

# THE SPIN PROJECT

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**“As the South goes... so goes the Nation.”**

- *W.E.B. Dubois*

Strategic communications at this important political moment

## The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

The moment Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast was a natural disaster. The evisceration of government and public infrastructure that preceded Katrina and the stumbling government response to the storm were entirely manmade disasters.

Community organizations must ensure that public dialogue remains active and responsible in the months after the hurricane. In order to redeem the injustice exposed by the Gulf tragedy, the stories surrounding it must be kept vibrant. We owe it to those whose lives were devastated by government negligence to keep telling their stories, to ensure their stories do not fade out after a few weeks of news coverage. Only by keeping these stories alive can we build the power to hold leaders accountable and build a society that values safety, security, and justice.

### Ten Framing Considerations

The hurricane laid bare to all Americans the issues about which many of us have been speaking

for years. For many of us, this is one of the most important moments in a generation for reframing our issues. Below, the SPIN Project has identified ten top-line framing recommendations for progressive social justice groups, followed by framing and message ideas for various issues.

### Safety & Security

Bush won the 2004 election based on the perception by many voters that he would keep them safe. Katrina destroyed that illusion. Americans, especially the poorest and people of color, are not safe from natural disasters or terrorism. This means the federal government failed to meet its primary duty. See Arianna Huffington's "[Post-Katrina Talking Points](#)" for more on this.

### Emphasize the Victims' Humanity and Heroics

After September 11, 2001, victims were instantly canonized. After Katrina, many victims were blamed. We need to remind

audiences of the basic humanity of those killed and displaced by the hurricane. They are also heroes, survivors of a government indifferent (if not hostile) to their well being.

### **Demand That Local Voices Be Spotlighted**

People who live in New Orleans should direct the city's rebuilding. Locals should also be the focus of news stories, instead of the usual default official spokespeople. It's our responsibility to train local spokespeople and present them to news outlets so they have a chance to tell their stories. Much like families of 9/11 victims demanded accountability from government, Katrina victims and their families are particularly suited to call for justice.

### **Localize the Story**

How does this disaster relate to your issue? Does it highlight missing safety nets in your community? How is your town's neglect by the federal government similar to that of New Orleans? How would your organization's members or constituents fare in a similar situation? These are the kinds of stories reporters will want to be pitched.

### **Issues and Timeframe: Frame Broadly**

Most of us know that this issue is about more than a September 2005 hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico. It's about racial and economic injustice, eviscerated government and indifference to the environment. It's about how the government and other institutions will rebuild the Gulf States in the next 5-10 years and beyond. We need to ensure that media outlets tell the broader story – that government has neglected the vulnerable among us, and that poverty and racism still plague us. We need to make sure they understand that every city and town in America shares similarities with New Orleans. For more on how we as communities can pause and broadcast a wide view of the situation, see [Kenneth Bailey and Najma Nazy'at's piece](#) on *The Nonprofit Quarterly* website.

### **Reframe the Role of Government**

Katrina made terribly clear that government has a very important role to play in our society: protecting its citizens. The hurricane hit a city whose defenses had been eviscerated by years of "small government conservative" neglect. There's always plenty of money to pay for pork-barrel projects for influential lawmakers and tax cuts for the wealthy, of course. It's always "the fat" that pays for programs to protect the poor and the weak that these conservatives want to cut. Money to upgrade and repair New Orleans levees was cut this year; something has to give when we're spending hundreds of billions of dollars in Iraq. To add insult to injury, more than a third of Louisiana's National Guards troops were unavailable to help their fellow citizens during the crisis- they were fighting a war of choice half a world away. Conservatives tell us that government is always the problem. Tell that to the people who cried out to their elected leaders to save them, only to find that they had other priorities.

As William Rivers Pitt reminds us in his [condemnation of neoconservative government](#), "Remember that a massive, highly industrialized and infrastructured, diverse nation requires an effective central government, funded properly and staffed by professionals and patriots, in order to keep the wheels on the road. Remember the words of that great Republican, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who said, 'Taxes are the price we pay to live in a civilized society.' What we are seeing in New Orleans is not civilized society, but anarchy. The reasons for this are as clear as the nose on your face."

