

Black Caucus puts poverty at top of list

Hurricane uproots class as an issue

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Countering criticism toward just one political party, actor Harry Belafonte jabbed both Democrats and Republicans.

"The most important wreckage to look at is the wreckage of the Democratic Party," Belafonte said. "We must look through the ravages of the Democratic Party and see if there's anything worth salvaging."

Belafonte continued: "I would hope that while the Black Caucus celebrates this moment, where we have all these wonderful black leaders and our white progressive associates, that we would get off the rhetoric, get off the redundancy, and dig deep into this country and let George W. Bush, let the Christian right, let a whole bunch of folks that is running away with this nation know that their legs have just been amputated."

Noting that Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign was set back with his 1968 assassination in Memphis, Belafonte, a veteran financier of the civil rights movement, says King, activists Fannie Lou Hamer, Frederick Douglass and A. Philip Randolph were the real advocates for the poor and that poverty has still not been seriously addressed by either political party.

In 1974, the percentage of black families living below the poverty level was about 32 percent, for white families, it was 8 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Currently, the percentage of black families living below the poverty line has dropped to about 27 percent while the percentage of white families in poverty has remained virtually unchanged. The poverty line is defined as \$9,573 or less for an individual or \$18,660

for a family of four with two children.

With approximately half of the blacks in New Orleans living below the poverty level, it was mostly poor African-Americans who could not make it out of the flood because many had no transportation.

"We've had the capacity to eradicate poverty, but we've never used it," says Congresswoman Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-Texas), a co-chair of the ALC. "Why did we hold ourselves from eradicating poverty when we had the capacity? Why did we wait so long?"

Open-ended questions such as Jackson-Lee's begged for answers that were rare during the ALC Town Hall meeting. Lively with questions and debate, the meeting presented few answers except the need for voters to support or oppose legislation, make demands and hold public officials accountable.

"A powerless people are a hopeless people," said Jackson-Lee. "I hope that at this meeting we are provoked and incensed. Nothing will happen in Washington unless you make us do it."

Bush is already feeling the pressure. His approval rating plummeted from 90 percent after the terrorist attacks in Sept. 2001 to 45 percent before Katrina to 40 percent after the botched Katrina rescues, according to a USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll.

Even so, Democrats admit the tragedy goes far deeper than one man. It exposes an American culture, says Rep. Danny K. Davis (D-Ill.), who co-chaired the ALC.

"Colonization, slavery, racism, prejudice, notions of superiority and inferiority, a strong desire for oppressors to stay on top of the oppressed, and a strong desire of those who have to keep what they have, even if it means to pimp off of others and to the extent that those who are pimped allowed it to happen," Davis

said.

The serious tone of the town hall event was indicative of discussions across America as many homes are now overflowing with guests - some strangers and some extended family members - left homeless by the New Orleans and Mississippi floods.

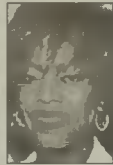
"It awakened people to the fact that it could happen to them if it could happen to people who looked like us and if it happened to people that we know," said actress Alfre Woodard. "Hopefully, more people will step up... with a consciousness long after we've cleaned up the damaged areas."

Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) agrees. "Some are to blame, but all are responsible," he says. "I don't think there's anything wrong with holding people accountable when they mess up, but even when we hold those accountable, we are all complicit in the long time poverty that continues in our society."

Accountability won't happen if legislators don't do their part in discovering whether race or poverty played a part in the botched rescue, says Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.).

"I don't have enough information to say what went wrong or how we could have done better. But we must renew confidence in our government," said Clinton, who had proposed a special commission to investigate the tragedy.

Harvard Law School Professor Charles Ogletree, the moderator of the town hall discussion said: "I have fears that we will soon forget and become complacent."



Woodard



Obama

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