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BLAME GAME NOT FOR THESE KIDS

IN THE week that Hurricane Katrina engulfed the Gulf Coast, pediatrician Deborah Frank examined a 2-year-old girl who weighed only 21 pounds. (That's the normal weight of a 1-year-old.)

When Frank asked if the girl had enough to eat, the child's mother burst into tears.

This was not in New Orleans or Biloxi. It was in Boston. Frank's clinic sees about 25 malnourished children a week.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, I don't want to play the "blame game." I want to play "truth or consequences."

George W. Bush didn't learn about 25,000 desperate and hungry people stuck in the New Orleans convention center until 24 hours after the rest of the world saw it on TV. He received the revelation only when an aide brought an Associated Press story into the Oval Office.

That was a predictable consequence of our president's penchant for avoiding the "media filter" and distancing himself from unpleasant news.

And the botched federal response to Katrina was a consequence of his administration's stripping of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the failure to heed warnings about the state of the levees in New Orleans.

Now truth has shaken the deeply held belief of many Americans that this country is different, exceptional.

"This is America," the refrain goes. "This is the richest, most powerful nation in history. How is it possible that we did not take care of our own?"

Yet before the winds of Katrina blew away the blinders, there were millions of sick and hungry children across America. Instead of helping them, Congress was poised to cut their already-inadequate safety net.

Dr. Frank told the story of the malnourished toddler as part of a conference call arranged by Voices for America's Children, an umbrella group of child advocates.

Voices had arranged the call before the hurricane because Congress had been scheduled this week to cut \$10 billion in Medicaid and \$3 billion in food stamps, along with reductions to the WIC nutrition program for pregnant women and infants.

The advocates had made essentially the same plea last spring, when Congress was debating the budget resolution that requires these cuts. They touted the efficacy of Medicaid and food stamps to mitigate the damage of poverty. Without these programs, the devastation to children is permanent. As Deborah Frank puts it, the policy changes are etched in the bodies of young children.

Congress passed the budget resolution anyway, leaving until now the details of cutting the programs.

Last week, two moderate Republican senators joined with two Democrats to get the Senate Finance Committee to delay action on the cuts right now, but the Republican leadership made it clear it intends to go forward. After all, the cuts are tied to yet another round of tax reductions - \$70 billion worth - also scheduled for this month.

Congress will wait for the outrage to subside along with the floodwaters. If members don't hear from constituents, and soon, they will slash the services. In your name.

"Children in general suffer so invisibly, except in times of national catastrophe, that people do not make connections between the overwhelming numbers talked about in Washington, and the pounds, and ounces, and lost learning capacity" in children, says Frank.

It was only when members of the media were "embedded" with the poor that we were able to actually see them. Will we now turn away?

The truth: This is America. This is the richest, most powerful nation in history. Will we not take care of our own?

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