Michael Eric Dyson,  
*Come Hell or High Water:  
Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*  
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Reviewed by Josh Cohen¹

I. Introduction

In the days after Hurricane Katrina assaulted the Louisiana coast in the summer of 2005, newspapers and television sets overflowed with shockingly revealing accounts and images that captivated readers and viewers across the nation and the globe. As Michael Eric Dyson indicates in *Come Hell or High Water*, the issue of race was, whether directly or indirectly, at the center of these accounts and images. In the first major book to chronicle the days before and after Katrina, Dyson emphasizes that Katrina’s impact can not be understood without addressing the ways in which race affected the residents of New Orleans, influenced the government’s response to the hurricane, and pervaded the media’s coverage of the disaster.

Dyson’s primary purpose is to explain why race should be at the forefront of the discussion about Katrina. Dyson, a professor at Georgetown University and a respected voice on race-related matters as they pertain to black America, also has a secondary purpose: to critique the Bush administration. However, even this critique, derisive at times, is ultimately intended to defend the social, political, and economic rights of

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poor black America. This defense is a theme that is common to Dyson’s publications, including his 2005 book *Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Minds,*\(^2\) in which he explains why the comedian’s harsh portrayal of lower class blacks is naïve, misguided, and counterproductive.

*Come Hell or High Water* is an appropriate and necessary read for Americans of all generations, races, and classes. It effectively combines an open discussion about race with a critical discussion about politics. Through this combination, Dyson offers a thorough and straight-forward evaluation of why Americans saw such disheartening images, how Americans reacted to these images, and what Americans owe to the many who perished.

**II. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS**

Dyson opens his work by offering a brief overview of the concentrated poverty that enveloped the areas of New Orleans that Katrina most adversely impacted and by considering Americans’ reactions when the post-hurricane media coverage exposed this poverty. He then broadly discusses how race played a role in the recovery efforts and examines the implications of Kanye West’s now famous assertion that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” Over the next several chapters, Dyson focuses on the various ways in which government agencies and key officials, both pre and post-Katrina, were responsible for both the extent of damage that the hurricane caused and the delayed and ineffective response to the needs of the hurricane victims. Following this lengthy assessment, the author describes the effect of “disaster capitalism,” a trend through which large businesses benefit economically from disasters such as Katrina. Dyson then evaluates the post-Katrina responses of black elites and the media’s impact on the country’s racial framework. The concluding chapter addresses varying explanations of God’s role in natural disasters and explains that black faith has an important function in post-Katrina America. Dyson’s epilogue details the means that different social sectors can employ to establish structures of justice for the country’s most vulnerable people.

\(^2\) *Michael Eric Dyson, Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (2005).
III. Textual Analysis

Dyson begins chapter one by presenting the reader with a vivid textual translation of the images that millions of Americans witnessed in the days after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans: corpses floating in water or scattered on sidewalks; families huddled together, clinging to the hope that somebody would rescue them; the squalid conditions of make-shift evacuation centers.\footnote{Michael Eric Dyson, Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster 1-2 (2007).} By including these descriptions in the opening pages, Dyson immediately elicits the reader’s sympathy for the victims of Katrina and prompts the reader to question what caused these images. Setting the background for the remainder of the book, Dyson posits that these images were the result of more than just one of the greatest natural disasters in American history. These images were the result of years of concentrated poverty that had left the poor “abandoned by society and its institutions, and sometimes by their well-off brothers and sisters, long before the storm.”\footnote{Id. at 2.} The author uses a series of statistics to demonstrate the effects of this concentrated poverty. For example, at the time of Katrina, New Orleans, a city that was two-thirds black, had a poverty rate that was seventy-six percent higher than the national average. Dyson effectively uses such statistics to indicate the extent to which the government and the rest of society have seemingly neglected the poor black communities of New Orleans.

