge of five selective-admission schools.

When things turn bad within a system, there are always elements within and without ready to implement New Plans. The demise, in the late 1990s, of one of NOPS’s least successful superintendents, Morris Holmes, provided an opportunity to civic establishmentarian (read, the business community) types long hostile to the professional leadership and rhetoric of career educators. They would try something new: bringing in a superintendent with no background in education, a retired Marine colonel from New Orleans, Alphonse Davis, whose father was a long-term custodian in the public schools. This innovation was engineered by an outfit calling itself the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation, one of whose leaders, Paul Pastorek, an attorney with the old-line Republican law firm of Adams and Reese, had been appointed to BESE by then-Governor Mike Foster, a Republican. Pastorek defended Colonel Davis’s administration as it sank beneath waves of disorder and public humiliation. When the longtime state superintendent of education, Cecil Picard, died in February (Picard is the one who is said

to have declared that no school would open in Orleans Parish following Katrina that was not a charter school), Pastorek was selected to replace him. His term began this March, and he will serve until a new governor is elected in 2008. As of now, expectations are that any new governor would reconfirm the appointment. (Given that the majority of those two hundred thousand or more souls still evacuated to other states and unable to return to the region are Democrats, the Republican Party will probably grab the state house, currently held by Kathleen Blanco, a Democrat who has decided not to run for re-election. The most paranoid among political observers believe the roadblocks preventing the return of the poorest evacuees are not accidental.) Pastorek's salary is \$286,000 a year, plus allowances of \$50,000 for housing and \$20,000 for automobile—this in a state where the average teacher salary is \$10,000 to \$15,000 below the boss' s housing allowance.

A Digression

I don't usually make comparisons between the U.S. government's response to Hurricane Katrina and its acts in Iraq, but some comparisons are hard to escape. Many of the same contractors have enriched themselves there as well as here; many of the same mistakes, based on ideology, have screwed up both locations. Chief among the ideologically driven errors is the conviction that the "private sector" is more able than the public sector to accomplish things that are, traditionally, the public sector's domain. Among the vendors who have profited in Iraq are many of the same corporations that, with mixed results, provided government-contracted services to disaster-struck New Orleans. For example, Blackwater was everywhere in evidence in the days following Hurricane Katrina—more present than the National Guard, according to some observers—a faux military presence that bullied and alarmed those who had returned to the city early to see the damage and begin the period of triage. At the center of the charter school movement, many here believe, is the profit motive, especially for national vendors providing construction, food services, security guards, and insurance to individual charter schools, consortiums of charters, and to the RSD. In replacing the system they despised, the advocates of limited government have created fields of profit for the private sector, while frequently delivering shoddy services and unfit products. Many of the charter schools themselves are in the hands of chartering entities with national profiles, KIPP and Mosaica among them. Thirty-one of the fifty-six schools that are open here now are charter schools, run by twenty-three organizations. The bottom line is that more than half the public school students in New Orleans attend charter schools, a higher percentage than anywhere else. Now, instead of centralized bad judgment, we have diversified bad judgment, with occasionally common results.

One egregious example of waste and bad judgment, made possible by Bush-administration FEMA rules and policies, required contractors to empty all schools of all contents (not a completed process—some of the most badly flooded schools remain neighborhood hazards with their rotting supplies and unsecured access). In many cases, the equipment—computers, desks, books, and other supplies still in wrappers as they'd been left at the end of the second week of the 2005 school year—was bulldozed out of dry buildings and tossed into dumpsters. All contents had to go, we were told, even those obviously not damaged, to guard against the threat of lawsuits by parents, should children returning to those schools encounter mold. As a former teacher, I have to say that any

mold in the building where I taught, an unflooded uptown campus, pre-dated Katrina. Still, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of materials were tossed away in my old school and in scores of other schools around the city. The contents were then replaced, badly by the accounts of many teachers, with cheap goods, at government expense, by private vendors under an arcane FEMA formula.

