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The New New Orleans

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If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise

a film directed by Spike Lee

HBO Home Video, two DVDs, \$24.98 (on sale April 19)

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts

a film directed by Spike Lee

HBO Home Video, three DVDs, \$19.98

Race

a film directed by Katherine Cecil

Information available at www.racethedocumentary.com.

Trouble the Water

a film directed by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal

Zeitgeist, DVD, \$29.99



Robert Polidori

2520 Deslondes Street, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2005; photograph by Robert Polidori from his book *Points Between...Up Till Now*, which includes his images of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans

Spike Lee's latest long documentary film about New Orleans, *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise*, which aired on HBO last summer, begins with a set piece on the outburst of ecstasy occasioned by the Saints winning the 2010 Super Bowl. Louisiana is football-mad and Saints fans were being redeemed after decades of suffering through losing seasons, but there was a special intensity to the celebration because, plausibly, it could have marked the beginning of the post-Hurricane Katrina era in New Orleans—the moment when rebirth rather than tragedy became the reigning local metaphor. There was a similar moment in local politics just the day before the Super Bowl, when Mitch Landrieu, son of a former mayor of New Orleans, brother of a United States senator, and a white politician who seems to believe deeply in racial reconciliation, was elected mayor.

By the dictates of narrative logic, the boisterous opening scenes of *If God Is Willing* have to be a straw man that can then be knocked down, and Lee doesn't disappoint. What follows is a comprehensive, vivid, detailed, relentlessly negative portrait of the state of the city, which ends with a photomontage of corpses. (And then the credits begin, in the manner of the final scene in Fellini's *8½*, with a shot of the documentary's enormous crew supposedly celebrating the Super Bowl victory.) The Saints seem like bread and circuses, and Landrieu like a well-meaning guy in an impossible situation.

Crime, we learn, is back at its unconscionably high pre-Katrina levels. The police force is brutal and corrupt. Poor blacks are on the receiving end of white vigilantism and cursory, rough, inefficient treatment in the court system. Federal aid is pathetically low, and so, therefore, is the pace of rebuilding. Residents of the tens of thousands of trailers put in New Orleans by the Federal Emergency Management Administration are being poisoned by formaldehyde. Business interests are using Katrina as a pretext to take over the city. The BP oil spill, raging out of control, has ravaged the Louisiana coast, environmentally and as a source of livelihood for its residents.

Spike Lee's first post-Katrina documentary, *When the Levees Broke*, which aired on HBO in 2006, was raw and painful—it got across the pure horror of the aftermath of the storm. *If God Is Willing* is a more elaborate and measured production. There are many interview subjects, from high government officials to movie stars (Sean Penn and Brad Pitt) to some of the ordinary people who appeared in *When the Levees Broke*. It covers an enormous range of topics and settings, including even the earthquake in Haiti. It is beautifully shot and edited; Lee has a dour view of the world but a palpable love of its individual inhabitants, and he's able to extract genuine life from everyone he puts on screen. (Michael “heckuva job” Brown, formerly of FEMA, is especially lovable.) The

score, by the New Orleans trumpeter Terence Blanchard, is gorgeous. But the film's obdurate refusal to comply with the conventional imperative to show New Orleans beginning a new and more hopeful chapter gives *If God Is Willing* a dead-end quality. Here, New Orleans seems just to have stopped, or to have found a way to take off from what was already a desperately bad situation before Katrina into a never-ending, far-deeper-downward plunge.

The technique of *If God Is Willing* is roughly the HBO house style: no on-camera host, no voice-over, just filmed scenes and people being interviewed. It's a method that does not require the filmmaker to draw any stated conclusions, and Lee makes an effort to represent a range of opinion in his selection of interview subjects. Still, from the aggregate of the voices he chooses to present and from the order in which he presents them, it's easy to infer his own position in the battles over the fate of New Orleans after the storm. Because of the overlay of chaos and recrimination the categories were not perfectly neat, but, generally, there was a faction in New Orleans (which thought of itself as reformist) that wanted to use the storm as the occasion to remake the city in a more efficient and high-functioning form: close the housing projects and Charity Hospital, rebuild ruined homes zone by zone according to a plan, refuse to rebuild everywhere, replace the old public schools with charter schools.

This camp largely won (except on planned rebuilding), and its ideas are what Lee appears to be dead-set against. Most of the people to whom he gives the last word in his treatment of each of these issues believe that the black infrastructure of the city—the schools, the neighborhoods, the projects, Charity—is being taken away because it's inconvenient and threatening to the white business elite, and because Katrina offered an irresistible opportunity. Conversely, restoring (and improving) pre-Katrina black New Orleans in toto is the only morally acceptable approach now.