When the media flashed images that symbolized this societal neglect and exposed the poverty that had encompassed black residents of New Orleans, many Americans were shocked, saddened, and brimming with compassion. Yet this same shock, sadness, and compassion would not have surfaced absent Katrina or another disaster of similar magnitude. As Dyson suggests, “it is the exposure of the extremes, not their existence, that stumps our national sense of decency.”\footnote{Id. at 2-3.} Dyson conducts a psychological evaluation when he deduces that this ability to selectively tune in to the plight of poor blacks allows the rest of the country to appear concerned without actually questioning the systemic forces that create and prolong poverty.\footnote{Id. at 4.} Although Dyson does not necessarily use this assessment to censure non-black or non-poor society, he does implicitly suggest that society address its complicity in the long-
term suffering of poor blacks. From the book’s earliest pages, Dyson’s sympathies for the impoverished black community are obvious.

Dyson continues to display these sympathies by drawing a distinction between what “we” saw as the non-poor, non-black American public and what “they” saw as the poor black victims of Katrina. Because much of the Katrina coverage centered on what “we” saw, Dyson wants to ensure that the reader is more concerned with what “they” saw. For this, the author references Michael Ignatieff’s “The Broken Contract,” an article that appeared in The New York Times Magazine three weeks after Katrina. To Ignatieff, what “they” saw was the U.S. government breaking the “contract of American citizenship,” which “defines the duties of care that public officials owe to the people of a democratic society.” In this chapter, Dyson effectively establishes that federal and state officials owed it to the black residents of New Orleans to heed the constant warnings of the city’s susceptibility to a major hurricane and to ensure that an effective and comprehensive evacuation plan was in place. He sets the groundwork for later chapters, in which he details how the government failed these obligations that arise from the “contract of American citizenship.”

Dyson opens his discussion of the government’s failures by resolutely asserting that “[o]f course race colored the response to Katrina.” However, Dyson seems astutely aware that most Americans, and perhaps some of his readers, would interpret such an assertion as an accusation that the government purposely offered an inadequate response because the victims were black. Therefore, the author quickly clarifies that racial consequences do not necessarily require racial intent.

For instance, he points to the inability of the Bush administration and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials, most of whom were white, to identify with the victims, most of whom were black. Had the victims been white, sentiments of empathy, as opposed to sympathy, may have pushed government officials to act more quickly and more proficiently in the interest of saving lives that more closely resembled their own.

7 Id.
9 Id. at 19.
10 Id. at 20.
11 Id. at 25-26.
Dyson further supports the notion that racial consequences do not require racial intent by analyzing one of the more controversial statements that was made post-Katrina. During a telethon in support of the disaster relief efforts, rapper Kanye West strayed from his script and asserted, among other things, that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” Many listeners, including Bush’s family, believed that West was commenting on the president’s racial intent, i.e. his personal sentiments about the black community. Dyson references interviews with both Laura Bush and George H.W. Bush, in which they label West’s remarks as “disgusting” and “vicious” and defend the president as somebody who cares about and is sensitive to issues of race.\textsuperscript{12} Although this interpretation of West’s remark may have been understandable and necessary in light of the racial outcry following Katrina, Dyson suggests that it was incorrect. According to Dyson, West’s blunt assertion did not comment on Bush or his administration’s racial intent; rather, it commented on the racial consequences of administrative and institutional decisions that Bush has made during his tenure as the country’s chief political figure.\textsuperscript{13}

These decisions have largely not benefited the poor black communities of the U.S. The reason for this is not, Dyson proposes, a result of Bush’s racial prejudice as much as it is a result of the Republican lack of concern for the black vote. A vast majority of blacks have voted along Democratic lines since the New Deal Era, and Republican politicians have since realized that they do not have to cater to the needs of the black constituency to achieve political office. For this particular topic, Dyson defers to the insight of political journalist Jacob Weisberg, who, shortly after Katrina, noted that “it’s a demonstrable matter of fact that Bush doesn’t care about black votes,” which “in the end, may amount to the same thing” as not caring about black people.\textsuperscript{14} To emphasize this point, Weisberg contrasts the Bush administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina with its response to Hurricanes Charley and Frances, which struck largely white and majority Republican regions of Florida in 2004. In response to the latter hurricanes, “Bush visited hurricane victims four times in six weeks and delivered relief checks personally.