Back to the Story

When the Colonel failed and fled in 2002, and after an interim superintendency by the then-chancellor of the University of New Orleans (soon to be forced to resign that position due to a tendency to co-mingle UNO Foundation funds with his own personal needs), yet another new savior was found for the system, another career education bureaucrat from elsewhere named Tony Amato. His tenure was politically stormy, unsuccessful in both financial and education reform, and it ended on the eve of Katrina with his abrupt resignation. Also on the eve of Katrina, there came riding into town (summoned by the state education bureaucrats and the same mess of “good-government” types that had given us the Colonel) the fix-it firm of Alvarez and Marsal, accountants whose specialty is downsizing failing businesses and sometimes “saving” them at the expense of their product quality. They had been through the school system of St. Louis a couple of years earlier, performing tasks similar to the one set before them here: to get the finances under control. They were on site when the hurricane struck, and as a result, their mission expanded widely and deeply, into the very fabric of the teaching enterprise. In St. Louis, the lead partner, Bill Roberti, managed to have himself named superintendent, but in New Orleans, Roberti’s lack of education credentials rendered him statutorily unqualified to serve. (Those qualifications had been waived for the Colonel, an error even these ideologues were loath to repeat.) Instead, Roberti became the de facto head. This proved to be a minor inconvenience, given the weakness of the acting superintendent, though it interfered with A&M’s modus operandi of gaining control through the temporary insertion of their own people in the chief administrative offices. A&M folks did come to occupy key posts below the level of superintendent. (It is worth noting that A&M’s St. Louis experience was one of its primary claims on the New Orleans job. Not only was its tenure in that city consistently dogged by controversy and dissention, but the long-term results, recently documented in news reports and education studies, suggest that that school system is now in worse shape than it was before A&M’s arrival.)

Between its initial NOPS contract, subsequent renewals, additional contracts—one rather small with a charter school cooperative on the city’s west bank, one very large, approximately \$30 million, with RSD that extends for another three years—Alvarez and Marsal has benefited to the tune of more than \$50 million from the catastrophe in New Orleans.

Arriving on the scene just a few months before the storm, over the objections of the few populist members left on the NOPS school board, A&M had already begun closing schools and laying off personnel, some of them teachers, as the 2005 school year began. Its original charge had been to straighten out what had become an intractable financial mess, apparently exacerbated by each in the quick succession of failed superintendents, a mess that included missing money, convoluted payroll issues, accounts that were hard to

find, much less balance—stuff that you might want some good accountant to clear up. As it happens, the accountants wound up working with the FBI, and a number of people, mostly at lower levels, went to jail.

But once the floodwaters inundated the city and began their long marination of many of its school buildings, A&M joined state administrators to bypass the elected school board and make some astonishing decisions. Among them was the termination of all employees, with compensation only for the two weeks of August that had been worked before Katrina (compensation that arrived by Western Union anywhere from three to eight weeks late). The decision to open no school for the academic year—even though most of the uptown schools and all of the west bank campuses had been spared flooding—appears to be the key to the great experiment envisioned by those hostile to public education (and government in general when it was not benefiting their corporate holdings), none of whom ever had or ever would have kids attending public schools. (Pastorek’s three children attended private schools, as have the children of most BESE and even school board members.)

The great experiment had begun. With seat-of-the-pants planning, with no community input, and against the objection of a smattering of political and social leaders, the state, Alvarez and Marsal, and the cast of the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation (working under new and different organizational names) brought us a new dawn of all charter schools all the time. Or that was the plan, abetted by the national charter school movement; right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation; and the libertarian or “market-liberal” Cato Institute, one of whose members crowed at a public forum in February, “We got rid of the school board! Anyone interested in market-driven education should be watching New Orleans.” Indeed. A flood of corporate foundation money poured in to help the representatives of the (market-driven) movement to get their schools chartered and staffed with a whole new kind of teacher (that is, young, inexperienced, and from somewhere else).

What’s Wrong with Charter Schools?

There’s not necessarily anything inherently wrong with charter schools. One or two had even struggled usefully into existence prior to Katrina. My main concern is not the same as the populist one frequently voiced, that they siphon off the “best” students and are therefore “elitist.” If there were such a thing as a level playing field, if the marketplace had egalitarian dimensions and common expectations, the notion of a loose confederation of schools with equal access to money, to students, to other resources would have greater appeal. And it is a fact that currently many of the charter schools seem to be doing a pretty good job, especially those that in their earlier incarnations as city-wide access or magnet schools were doing a good job already.

BESE member Leslie Jacobs of New Orleans and others often recite the mantra “market-driven education,” as if it were an obvious good in itself. The well-known flaw in that thinking is that not every consumer is equally well placed psychologically, educationally, culturally, and certainly financially, to approach the market on anything like an equal footing. In a city like ours, where generations have languished in poorly run schools, in dead-end jobs, or within a network of government programs and an underground market

economy, there are people who simply cannot make such an educational marketplace work for them. Even assuming that they could clear the hurdles of finding the right school, fulfilling its requirements (whether they be testing or some form of parental commitment), and enrolling a child, they are then faced with the requirement (in almost every charter school, including those that claim to have no admission requirements) that their child maintain levels of performance and discipline or leave the school.