Such a restoration could take place only through a much, much larger infusion of money than New Orleans got after the storm, and the only place so much money could come from is the federal government. The city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana, even before Katrina, were far too poor to offer the most basic government services at a decent level, let alone rebuilding funds. The local business elite—a puissant-sounding off-camera presence in most treatments of Katrina and its aftermath—actually doesn't have much money compared to its counterparts in other American cities, even in the South: New Orleans has no home-grown big business like Coca-Cola in Atlanta, FedEx in Memphis, or Hospital Corporation of America in Nashville.

Congress and the Bush administration did spend heavily in New Orleans, but a few months after Katrina Bush balked at what was probably the closest thing to a big

comprehensive plan that he might plausibly have endorsed, a proposal by a Louisiana Republican congressman named Richard Baker for a big federal buyout of flooded housing. Baker's plan was meant to lead to an overall remaking of the city: whole neighborhoods would be bought up, resold, and redeveloped. Instead the administration and Congress appropriated billions in grants to individual homeowners who wanted to move back, and to specific building projects for schools, water treatment plants, libraries, and so on.

All of these monies were distributed notoriously inefficiently. Funding for most of the project grants wasn't released for years. The program for homeowners, called Road Home, was run by the administration of Louisiana's governor at the time, Kathleen Babineaux Blanco—who appears in *If God Is Willing* as an entirely admirable figure—with appalling delays in the release of the funds. In any case, the premise of both Road Home and the project grants was friendly to patchy redevelopment of a kind that made it nearly impossible for the strapped city government, which had to bear most of the burden of providing basic services like police, fire protection, public transportation, and garbage removal, to give its scattered citizens what residents of most American cities take for granted.

Toward the end of *If God Is Willing*, Lee gets a number of his interviewees, including even the usually genial Mitch Landrieu, to assert bitterly that the BP oil spill could never have happened off the shore of the Hamptons. In one sense this is true: residents of the Louisiana coast, even after the spill, have eagerly promoted offshore oil drilling in a way that it's hard to imagine at least the summer residents of the Hamptons doing, if there were oil to be drilled there. But there's also an implication in these comments that the blown well would have been plugged sooner if it had been in the Northeast. That's probably not so—it's doubtful that either BP or the Obama administration had a solution in place by May that they delayed until September because the spill was in Louisiana—but it bespeaks an authentic New Orleans attitude, a feeling that all of the city's spectacular misfortune hasn't happened in the first place, and doesn't get more fully corrected after it has happened, just by unhappy accident. There is, so many feel, an uncaring attitude, or even a malign intent, behind the city's troubles, which stem from New Orleans's being a poor, black-majority city.

Another of the recent crop of New Orleans documentary films, by a British-born New Orleanian named Katherine Cecil, is called *Race*. The title is a too-obvious, though maybe irresistible, double entendre, referring to the 2006 New Orleans mayoral election and to the theme underlying it. The civil rights movement—in particular the 1965 Voting Rights Act—generated a much larger and more engaged black electorate in New

Orleans. For one historical moment this made blacks the key constituency in elections between white candidates; the first politician to take advantage of this was the white candidate Moon Landrieu, Mitch Landrieu's father, who was elected mayor in 1970 with a big majority of the black vote and a minority of the white vote.

Landrieu's successor was the first black mayor of New Orleans, Dutch Morial, who had one son, Marc Morial, who was mayor of New Orleans in the 1990s, and another, Jacques Morial, who is a frequent interview subject in *If God Is Willing*. As the years passed, movement to the suburbs decreased the white population of New Orleans to the point where the political situation had reversed: white voters became the swing constituency in elections between black candidates, so the black candidate who was more acceptable to whites usually won. But for a black mayor to retain the loyalty of voters of both races was very difficult, and not just because of public policy differences. New Orleans whites like a kind of nonconfrontational bearing in black politicians that doesn't play well with black voters. Dutch Morial, on the morning after his reelection in 1982, told two interviewers from the *Times-Picayune*, "I don't know why people want me to deal politically differently than any other mayor. Is it because I'm a nigger? Because I'm a nigger, I've got to be shat on by everybody else?" That was the end of whatever love Morial had in white New Orleans.