\textsuperscript{12} Id. at 28.
\textsuperscript{13} Id. at 29.
\textsuperscript{14} Id. at 30 (quoting Jacob Weisberg, An Imperfect Storm: How Race Shaped Bush’s response to Katrina, SLATE, Sept. 7, 2005, http://www.slate.com/id/2125812/).
Michael Brown of FEMA . . . was so responsive that local officials praised the agency’s performance.”

Dyson fails to mention that Katrina’s magnitude and the circumstances of her aftermath make it difficult to compare her with other storms. Nevertheless, the differences in the adequacy of the responses are noticeable and revealing. Both Dyson and Weisberg suggest that, had the vulnerable residents of New Orleans been actual or prospective constituents, Bush would have acted out of “the instinct of self-interest” to ensure that pre-storm mitigation and post-storm recovery efforts were more satisfactory.

Dyson’s clarification that racial intent is different from racial consequences is essential, given that many non-blacks, including President Bush, are unable to understand the covert role that race played in Hurricane Katrina. When Bush was asked whether race played a role in the government’s delayed response, he answered that Coast Guard helicopters did not check skin color when saving people from rooftops. When the American public was asked the same question, only twelve percent of whites, as opposed to sixty percent of blacks, answered affirmatively. Dyson uses these answers to stress the need for a less simplistic understanding of how race operates in American culture and how it shapes the policy decisions of American government leaders.

Having established that race should be an integral part of the discussion about Katrina, Dyson unnaturally shifts to an historical overview of emergency management in the United States. Although the author claims that such an overview is necessary to understand FEMA’s current role in disaster relief, the section is too lengthy and leads the reader astray from the book’s focus. When Dyson finally arrives at FEMA under Bush’s leadership, however, he offers the reader a clear explanation of why FEMA failed the people of New Orleans: in 2000, Bush’s first head of FEMA cut the funding for Project Impact, an endeavor of the Clinton administration that encouraged grassroots efforts to build disaster-resistant communities; in 2002, FEMA became part of the Department of Homeland Security, which shifted the agency’s focus to terrorism; in 2005, five out of the top eight FEMA officials had almost no prior experience in disaster management. Dyson effectively uses

15 Id. at 31 (quoting Weisberg).
16 Id. at 30 (quoting Weisberg).
17 Id. at 31.
18 Id. at 33.
19 Id. at 47-51.
this background information to suggest to the reader that the reasons behind FEMA’s failures before and during Katrina are no mystery. He also uses this information to further his anti-Bush agenda, repeatedly commenting on Bush’s pervasive cronyism, his obsession with fighting terror, and his aversion to the government’s role in assisting vulnerable citizens. These anti-Bush tendencies set the tone for the next several chapters.

Dyson uses chapters four through seven to illustrate and to emphasize the dysfunction, unresponsiveness, and general ineffectiveness of Bush’s administration pre and post-Katrina. Primarily through news transcripts, press releases, periodicals, and archives from the National Hurricane Center, Dyson traces the government’s actions, inaction, and reactions from the years preceding Hurricane Katrina, to August 29, 2005 when Katrina made landfall, to the first week of September when recovery and relief efforts were still being conducted. Dyson’s attention to detail in these accounts is effective in several ways. Firstly, it lends credence to the notion that the government’s mismanagement was not the result of an entirely unexpected natural disaster. Dyson cites to a significant number of sources that indicate that the government was fully aware of the potential damage of a hurricane like Katrina, such as a 2001 FEMA report that determined that a catastrophe hurricane in New Orleans was one of the most likely disasters facing the U.S.20

Secondly, Dyson’s detail lends credence to the conclusion that the government’s mismanagement was not the result of a few isolated misguided decisions during the chaotic days before and after Katrina. Rather it was the result of years of failing to adequately address obvious domestic needs. For instance, Dyson refers to a 2004 fictional hurricane emergency response drill for New Orleans that was conducted by a private company hired by FEMA. After the company completed the hurricane simulation, its funding was cut before it was able to complete the second phase of its commission, designing a plan to address issues like evacuating the sick and providing housing for New Orleans citizens.21

Lastly, Dyson’s detail serves to quiet possible critics who might maintain that Dyson is simply benefiting from the convenient use of hindsight. In these chapters, Dyson is not merely searching for opportunities to nitpick or looking for holes in the government’s disaster

20 Id. at 78.
21 Id. at 81-82.
prevention and emergency response plans. On the contrary, Dyson is emphasizing themes of the Bush presidency that have left this nation’s previously vulnerable citizens even more vulnerable. On several occasions, Dyson mentions the effects of Bush’s budget cuts in the domestic arena. For instance, in 2005, a $71 million cut in funds for the New Orleans District prevented the Army Corps of Engineers from executing an intended levee-strengthening project.  

