



**RELEARNING LESSONS OF FIRE AND FLOOD:
PROPHECIES OF THINGS TO COME**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

When James Baldwin chose the title of his book, *The Fire Next Time*, from a prophecy in one of our sacred songs that says “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water the fire next time,” he meant it to be a prediction that the enraged Black masses, tired of being denied their freedom, would eventually rise up in rebellion in the Sixties and set the cities on fire. But he didn’t and couldn’t know that global warming would bring both greater flood and fire as real threats to our world and future. However, we who have seen and suffered the devastation of New Orleans and the Gulf by flood-water and fierce wind and the yearly increase in the intensity and duration of bush, field and forest fires, know there is more flood and fire to come. We know too that without check on global warming and disciplined development of and care for fire-prone and coastal areas, as well as protective measures in both, greater catastrophes can be predicted with certainty.

Also we know that without radical social change, the White and rich will always be more prepared and pampered and the poor and people of color will bear the brunt of natural disasters made more deadly and destructive by the willingness of those in power to disregard their welfare and sacrifice their well-being for a number of immoral and irrational reasons. Thus, the recent official response to the devastating fires in San Diego is not only a study in contrast to the official response to the natural disaster and human catastrophe in New Orleans, but also a promise and prophecy of things to come.

And behold, there was Bush in San Diego, trying to look presidentially somber, straining to seem concerned and on top of it, making appropriate pro forma offerings of prayer and rapid relief for “those affected.”

He had already declared disaster for the region in record time and had quickly sent ahead federal funds, personnel and equipment to pave the way for a triumphant entry into the area of tragedy. This time he would land and look appropriately concerned and involved—no New Orleans flying around observing from on high, safely and sanitarily above the poor minions making it thru the water and waste the best way they could.

This time the head of FEMA would rapidly be there to deal with the emergency, instead of being delayed by the demands of dinner and the dismissive disregard of those Black, poor and relatively powerless. Even the head of Homeland Security was sent, apparently as a sign of serious concern, and perhaps, to remind the public of the possibility of terrorists behind every burning bush and tree, trying to set fire to our “freedom”. Some of us might not be able to make the leap of faith required to make this link. But there are always the true believers who are certain in the midst of their pimped and pandered to xenophobic fear and loathing that there is a real link out there somewhere, and if we just have faith we will find it.

Regardless of official rumors and press reports, Bush did not respond so quickly with money, material and skilled personnel in San Diego County because of any lingering consciousness of Katrina. Nor did he move swiftly because he remembers, feels remorse or is still reeling from the effects of his criminally negligent response to the Katrina catastrophe. That would require a moral conscience he doesn’t have; a strong political opposition from the Democrats that doesn’t exist, and an organized and powerful Black and progressive Movement still to be built. Bush responded the way he did because that’s the way the system works,

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based on race and class and the wealth, power and privilege that come from this.

So, there was the ingathering of the wealthy and well-to-do at Qualcomm Stadium as citizens worthy of the city's best attention and care in their hour of distress. There was for them cool and warm water, food of all kinds in a abundance, air-conditioning, acupuncture, ice cream and Starbuck's coffee, massages and other creature comforts, clowns, games and various goodies, teachers and tutors, counselors, bedding befitting the worthy and special spaces for housing, caressing and comforting pets.

But as might be guessed, some among us did not fare as well. The Native Americans on the reservations were left a long time to fend heroically for themselves and to save as much as they could of lives, homes and priceless and irreplaceable art and artifacts of their culture. Also, Mexican workers were trapped in the hillsides and canyons, unable to understand orders to evacuate and afraid to come to relief stations or the stadium because of fear of deportation. Still for the White and wealthy, it was a high level of service at a terrible time, with local, state and federal governments coming quickly together to save and comfort them in their time of need.

However, it was not so in New Orleans where it took four days of unconscionable and disastrous delay to declare a state of emergency for the city, even though there is

no comparison of the two disasters in terms of the extent of destruction, the number dead, injured, homeless and those left helpless, scattered and stranded in distant places unable to return and rebuild. Indeed, two years later, tens of thousands of Katrina victims have no home and are without work or means to rebuild their lives.

Furthermore, the press this time was so positive, full of praise for the first-responders, emergency workers and volunteers and for the patience and understanding of the victims. No alarmism here or indictment of the people for their own tragedy. Even when it came to talk of global warming, the lust for luxurious living in the so-called wilderness and the unchecked residential expansion into fire-prone areas, there was no condemnation or even criticism. Indeed, there was talk of the wealthy residents and us all being "accidental arsonists" who in our love for the beauty of the wilderness simply forget the hazards of fire and the costs that comes with endless and excessive consumption and waste.

It is willful illusions like these and those about the superiority of themselves and the sustainability of a wasteful and oppressive society that bode ill for us and the world. And we can only counter this by becoming floods and fires of righteous struggle ourselves thru which a new future is forged and the world is repaired, refreshed, renewed and transformed.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Black Studies, California State University-Long Beach, Chair of The Organization Us, Creator of Kwanzaa, and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, [www.Us-Organization.org and www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org].