

## **Congresswoman McKinney Statement on a Civil Rights Tragedy**

Written by Robert ID2070

Wednesday, 02 November 2005 10:29 -

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Statement of Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney On The Upcoming March to Gretna Capitol Hill Press Conference with the Hip-Hop Caucus Wednesday, November 2, 2005

The Greatest Civil Rights Tragedy Ushering in the 21st Century: American racism exposed on a Louisiana bridge.

First of all I'd like to acknowledge the life and death of Rosa Parks, a pioneer with courage, who will be laid to rest today.

CNN.com reports that as the heart of a hurricane-ravaged New Orleans filled with sewage-tainted floodwaters and corpses, Mayor Ray Nagin urged people to cross a bridge leading to the dry lands of the city's suburban west bank.

And there begins the story of what might become the worst American civil rights episode ushering in the 21st Century.

The lead actors in this two-bit replay of the Bloody Sunday attempted crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge 40 years ago by blacks demanding the right to vote, are a police chief and a sheriff who are now as famous as Bull Connor. But sadly, share some of his attributes, too.

It is reported that during the 1980s, Jefferson Parish Sheriff Harry Lee ordered special scrutiny for any black people traveling in white sections of the parish. He is quoted by the New Orleans Gambit as having said, "It's obvious that two young blacks driving a rinky-dink car in a predominantly white neighborhood . . . They'll be stopped."

In 1994, the Gambit reports Sheriff Lee withdrew his officers from a predominantly black neighborhood after protests erupted when two black men died while in his care. He is reported to have said, "To hell with them, I haven't heard one word of support from one black person."

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In April of this year, blacks complained that Jefferson Parish officers were using a caricature of a black man for target practice. Sheriff Lee laughed when presented the charges and is reported to have commented, "I've looked at it, I don't find it offensive, and I have no interest in correcting it."

In May of this year, a 16-year old joy rider in a stolen car was murdered when 110 shots were fired into the stolen truck, striking the 16-year old and injuring two other teenaged passengers. In response to criticism from black ministers over the incident, Sheriff Lee is reported to have responded, "They can kiss my ass."

City of Gretna police chief Arthur Lawson is equally impressive. His justification for trapping Katrina survivors in New Orleans is, he is reported to have said, "If we had opened the bridge, our city would have looked like New Orleans does now:

looted, burned and pillaged."

Eyewitnesses report that before they were close enough to speak, officers began firing their weapons over the heads of the New Orleans survivors. Other officers are reported to have said that they wanted "no Superdomes in their city."

The world got a chance to see what too many of us here in this country already know: that racism is alive and well in America.

Could it be that the police chief and the sheriff are guilty of a hate crime?

How can federally funded roads be blocked by local officials at a time of emergency?

Where was the Federal Government  
that should have been ensuring the lives of all Katrina survivors?  
Didn't the New Orleans survivors have the right to life?

And civil rights?

And where's the outrage?

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I've personally learned that many people black and white are outraged about what happened. But you wouldn't know that by the response up here on Capitol Hill, where one of my colleagues is reported to have said to a group of lobbyists:

We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans.

We couldn't do it, but God did."

No one has asked for his resignation, no one has even suggested that he could have chosen less offensive language—no one has suggested that they were offended at all by what he said.

And so we are left  
with what too many New Orleans residents quietly suffered for years:  
the soft underbelly of American racism.

The Justice Department should investigate this very sad incident.

Today I will introduce legislation to strip all federal funds from the Gretna City Police Department, the Jefferson Parish Police, and the Crescent City Connection security force, all reportedly involved in the tragic blocking of the Gretna City bridge.

This is not 1965. Sadly, Gretna City Police Chief Lawson and Jefferson Parish Sheriff Lee sunk to the low ground by denying high ground to people fleeing Katrina's floodwaters.

And thanks to their and their officers' actions, the Gretna City Bridge incident will live on in civil rights history just as does Bloody Sunday at the Edmund Pettus Bridge.