Examples such as this do not constitute second-guessing on Dyson’s part; they constitute proof that President Bush’s administration has neglected to assist the citizenry.

Dyson suggests that this domestic neglect is directly related to another theme of the Bush presidency, increasing attention to and expenditures on the military and the “War on Terror.” For example, Bush’s focus on terrorism forced forty percent of Louisiana’s National Guard into active duty in Iraq.  

In addition, the National Guard units who responded to Katrina had to use outdated and inadequate radios, trucks, and medical gear, the newer equipment having been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan.  

Dyson’s emphasis on this theme shows the reader the extent to which Bush has prioritized this country’s international goals over the needs of U.S. citizens. However, his emphasis might also be intended to display to the reader his overall lack of support for President Bush and the administration’s military efforts abroad. At times, Dyson seems too focused on simply criticizing “Bush’s obsession with fighting terror.”  

But behind this criticism lies Dyson’s primary point: Bush’s government has been inattentive to the needs of certain American citizens, regardless of whether these needs arise from natural disasters, environmental issues, poverty, or racial inequality.

This chasm between Bush and the needs of ordinary American citizens is not just reflected in Bush’s decisions in an administrative context. Dyson implies that it is also reflected in Bush’s decisions in a personal context. The author’s attention to detail emphasizes this detachment as another theme of the Bush presidency. For one example, Dyson recalls that two days after the storm hit New Orleans, Bush flew over the Gulf Coast in Air Force One to get a bird’s eye view instead of landing to get an up-close view. Dyson also points to Bush’s remarks in

22 Id. at 82.
23 Id. at 56.
24 Id. at 112.
25 Id. at 100.
which he singled out Senator Trent Lott as a victim: “Out of the rubbles of Trent Lott’s house – he’s lost his entire house – there’s going to be a fantastic house. And I’m looking forward to sitting on the porch.”

This comment was made during a staged photo-op, in which Bush was joined by fifty firemen serving as props and not by actual victims of Katrina. Dyson uses these examples to highlight Bush’s unwillingness to reach out to ordinary citizens and to evoke Bush’s “tone-deaf empathy for the vulnerable.” Although Dyson may be correct in his assessment of the president, he fails to consider that, in these particular instances, safety, health and security concerns may have necessitated a more detached response.

Throughout these four chapters, Dyson focuses on his secondary purpose, to critique the Bush administration for its pre-Katrina neglect of obvious domestic needs and for its post-Katrina inability to effectively respond to desperate citizens. Dyson’s substantial support leaves the reader convinced that, had the Bush administration been more responsible, extensive damage could have been prevented and many lives could have been saved. However, throughout this critique, Dyson loses sight of his primary purpose, to demonstrate the role that race played in Katrina. He occasionally attempts to bring race back into his discussion, such as when he recalls how the evacuation of the Superdome was temporarily suspended in order to allow 700 guests and employees of the Hyatt Hotel, who were mainly white, to move to the front of the school bus-boarding line. But Dyson largely leaves it to the reader to presume that the people most affected by the themes of Bush’s presidency were primarily black and primarily poor.

Having fully discussed why the people of New Orleans were physically vulnerable to the effects of Hurricane Katrina, in chapter eight Dyson discusses how these people became more economically vulnerable after Katrina. The title of the chapter, Capitalizing on Disaster, refers to author Naomi Klein’s notion of “disaster capitalism,” a trend through which large engineering companies, for-profit consulting firms, and government agencies reap massive economic benefits by reconstructing areas struck by natural disaster or war. To demonstrate

26 Id. at 94-95.
27 Id. at 94.
28 Id. at 71.
29 Id. at 96.
how disaster capitalism was manifest in New Orleans, Dyson offers the reader several examples of lucrative contracts that were given to major construction firms with previous ties to the government, largely excluding minority-owned companies. He also points to Bush’s temporary suspension of the Davis-Bacon Act of 1931, which effectively permitted reconstruction companies to pay their workers wages that were less than the prevailing local rates.\textsuperscript{31} Dyson appropriately concludes that these examples of disaster capitalism will have a disproportionately negative impact on black residents of New Orleans who are attempting to recover from Katrina.

