

Hypocrisies blown away

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Article

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FORMER US Education Secretary William J. Bennett showed his true colours recently when he said on a US radio show: "You could abort every black baby in this country and the crime rate would go down" (Time, Oct 10).

He had authored a title called *Book of Virtues — A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, and one wonders whether this is part of the values he is advocating.

For sure, "all (wo)men are created equal" is one value that is significantly relevant to those who are dealing with education, in particular those high-ranking officials.

After all, education is often regarded as an effective tool to create equality.

This makes the remark by the former secretary sound awkward, more so when he was quick to back down by saying that his remark was "impossible, ridiculous and morally reprehensible".

So, why even think about it, and loudly at that? Maybe the Katrina and Rita hurricanes can reveal some answers.

Interestingly, in the light of the hurricanes and the aftermath, the British Daily Mail's editorial of Sept 3 raised a plausible hint:

"Has the myth of the 'can-do' US ever been more shockingly exposed?"

This may be the answer, a "myth" that the US can go it alone come what may.

Or is it the image of an invincible power that is so elegantly projected abroad, as implied in the editorial of *Le Figaro* (Sept 3): "Is powerful America more sure of itself outside its borders?"

Or, is it simply that the US is not that great as it is made out to be?

Evidently so when Katrina and Rita cracked open the US system, laying bare many of its inherent problems, not unlike other Third World countries.

Interestingly enough, on the subject of the hurricane, the Daily Mail had the headline "Third World America". Or it is a contradiction? Apparently not.

It is quite obvious that behind the make-believe facade, the US can also look so "Third World" more often than we care to notice.

Not only does the world see this from the physical impact of the hurricanes, but also the more subtle side of America's core values — democracy, freedom and equality — something that the deprived Third World is supposed to envy, as is often alleged.

These values are now hyped as Made-in-US export commodities and the panacea to the larger global ailments.

No other renderings are allowed. As all Americans have allegedly benefited from them, the world must too.

But the hurricanes tell another story. With the charade now over, the US now stands stark naked for the world to see and discern.

This time, the whole world has reason to be "shocked and awed" — more than what the invasion of Iraq had done.

Just what are they? Plenty, going by what prominent Americans are publicly saying.

Let us begin with Wynton Marsalis, the New Orleans-born jazz trumpeter and artistic director of New York City's Jazz at Lincoln Centre (Time, Sept 19):

"America always backs away from fixing the nation's racial problems.

"Not fixing the city's levees before Katrina struck will now cost untold billions. Not resolving the nation's issues of race and class has and will cost so much more."

Indeed, Hurricane Katrina has exposed the fault lines of a region — and a nation — rent by profound social divisions, wrote Mark Naison, another American.

As implored by Marsalis, it is time to "re-examine the soul of America".

Naison, a professor of African-American Studies and History, and director of Urban Studies at Fordham University in New York, observed in his article "Black Poverty's Human Face":

"Unlike Sept 11, this crisis highlights communities driven by race and class and in which poor blacks bear levels of hardship that far exceed any other groups."

He went on to ask:

"Is this what the pioneers of the civil rights movement fought to achieve — a society in which many black people are as trapped and isolated by their poverty as they were by segregation laws?" (Business Week, Sept 19).

Undoubtedly, the concentrated, racialised poverty in America has been unmasked the way it never had been before.

Noted Naison: "A hundred years from now, people will regard those pictures (the sight of tens of thousands of desperate black people crying for help outside the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Centre) as symbols of American civilisation at the dawn of the 21st century; the continued isolation of blacks within the wealthiest nation on earth."

The soggy reaction of the US authorities was also taken to task.

"The country is really just not prepared for a major catastrophic event," to quote the director of the National Centre for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University (Business Week, Sept 19).

Writes Bruce Nussbaum in the same issue of the magazine: "Problems emerged because of deeply flawed organisations beset by poor management, soiled cultures, and inadequate communication" — features familiar to the Third World, and now to the US too.

Yet another American voice is Jonathan Alter's "The Other America" (News- week, Sept 19) where he contended that Katrina has stripped away "the old evasions, hypocrisies and not-so-benign neglect".

And this posed a pertinent question: Why does part of the richest country on Earth look like the Third World?

The reality, according to Alter, is that poverty in America, after a decade of improvement in the 1990s, is actually getting worse.

For the first time in half a century, the third year of recovery (2004) also saw an increase in poverty, an image long hidden before the hurricanes struck.

Reportedly, the "size" of the poor living in the US is to be compared to the population of Canada or even Iraq for that matter.

Sadly, little of this is known to many fellow Americans, insulated by a sense of national superiority.

However, the fiasco and vulnerabilities related to Katrina are now colouring the real America. Next may be the bird flu pandemic.

In short, take away the hype and niceties and what is left are "holier-than-thou" attitudes based on double standards.

In fact, among us are those who are behaving like George Orwell's pigs (especially Napoleon and Squealer) in the satirical Animal Farm of 1945.

This can also explain their pig-headed attitude based on the commandment "some are more equal than others" which are cleverly disguised as values of democracy, freedom and equality.

Could this be yet another version of Orwell's allegorical imagination, except that this time the politicians- cum-actors are from the "free" world?

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