Ray Nagin, the black mayor during Hurricane Katrina, followed this pattern. He was elected in 2002 by presenting himself as a businessman devoted to government efficiency, carrying the white vote while losing the black vote. After Katrina and the forced out-migration of tens of thousands of black voters, as his reelection campaign came into view, Nagin realized that he was going to draw mainly white opposition, so he altered his self-presentation so as to appeal more to black voters. During a speech he gave on the Martin Luther King holiday in 2006, just months after Katrina, at the height of the debates over how to rebuild the city, he said:

It's time for us to rebuild a New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans. And I don't care what people are saying Uptown [where affluent whites live] or wherever they are. This city will be chocolate at the end of the day.

He was reelected in the fall by carrying the black vote and losing the white vote. This is the story that Katherine Cecil tells clearly and effectively in *Race*, though at a level of craft far below Spike Lee's.

The nerve that Nagin struck was a feeling in black New Orleans that somebody out there—white New Orleans,



Charlie Varley

Ray Nagin (left), mayor of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, and Mitch Landrieu (right),

the Bush administration, American culture—did not want New Orleans's displaced black residents to return, so that the city could return to white political control; and that all the arguments about how and where and when to rebuild were really about that. As a white New Orleans expatriate who still goes home regularly, I had access during those years to white opinion as expressed in living rooms rather than in public, and I can report that this feeling in black New Orleans wasn't entirely wrong. The ancient, ever-present white fear of black insurrection spiked after Katrina, and there was a palpable longing for New Orleans to be reconstituted as another Charleston or Savannah, smaller, neater, safer, whiter, and relieved of the obligation to try to be a significant modern multicultural city. But that longing has to be understood as something far short of a program that was actually (if surreptitiously) put into effect. If white New Orleans were that efficient, the recovery would have proceeded in a faster and more orderly way.

George W. Bush, in the chapter on Katrina in his memoir, *Decision Points*, quotes a number of statements to the effect that the federal government was slow to respond to Katrina because most of the victims were black, and then says:

Five years later, I can barely write those words without feeling disgusted. I am deeply insulted by the suggestion that we allowed American citizens to suffer because they were black.... The more I thought about it, the angrier I felt.

Bush is not, in my view, being disingenuous here, but his account of his handling of Katrina—which is actually quite interesting and forthright—has more race in it than he appears to realize.

A signal event in the history not just of New Orleans but of the country was the entry, on January 4, 1875, of a column of federal troops under the command of General Philip Sheridan, the greatest cavalryman in the Union Army during the Civil War, onto the floor of the Louisiana legislature, which was located in New Orleans at the time. The state, which was in a condition of low-grade internal civil war over the question of black enfranchisement, had two competing governments each claiming to be legitimate, and the troops removed Democratic (meaning Confederate *après la lettre*) members of the legislature and replaced them with Republicans (meaning supporters of blacks' right to vote). The whole country, not just former Confederates, was outraged at this intrusion of federal military power into civil politics; there were large public meetings of the better sort of liberal citizens in Boston's Faneuil Hall and New York's Cooper Union, and *The Nation* and *The New York Times* published horrified editorials.

This demonstration of how little national support there was for federal troops' enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment in the South helped set the stage for the end of Reconstruction in 1876, and then for the passage of the Jim Crow laws by Southern states without federal opposition. In 1878 Congress passed the Posse Comitatus Act, which explicitly forbids federal troops from performing law enforcement functions in states. It was nearly eighty years before federal troops again so dramatically entered the South in the name of civil rights, when Dwight Eisenhower sent them to Little Rock in 1957.

In the days after Katrina, state and local authorities were unable to handle the suffering and chaos that enveloped New Orleans. The most significant help the city got was from the 82nd Airborne Division of the United States Army, under the command of General Russel Honoré (who's treated as a hero in both *Decision Points* and *If God Is Willing*), and the reason Bush took six full days to give the order dispatching the troops was the Posse Comitatus Act. Governor Blanco, according to Bush, repeatedly refused to issue an official request for federal help, which would have been one way around the act. That left him the option of invoking an even older law, the Insurrection Act of 1807, but in that case, Bush wrote,

the world would see a male Republican president usurping the authority of a female Democratic governor by declaring an insurrection in a largely African American city. That would arouse controversy anywhere. To do so in the Deep South, where there had been centuries of states' rights tension, could unleash holy hell.