Government, when properly funded and managed, is the only institution that can protect us from disasters of this magnitude. It is also our best hope for defeating the threats posed by poverty, racism and environmental hazards.

### **Demand an Accountable, Locally-Controlled Rebuilding Process**

Bush's "Katrina Opportunity Zone" and his other recommendations for rebuilding the Gulf region are simply repackaged conservative wish lists from the past twenty years. The rush to award no-bid contracts to Halliburton and their ilk, huge corporations with no local roots and no accountability, is reminiscent of

Iraq. We must demand that the rebuilding of the Gulf region be controlled by locals. There must be checks and balances built into the process to ensure that the hundreds of billions of dollars of tax money spent on this rebuilding helps people in need and doesn't just enrich the friends of people in power. See Campaign For America's Future's website for some good accountability [guidelines](#).

### **Demanding Accountability is Not “Playing the Blame Game”**

When the Bush Administration declines to “play the blame game,” it's because officials trying to shirk responsibility are concerned that the finger will point at them. There is no better time than the present to hold those we employ in government accountable for their mismanagement. It's also important to applaud and thank those officials who have worked intelligently and courageously.

### **Keep History Alive While Looking Forward**

The news media's natural tendency is to move on from things. This is too important for us to let its space in the news dialogue diminish. As time passes, we need to continue to tell our story of Katrina. We must continue to build a narrative that explains the path our government took to bring us to disaster (Van Jones calls this a “[war against forgetting](#).”) We also must not let that emphasis turn to single-minded focus on the past, so that we forget to push for policy objectives and accountable leaders who understand our values.

### **Start Where Your Audience Is**

This event brought up incredible passion in many people. But we can't assume that those in our target audience understands the issue the same way we do. While Katrina has opened a window to issues of race and class, many Americans may still not be ready to talk about those issues head on. Remember to start where they are, and focus on values you share with them:

- “Hurricane Katrina has laid bare the deep divides between rich and poor, and black and white, that still exist in this country.”
- “National security is meaningless if we can't protect the most vulnerable among us.”

### **Wrap Your Frame in a Powerful Message**

**A message is where you focus and clarify the concepts in your frame. The SPIN Project recommends a three part message: what the problem is, what the solution is, and what action should be taken.**

***Problem:* The problem section of the message should frame the issue clearly, broadly, and in a compelling way so that the issue is felt and understood by everyone among your target audience -- especially to those not familiar with the issue. This section defines the issue, who is affected, who is causing the problem, and who is responsible for correcting the problem.**

***Solution:* This is the ‘values’ part of your message. What do you stand for? What is your positive vision for the future? How will communities benefit from your proposal? The solution helps you convey viable alternatives for success. You must offer a positive vision for your initiative –not just a response to your opponents. It's also important to convey a sense of hope and possibility in this message, to suggest that change is achievable and within reach.**

***Action:* This portion of the message is the ‘call to action’. You must offer a sense of leadership to your target audience, and give them a sense of what they can do to solve the problem and help achieve the solution. Of course, keep in mind that particular actions may be different depending on your various target audiences—not every target is asked to do the same thing. Be as specific as possible when you ask for action. For example, if you want your audience to contact an official or representative, provide specific contact information for that person.**

- “This is what happens when the government doesn't protect its people: those who can afford to get out, and those who can't get left behind.”

## Talking Points for Your Issue

Along with the broad framing recommendations above, many issue areas need special message considerations.