As Tulane history professor Lawrence Powell noted in scathing remarks about the laissez-faire approach to the rebuilding of the city, “Markets are all about coordinating expectations.” That is one thing none of the planning efforts managed to accomplish with regard to education, and as a result, when the school year began in fall 2006, we saw a spectacle of confused and harried parents wandering all over town trying to make sense of their new “choices.” Instead of genuine community input, which might threaten preconceived and ideologically driven decisions, parents have been treated to various empowerment charades, including one begun this spring by yet another privately financed institute aimed at correcting the terrible wobble of the market-driven education bandwagon.

The Recovery School District

With charter schools not accessible to all, and with too few organizations lining up to create or sponsor charter schools, enter the Recovery School District, headed until the end of May by a formerly cloistered education bureaucrat from Baton Rouge, Robin Jarvis. When the state realized that not enough outside chartering forces would arrive in time for the 2006–2007 school year, it created RSD for everyone who couldn’t find or fit into a charter school.

RSD opened seventeen schools in the fall of 2006—schools that were inadequately staffed (many still have only a minority of certified teachers); that lacked books, food services, and other infrastructural necessities; and that started the year in school buildings that had either not been improved at all or were in the middle of reconstruction. RSD claimed that it could not begin its preparations until the summer of 2006. Officials cited Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) rules that required that the federal money necessary to fix the buildings be reimbursement money only, coupled with the state legislature’s refusal to advance the money against the eventual reimbursement. Why didn’t it begin trying to hire teachers earlier than that summer? The answer has to do with agreements RSD made with a private teacher-vetting organization that could not seem to do its work with any efficiency. By the time RSD decided to hire teachers, many of the best-qualified former NOPS teachers had gone to work in charter schools or in other districts, or, by the hundreds, they had simply retired rather than deal with the chaos of the coming school year.

As of this writing in spring 2007, RSD offices still lack a telephone landline; an RSD Web site search sends the searcher to the NOPS site. When hundreds of students showed up looking for a school during the Christmas/New Year break, RSD had to “wait-list” them due to overcrowding in its schools, but the wait-listing produced such an outcry that RSD reversed its position, cramming more students into the overcrowded rooms. The pattern is set—RSD’s mistakes come about because no one knows how to steer the ship

or because those who try to steer are tone-deaf to the needs of the community.

Waiting until summer to begin recruiting faculty and ordering supplies guaranteed that the school year would begin badly. Having waited and then marched applicants for the teaching positions through a testing and vetting process that many found tedious and insulting—devised by yet another private consulting entity—the RSD began the school year with as many as a third too few teachers to maintain even a very poor teacher-student ratio. And for all the ballyhoo about ascertaining teacher competence, it wound up with a large number of uncertified teachers and a significant number of new teachers from elsewhere who quit within weeks of the start-up, in no way prepared to deal with the children of the New Orleans underclass. The situation was not helped by the near absence of mental health services in New Orleans, especially within the schools.

But RSD had plenty of security guards to keep watch on its students (a population grown to more than 9,500 as people trickle back into the city still, trying to put their lives back together). Many of the guards are employed by the Guidry Group out of Texas, subcontracting to Day and Zimmerman from Philadelphia. Neither muscle firm had been in the school security guard business before arriving in New Orleans. One school, McDonogh Senior High, has more than thirty-two security guards (as well as a regular contingent of New Orleans police officers) and one social worker for a student population of about eight hundred; the number of security guards roughly matches the number of teachers. The current overall RSD ratio is one guard for every 37 students; prior to the state takeover, the ratio was one guard per 333 students. To enter McDonogh and most other RSD buildings, students have to pass through metal detectors, something new to most of us in the post-Katrina landscape. Even in the building where I taught, now converted to a regular middle school with about three hundred students aged ten to fourteen, there are eight security guards on duty. Prior to Katrina, I believe we had one guard who checked on us a couple of times a week.

RSD superintendent Robin Jarvis was in over her head from the beginning, poorly supported from within her own bureaucracy, and a stranger to the community—from which RSD sought no input about which schools to open or other neighborhood issues. After a year of more-or-less uncritical support, in early April our local daily, the Times Picayune, finally called for her to quit-already. The straw that broke that particular camel's back was the RSD's plan to make it nearly impossible for any student to fail, a rounding off of quarterly grades that would have allowed a student who failed three academic quarters to pass the subject if he or she made a D in the fourth. The rationale for this was a (not inhumane) realization that many of the students had been denied any education last year by the closing of all the schools, that many students remain traumatized and unfocused, and—though this was never said—that the RSD schools had largely failed in their teaching mission.