Bush finally found another way around the Posse Comitatus Act, which was to dispatch the troops under orders not to engage in law enforcement. That ended the first post-Katrina phase of televised but unabated hell. It's useful to contrast Bush's account to that of Bobby Jindal, Blanco's Republican successor as governor of Louisiana, who was then a congressman. Jindal would have us understand the week after Katrina hit according to an opposition between hapless "politicians and bureaucrats" on the one hand and heroic "private individuals" on the other, and he explains the delay in sending the 82nd Airborne as a failure of organization:

The government needs to establish from the outset a unified chain of command with the power to override the normal process restrictions and get things done.*

Evidently Jindal, unlike Bush, is unaware that this is illegal, for reasons that have nothing to do with "bureaucracy" and everything to do with the history of race relations, in the country generally and Louisiana specifically.

Racial issues were also at the heart of the toxic politics of rebuilding that emerged as

soon as the floodwaters receded. Both *If God Is Willing* and *Race* tell the story of the unveiling of the first comprehensive rebuilding plan, in January 2006, by Joseph Canizaro, a Republican real estate developer assigned to the task by Mayor Nagin. The plan, which suggested that some of the poorest, most devastated low-lying areas of the city not be rebuilt right away, got an outraged reception from many temporarily exiled blacks, who felt it was being purposely presented in their absence so as to ensure that they could never return to their homes. (This reaction may have led Nagin, just a few days after he had helped unveil the plan, to make his “chocolate city” speech.) Because it was impossible after that to create a zone of trust between blacks and whites large enough to allow for the creation of a different plan, there was no plan at all, except the universal individual right of return.

As of a year ago, more than a quarter of the housing units in New Orleans—50,000 houses—were still standing empty. Mitch Landrieu has indicated, carefully, that he is willing to begin tearing these houses down, and that raises the possibility of his launching some more comprehensive departure from the policy of simply waiting for every displaced resident to come back while proclaiming that every neighborhood in the city—especially the Lower Ninth Ward—must be restored. Whether he can do this, and whether he can retain black support, aren’t just related questions; they are the same question.

The best of the Katrina documentaries thus far, to my mind, is *Trouble the Water*, which was released in 2008. A young New Orleans couple, Kimberly and Scott Roberts, poor sometime drug dealers living just across the Industrial Canal from the Lower Ninth Ward, began shooting home videos as Katrina approached New Orleans. They made an astonishingly vivid record of themselves and their neighbors preparing for the storm, then huddling in their attic when their narrow wooden house was flooded. They managed to evacuate to Alexandria, Louisiana, where they met and joined forces with Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, documentary filmmakers who had come to Louisiana for a different post-Katrina project that had gone awry.

The result of this accidental partnership is an extraordinary record of one family’s entire Katrina experience: the storm itself, the immediate aftermath in New Orleans, exile in Alexandria and Memphis, Tennessee, and finally the return. It helps that Kim Roberts has a generous measure of cinema vérité star quality: she never says anything dull or rote or false, and something about her commands the viewer’s eye. She and Scott make for an ideal vehicle for telling the basic story of the storm. Their own lives hit most of the major points (a grandmother dies in the hospital, a brother goes missing in prison, troops deny them sanctuary at an empty, clean New Orleans military facility), and Lessin

and Deal sketch in the rest with a light, strong, undidactic touch.

Documentary filmmaking is a craft that is highly dependent on access to good material; having Kim and Scott's filmed life experiences means there's no need to have any official personages appear on camera to tell us what their story means. What it means is obvious, and Kim and Scott's consistent toughness, optimism, humor, and kindness give them far more emotional power as characters than they'd have if they were stolid socialist-realist victims being ground under the boot heel of society.

Lessin and Deal spin out the tale of Kim and Scott as a counterintuitive man-bites-dog story: the storm visits every conceivable misfortune on them but their lives wind up evidently transformed for the better. Before Katrina, they are quasi criminals; after, they are clean and sober, politically active, and pursuing musical careers. That may just be their luck, and it may just be temporary. In no way does *Trouble the Water* present a misleadingly positive picture of the condition of New Orleans; toward the end there is a very funny (because it resists the temptation to be heavily sarcastic) segment about the bouncy, patently false promotional materials being prepared by the local board of tourism.

Still, five and a half years after the storm, there is something inspiring about seeing people in New Orleans simply getting on with their lives, despite all the reasons this shattering experience has given them to succumb to bitterness or despair. That's what thousands and thousands of people in New Orleans have done. They're not defeated. They inhabit their city. They don't have many illusions about how things have gone or how they're likely to go now, and there is honor—even hope—in the choice they have made.

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Bobby Jindal, with Peter Schweizer and Curt Anderson, *Leadership and Crisis* (Regnery, 2010), p. 123. ↩