### Racial Justice

- This is a critical moment to highlight racism and visions of racial justice to people who don't normally think about those things.
- New Orleans' tragedy showed many Americans that while 21st Century racism looks different than that of slavery or the Jim Crow era, it is just as powerful. It is deeply ingrained in our institutions: our educational system, our financial institutions and a government that prioritizes the needs of the rich and powerful.
- Major public figures like Senator Barak Obama have acknowledged that Katrina has made clear the “added barriers people of color face” and government's “passive neglect” of populations in need. Even President Bush said that the poverty revealed by the storm “has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America,” and promised “bold action” to confront it. It is critical that we hold our leaders accountable for their promises.
- For more on this, see the Praxis Project and Youth Media Council's talking points and story ideas at: [http://www.thepraxisproject.org/tools/katrina\\_memo\\_09-06-2005.pdf](http://www.thepraxisproject.org/tools/katrina_memo_09-06-2005.pdf)

### Economic Justice

- Katrina devastated poor people in the region. Just as FEMA and other underfunded government agencies were unable to help these people in an emergency, emaciated government programs have for years been unable to help these people lift themselves out of poverty. We demand government that guarantees all of our safety and security, and we all now see that this can't be done without first ending poverty.
- While those displaced from Katrina struggle to find food and shelter for their families, the Bush Administration and Republicans in Congress are pushing

an end to the estate tax- something that would only benefit a few extremely rich families. If they succeed, the government will lose billions of dollars it needs to protect those most devastated by Katrina.

- It makes economic sense to protect the poorest among us. America works best when all of its citizens share in its prosperity. Abandoning the poor and the weak only hurts us all in the end.

### Housing

- Katrina displaced hundreds of thousands when it destroyed their homes. The scale of the devastation was horrible. But even here in our community, where we were lucky enough not to face such a disaster, we also have many people without decent, affordable homes.
- In a way, every city in America is New Orleans. There are thousands of people in our own city without a safe, healthy place to live.

### Environment

- The chemical cesspool left in New Orleans confirms everything environmentalists have been saying for at least the last 30 years – that poor people and people of color feel the effects of pollution sooner than anyone else.
- The rebuilding of New Orleans' can be a model of smart development. The new city must respect the demands of the natural environment and the needs of the people whose lives depend on it. It can be rebuilt with the ingenuity and fair labor practices of the 21st century – and with the hope for future generations that built all of our cities.
- Katrina foreshadows the kind of natural disasters most scientists believe we'll face as a result of global warming in the next 50-100 years.

### Healthcare

- We need quality healthcare now more than ever to care for those affected by the disaster. We must ensure that people displaced by the hurricane – many of whom live below the poverty line – are not denied healthcare.
- Neglecting to insure all Americans is like neglecting to fix New Orleans' levees – we all know the situation must be repaired, and that not doing it exposes the most vulnerable among us to tremendous danger.

## Crisis Communications 101

**Set goals**

See the “Strategy Considerations” section below for help in determining your priorities for the next several months. Will Katrina significantly alter your mission and goals? How does the disaster affect your community and what can you reasonably expect to do about that?

**Clarify facts and make fast initial reaction**

Clarify the facts, then develop your strategy and message based on facts and guided by your newly honed goals. Be prepared to take simple first steps: draft a statement – reacting to the aftermath of Katrina, or offering guiding principles for the rebuild, for example. Post your statements to your website prominently, and distribute it to local and national journalists who expect or might be influenced by a response from you.

**Designate spokespeople**

Who can best represent your position on the situation? Centralize the flow of information and then clarify to staff and volunteers who has the authority to share that information with media. If you want members or constituents to serve as spokespeople, train them for that job.

**Coordinate with other organizations**

If ever there was a time for unity, this is it. Do not keep those closest to you in the dark – inform your key volunteers, staff, donors, members and allies of your message.

**Continue to be a resource for reporters**

While times of crisis are the most difficult times to return reporter’s phone calls, they’re also the most important times to prove that you’re a good source and to build relationships with reporters. A crisis is an important time to reframe an issue, and by not calling reporters back, you cede the framing (and the terms of debate) to those who do choose to respond.

**Monitor relevant outlets and watchdog as needed**

Keep an eye on your target media. If they’re adopting a frame, language or images you consider harmful and unfair, let them know. Or, if you like their coverage, applaud their fairness and thorough journalism. Write letters to editors and producers.