Within days of announcing this grading policy in early April, the RSD rescinded it, amid criticism from the media, from BESE, from the new state superintendent, and from others who recognized that the policy made a mockery of the mockery that RSD's creators

(especially at the state level) had heaped upon the previous public school system because of its alleged failure to educate its kids.

Where We Are Now

New Orleans now has three “systems”: NOPS, with a handful of previously pretty good schools still functioning reasonably well; RSD, with approximately twenty schools, mostly in distress, educating about a third of the city’s public school students (and planning to open another six to ten campuses next year using modular buildings supplied by the private sector); and thirty-one charter schools. Of those, eight are confederated within something called the Algiers Charter School Association with its own superintendent; the rest operate under charters from either BESE or the Orleans Parish School Board, each with its own board of directors, financial plan, and sponsoring partners. Each of the three superintendents earns in the \$150,000 range. There are significant variations among schools in teacher salary, benefits, and other financial and business arrangements. There are people maneuvering to consolidate services. There are even people, mostly within the traditional NOPS organization and board, who envision an eventual reunification of the schools. The president of the school board talks this talk; the BESE members who speak on the subject are more circumspect, and you get the impression that hell will freeze over before they embrace a unified public school system, given the possibility of unionization that unity implies.

The state education department has acknowledged that, for all its hand-wringing over facilities, the RSD has accessed only 10 percent of the FEMA money that has been earmarked toward its use—\$24 million of \$240 million available. Although RSD and Alvarez & Marsal have identified eight sites where renovation might begin, their list remains tentative as of May. Meanwhile, the plan is to spend more than \$40 million on temporary classroom buildings, in an engineering task to be overseen by the Louisiana National Guard, to accommodate the expected increase in RSD’s student population from 17,000 to 26,000. State education superintendent Pastorek has also engaged yet another outside facilities consultant, CSRS/The Facility Group out of Baton Rouge, to assist in that work, while grumblings about A&M finally have reached an almost discernable public level. No one will comment on whether its remaining \$30 million in facility consulting contract work is in danger, though its staff have not missed a meal since they arrived in New Orleans.

When Alvarez and Marsal’s top local managers acknowledged in early May that they had no one on their “team” who specialized in engineering, construction, or architecture issues, and that it was therefore not their fault that nothing had been done to really advance facility planning for the anticipated influx of 2007-2008 students, local critics were already so benumbed that little grousing was heard. So far, no one has even asked how A&M planned to fulfill its contract during the planning and construction phase that was clearly on its way.

Because the school board owns dozens of properties that will almost certainly never be schools again, A&M has turned its attention, and at least one of its \$500-per-hour managers, to the task of how to offload the properties. This is an area of simmering political interest and soon, no doubt, will become the center of much more active

attention from developers.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, there were about 64,000 public school students. Currently, there are a few more than 30,000, with expectations for another 6,000 to 9,000 next year. A&M held a public ceremony recently, announcing that the NOPS schools were in pretty good financial shape now (all five of them) and that A&M's services would be ending soon—though the RSD contract goes on, as does the real estate activity. Bill Roberti allowed as how he was phasing himself out, and would likely only be billing fifty hours a month from now until December (he bills at more than \$500 per hour), reducing his personal earnings from the New Orleans project to only about a quarter of a million dollars for the remainder of 2007.

Although the numbers fascinate me, our local paper has taken a business-as-usual attitude and fails to highlight them for a local population still struggling to pay exorbitant rents and sky-high utility bills—or throwing away their new homeowners' insurance bills in disgust and despair.

Will the schools survive and improve? One has little reason to expect visible improvement anytime soon. Before Jarvis even submitted her resignation, Philadelphia's public school chief, Paul Vallas, had come to town as a \$40,000 consultant to the RSD. He was about to end his stint as school chief in Philadelphia in a confrontation with that city's mayor over the schools' unexpected seventy million dollar budget shortfall.

In early May, after weeks of denying it, Paul Pastorek announced that Vallas would take over the RSD, a system with twenty-two schools and oversight of a slightly smaller number of charters. Though accustomed to running systems with ten times the number of students, Vallas's public comments have suggested an eagerness for a new challenge, as well as an acknowledgment of the necessity of leaving Philadelphia. Vallas has come to New Orleans with what is described as a year-to-year agreement, while his family has returned to their native Chicago. In his initial remarks, he told local citizens that if they weren't happy with his performance, he'd hit the road; one senses that he may well do that before a full year is up.