At this point, Dyson could have reminded the reader of his chapter one citation to remarks that Bush made in his first post-Katrina nationally televised speech: that this country must rise above the legacy of inequality that has prevented generations from enjoying the opportunity that America offers.\textsuperscript{32} By failing to make this connection, Dyson misses a chance to emphasize to the reader that Bush does not practice what he preaches or that Bush fails to acknowledge how his government’s actions are perpetuating, rather than rising above, this “legacy of inequality.”

After Dyson exhausts his criticisms for the government’s role in Katrina, in chapter nine he expresses his disapproval of the black elite and the media’s responses to both Katrina and the black poor who were most affected. In regards to the black elite, or as Dyson refers to them – the Afristocracy – Dyson notices episodic compassion for the black poor. He rightly commends members of the black upper-class for their significant financial contributions and moral support in the wake of Katrina. However, he also chides the black elite for their absence during periods of continuing struggle. To elicit more consistent support for the black poor, Dyson quotes Martin Luther King, Jr.: “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”\textsuperscript{33} Dyson’s quotation of Dr. King is a tactful way of urging black elites to use their influence to draw national attention to the injustices that Katrina laid bare.

Dyson also attacks the media’s role in shaping this country’s racial framework. For this argument, he primarily relies on two Associated

\textsuperscript{31} Dyson, \textit{supra} note 2, at 132-134.

\textsuperscript{32} Id. at 9.

\textsuperscript{33} Id. at 152.
Press photographs that appeared in newspapers around the country. The first photo pictured a young black man holding items in each arm as he waded through the city’s waters. The accompanying caption described the man as having looted a grocery store. In the second photo, a young white couple held similar items in their arms, but the caption described them as having found food from a grocery store. Dyson maintains that these captions communicate a strong, albeit implicit, value judgment: the black man’s action is legally and morally wrong, notwithstanding the desperate circumstances; the white couple’s action is understandable, given the desperate circumstances. He accurately concludes that, through such images, the media contributes to the perpetuation of a distorted racial framework. However, a more thorough study of other Katrina photograph captions would be helpful to determine if the difference in the descriptions of black and white victims was pervasive.

Continuing his attack of the media, Dyson addresses how the media relentlessly reported rumors that blacks were engaging in criminal activity in both the flooded streets and the overcrowded shelter centers. In regards to the looting in the streets, Dyson quotes journalist Jordan Flaherty: “No sane person should classify someone who takes food from indefinitely closed stores in a desperate, starving city as a ‘looter,’ but that’s just what the media did over and over again.” In regards to the shelter centers, Dyson cites multiple television news reports and newspaper articles to demonstrate how the media painted a disturbing picture of theft, murder, rape, gang violence, and general unrest. He then cites a FEMA physician, the Orleans Parish District Attorney, and The Times-Picayune to indicate that these reports and articles were exaggerated and largely unfounded. Despite the spurious nature of many of these reports, the media did not hesitate to broadcast them, because “such rumors seemed to confirm a widely held view about poor blacks.” Instead of combating this view, the media perpetuated it.

Dyson’s critique of the media is effective in several respects. First, it explicitly shows the reader how instrumental the media can be in shaping the general public’s notions of race. More importantly, it shames the media for shifting the country’s focus to the desperate actions of

34 Id. at 165.
36 Id. at 172-173.
37 Id. at 174.
desperate citizens and away from the responsibilities of an irresponsible government. Lastly, it challenges the media to bring to light the reality of poor black life in the U.S. without resorting to “stale stereotypes and callous clichés.”