**Be more reasonable than your opponent**

This does not mean stripping your communications of outrage or compassion. It simply means that, even in times of crisis, people lose credibility in the media when they make statements they cannot back up or when they raise their voices beyond a reasonable level in broadcast interviews.

## Strategic Checklist

The following is a list of things to think through when planning your post-Katrina approach:

- How does the changed political landscape alter your organization’s goals and priorities?
- How is your organization uniquely positioned to make the most impact during this important time? How much capacity do you have to act accordingly?
- Must your organization be “out front” on this issue, or would it be more effective to support a better-positioned or needier organization?
- Based on your goals, what are your specific target audiences? What are the top 10-20 outlets (and corresponding editors/producers/gatekeepers) you’ll use to reach them?
- Can you integrate your response to Katrina with your organization’s long-term strategic plan and vision?
- What’s currently missing from your target outlets’ coverage and what can you do to inject that missing perspective?
- Which other organizations will you partner with in your response? Is there new potential for a previously unlikely alliance?
- Given your goals and target audience, what tone will you adopt to reach them effectively?
- Who are your best potential messengers? Are they trained as spokespeople? If not, do you have the capacity to train them?
- What changes to your existing framing and messaging will you have to make to meet your changed goals?

## Resources

A number of organizations have begun the hard work of explaining how the failure to adequately respond to Hurricane Katrina is related to the work that our organizations are involved in. Some of the work we’ve found interesting here at the SPIN Project includes:

- *The Pew Center for the People and the Press* (<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=255>) has released the results of a poll they

conducted in the wake of the storm, detailing the deep divisions in Americans' understanding of the hurricane and what it means. Perhaps the starkest portrayal of the deep divisions that remain in our country: when asked if they believed the government response to the storm would have been faster if most of its victims were white, two-thirds of African-American respondents said yes; among whites, only 17% said yes. Continue to look here for compelling data on media and the Katrina aftermath.

- *Wade Rathke*, the Founder and Chief Organizer of ACORN and SEIU Local 100 in New Orleans has first-hand accounts of the storm and its aftermath at <http://www.chieforganizer.org>.
- *New California Media* (<http://news.ncmonline.com/news/>) has been providing an invaluable roundup of Katrina stories from a wide variety of community and ethnic media outlets.
- *Demos*, a progressive think tank, is collecting and posting news and opinion pieces that explore the questions being raised about government in the wake of this disaster. The site specifically focuses on the role of government, and the need to examine government as a tool shaped by citizens. (<http://www.demos.org/page363.cfm>)
- Finally, *The Center for American Progress* has assembled a Hurricane Katrina Resource Guide (<http://www.americanprogress.org/site/pp.asp?c=bijRj8OVF&b=1034063>). The guide focuses on policy implications following the Hurricane, and features a “Progressive Vision for Reconstruction of the Gulf Coast.”

## Stay on Top of the Story

Be sure to track coverage of the disaster and watch where the story is going. Coverage will change week-to-week – respond to coverage to keep the discourse within your frame and message goals. Also, scan for

opportunities to grow stories as they emerge, and look for hooks that could enable you to draw attention to the issues you work on.

Along with the major news networks and your preferred print outlets, blogs are an excellent way to keep track of how the story is being framed by both the media and by elected officials.

### Views from the Left:

*Alternet* (<http://www.alternet.org>) Our sister organization at the Independent Media Institute has been turning out some truly outstanding coverage on the Hurricane, and the larger issues it has surfaced.

*TalkLeft*

([http://talkleft.com/new\\_archives/012103.html](http://talkleft.com/new_archives/012103.html))

*Daily Kos* (<http://dailykos.com/>)

### Moderate views:

*Eschaton* (<http://atrios.blogspot.com/>)

*Talking Points Memo*

(<http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com>)

*The Washington Monthly*

(<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/>),

**Views from the Right** (Don't forget to pay attention to what the conservative world is saying!):

*Powerline* (<http://www.powerlineblog.com/blog.com/>)

*Town Hall* (<http://www.townhall.com/>)