While it is possible to read his record different ways, among the facts is that he has no formal background in education, although he has run two large systems. He first became superintendent in Chicago in the mid-nineties, at the request of his boss, Mayor Richard Daley, whom he served as the city's finance director. He spent another five-plus years in Philadelphia. At the center of the mixed reviews of his record is his claim of success in raising standardized testing scores. There, as everywhere else, serious educators questioned whether test scores had become talismans rather than proof of actual learning. Vallas was also criticized in Philadelphia for bringing in Chicago cronies as upper management and consultants, a move he has indicated he will repeat in New Orleans, citing them as successful education reformers. Some critics have wondered whether cronyism might even have been a factor that led to the unbalanced budget in Philadelphia, where last year alone at least eighty million dollars went to outside entities to run schools and detention centers and design curricula. Edison Schools, which has a

small presence in New Orleans, runs twenty-two for-profit schools in Philadelphia, where it receives an additional \$750-per-pupil allotment above what regular public schools get. A champion of privatization, Vallas enters an arena already heavily weighted toward that goal.

What Vallas will be paid has yet to become part of the public record; his salary in Philadelphia was more than a quarter of a million dollars. Though he arrives with a reputation as one who embraces the charter school movement, some who have considered his record are concerned at what appeared to be a shift to “move power back to the home office” in Philadelphia. That shift seemed to reverse the decentralization movement of the previous decade, in which power had spread out to principals and school sites and away from the central office, the very rallying cry of the charteristas.

The people who gave us the free-enterprise version of public education, especially the ones who don't live here and can watch the experiment from the comfort and safety of elsewhere, will not give up easily, nor will they allow honest evaluations of their efforts anytime soon. They are already using New Orleans and its charter school revolution to revive a national voucher movement. It will be something like, again, Iraq, I think. Years will pass before the boosters begin to shy away from their work, pretending that they meant something different all along or just deciding that the population of this old whore of a city is simply too backward to be able to know what is good for her and her children. And meanwhile, big salaries will be paid to small numbers of people, contractors and vendors of all sorts will make handsome profits, kids without much hope for a better life will continue killing each other in the streets.

Is the old model of public education preferable? Certainly not as it was being practiced pre-Katrina. Was there another way? Unfortunately, given the large and widening class differential in this city, maybe not. There are simply too many people convinced that poverty is a stigma that marks the poor as deserving their distress, rather than an effect of an economic system that denies, derides, and deprives. Such people mean well as they go about their planning; they mean well even as they shift their efforts to the ideological rather than the practical task before them; they mean well even as they can't understand why their good intentions have not caused an oppressed people to realize how lucky they are.

For reform that embraces community-centeredness, and not the privileged individualism implicit in the national charter movement, New Orleans would have to be the location of a genuine debate about community goals and options. Instead, it is hostage to an invasion of school-snatchers and their dreams of privatization.

A Final Personal Note

For a year, I have been working on a book about this subject. For four years before Hurricane Katrina, I worked three days a week within the system as a creative writing teacher for a new middle school for the arts. Although my school had an entrance requirement—that the kids who came to us from throughout the city show some talent in one of the six art disciplines offered—it would be hard to classify it as elitist or exclusionary in any meaningful sense. Almost all of the students were children of the

working poor, and most came to us from schools that had not prepared them well in basic subjects, much less developed their particular gifts. When we had parent meetings, the majority of our parents showed up, a rarity in the public schools, and many were still wearing the name tags they had worn all day at their jobs.

With others from our faculty, I tried to charter the school, once it became clear that it wouldn't open any other way. Our proposed charter, for all its earnestness, lacked a sound financial plan or a well-heeled (or at least well-connected) board, two elements that BESE absolutely required. When I pressed the matter further, seeking to have us open under RSD, I was told by Jarvis that no selective admission schools would be opened, even though our selectivity was based only on artistic criteria. We continued to disagree, though Jarvis dropped out of the conversation and turned the case over to an underling, who recited from a playbook.

My six-year-old son attends one of the charter schools that was once a public school; my daughter will begin attending a public school in the fall. My interest in the outcomes is not abstract. My hope, as I continue with the book I am writing, is to make a difference by joining the process by which we all take a hard look at what we are doing, and try to get it right.

Ralph Adamo is a poet and journalist in New Orleans. His sixth book, of new and selected poems, *Waterblind*, is available from Portals Press. Initial research on his forthcoming book, upon which this article is based, came from a Katrina Media Grant from the Open Society Institute.

Homepage and featured photo by Paul Barker.