In the concluding chapter, Dyson shifts to a discussion of religion. For most of this chapter, the author focuses on theodicy, a branch of theology that attempts to reconcile the existence of global suffering with the existence of God. Dyson does not offer his own reconciliation as much as he reviews the reconciliations of various religious figures and factions, particularly conservative Christians. Although this section’s connection to the work’s overall theme is tenuous at times, Dyson still manages to defend the black poor when he criticizes religious zealots who contend that God was punishing New Orleans for its sins. Dyson also manages to scold President Bush, because “[u]nder the guise of supporting faith, President Bush has shifted the burden of social services from the government to faith-based institutions.” However, this chiding is not only intended to condemn the President. It is also intended to urge black churches to renew their commitment to the most vulnerable and most desperate members of society. As a professor of theology, Dyson explicitly includes himself as part of the black church when he states that “we [must] act on the horror we have witnessed.” This self-inclusion as part of the solution is a fitting way to conclude a book that primarily focuses on the faults of external forces.

Also fitting is Dyson’s epilogue, in which he suggests that all sectors of society should play a role in addressing the injustices that Hurricane Katrina exposed. He emphasizes that this role should not be limited to charitable donations that are made in the wake of disaster. Rather, “[w]hat is needed are structures of justice that perpetuate the goodwill intended in charity.” According to Dyson, these structures can not be built without the cooperative and dedicated efforts of the media, black society, non-black society, and all levels of government. These structures also require a truthful national dialogue on “poverty, race, class, envi-

38 Id. at 176.
39 Id. at 183.
40 Id. at 199.
41 Id. at 201.
42 Id. at 203.
rnonment, government, the media, and our culture.” In *Come Hell or High Water*, Dyson has responsibly and effectively begun this dialogue.

IV. DISCUSSION

Dyson’s comprehensive work successfully weaves together a discussion about race and a discussion about politics. These discussions owe their effectiveness to Dyson’s considerable detail and support. They also owe their effectiveness to Dyson’s blatant compassion for the black poor and his blatant disfavor for the Bush administration, which has continuously abandoned the black poor. At the same time, these blatant sentiments are one of Dyson’s few flaws. Throughout the text, Dyson often expresses his disapproval of Bush and other members of the administration in overly derisive terms. For instance, in describing how key Bush officials seemed personally removed from the response, Dyson remarks that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was “not to be outdone by Rumsfeld or Bush in blithe disentanglement from the suffering at hand.” Comments such as this are entertaining for the reader, but they detract from the book’s substance and may prevent the work from being considered serious or scholarly.

While most of Dyson’s discussion is fluid, there are isolated segments that interrupt the natural flow of the book. For instance, Dyson’s ten pages on the progression of emergency management in the United States are interesting from a historical standpoint, but they only narrowly contribute to the book’s purpose. In addition, certain segments of the book seem to be included merely because Dyson is knowledgeable about subject areas other than race and class. These segments come at the expense of the book’s fluidity. For example, spurred by his title as the “Hip-Hop Intellectual,” Dyson devotes ten pages to a discussion of how numerous hip-hop artists have addressed Hurricane Katrina in their music. This section is useful in that it shows the reader how certain non-media entities framed the racial consequences of the hurricane. However, the several pages of lyrics may be a distraction to the reader.

43 Id. at 212.
44 Id. at 74.
Despite these minor flaws, Dyson offers an engaging and thought-provoking work. His use of detailed support is more than ample, and his compassion for the black poor is obvious. This compassion, coupled with outrage at how the government has treated the black poor, are the driving forces behind *Come Hell or High Water*, which ultimately fills the reader with these same sentiments.

V. Conclusion

*Come Hell or High Water* is a powerful book that achieves its objectives: it demonstrates how a discussion of Hurricane Katrina is incomplete without a discussion of race, and it illustrates exactly how the American government neglected its own citizens. Although Dyson’s slightly informal tone and occasional sarcastic tendencies may disturb a scholarly or legal audience, all readers will find that Dyson effectively captures why New Orleans was so devastated by Katrina. More importantly, Dyson will cause most readers to contemplate their own individual roles in the post-Katrina United States and to facilitate open discussions of race and class. Dyson’s work is sure to inspire individuals to question the media’s racial framework and pressure their representatives to act on behalf of the nation’s poor.