

**HURRICANE
KATRINA:**

**NOT A
REAL
DISASTER**

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1. NOT A REAL DISASTER

I**T'S PAINFULLY DIFFICULT** for me to wrap my mind around images of Americans lying dead by the score, their corpses being eaten by rats and dogs. As a brave new America trudges forward into the 21st Century armed with a new set of national priorities, there's something acutely unnatural about this disaster.

First of all, it didn't have to happen. It's no secret that New Orleans sits in a geographic "bowl," the bottom of which is ten feet lower than the nearby Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf, the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain all tower above the vulnerable city, held back by an aging levee system perpetually sinking into the muck that is southern Louisiana. For New Orleans, the question has long been "when," not "if." In 1995, with hurricanes growing more numerous and powerful (dare we say, "global warming?"), the U.S. Congress created the Southeastern Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project (SELA) – the agency tasked with preventing New Orleans from becoming New Atlantis. The feds funded the project at \$430 million and hoped to complete it by 2005. So far, so good.

Then came the George W. Bush administration. By 2003, they cut SELA funding to what the New Orleans Times-Picayune described as a "trickle." By 2004 the Bush administration slashed SELA funding over 44 percent from its 2001

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level, funding only 20 percent of the Army Corps of Engineers 2005 SELA budget. This brought construction to a halt on the mostly completed project. Corps officials, according to numerous Times-Picayune articles, cite the cost of the Iraq War and the Bush tax cuts (for the wealthiest Americans) as the reasons for slashing the SELA budget.

Fast forward to Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans' 15-foot tall levees were no match for Katrina's promised category five winds and 30- to 40-foot tidal surge. But the storm dropped to a level four and veered east, devastating the Mississippi coast and sparing the Big Easy from the brunt of its force. New Orleans residents awoke the next day and breathed a collective sigh of relief, seemingly having dodged the bullet and sustaining only superficial damage.

But then two flimsy sections of the levee burst – unable to withstand the increased pressure from Lake Pontchartrain's swelled waters and the city started, in water torture fashion, to slowly fill with floodwaters. The flooding was an all-too-predictable event despite George W. Bush's claim that "no one could have predicted the levees would break."

In fact, in a report written in the spring of 2001 (before 9/11), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) identified a direct hurricane hit on New Orleans one of the country's three biggest threats. The two others were a terrorist attack in New York and an earthquake in California.

Last year Time wrote about of the danger of levees bursting and water flooding into the city from Lake Pontchartrain, saying, "What would ultimately remain of the city may not be worth preserving." And as recently as July 18, a few weeks before Katrina was even a tropical breeze, U.S. News had a feature article titled "Big Blow in the Big Easy." U.S. News prophetically cited the director of LSU's hurricane studies department saying, "If a hurricane comes next month [which it did], New Orleans could no longer exist." These are only three of countless warnings both nationally and locally that have been sounding for many years. Unlike the tortured search for memos and "warnings" of 9/11, disaster experts, the Army Corps of Engineers and previous FEMA administrators have been openly screaming in alarm to the Bush White House that New Orleans was in danger.

It also must be noted that, unlike the 9/11 surprise attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Katrina's deadly path to New Orleans was tracked for a full five days.

NO SUV LEFT BEHIND

Here's where one of the most embarrassing episodes of modern American history turns even uglier. On Sunday, August 28th, the day before the storm hit the Gulf Coast, the Governor of Louisiana ordered New Orleans evacuated. In Louisiana, however, the word "evacuation" takes on a meaning of its own. It means those who can leave should pack up a few valuables and get their butts out of town, pronto. And flee they did, packing up SUVs and checking into hotels from Atlanta to Houston.

In an Armageddon-like scenario, over 100,000 New Orleans residents were left behind, and the ugly truth is that those left behind were mostly either too poor or too infirm to leave. New Orleans was, in fact, in a state of disaster before Katrina struck and before the levee failed. Over one quarter of New Orleans' population struggled to live below the federal poverty line in some of the most substandard housing in the country. Over 100,000 of them lacked access to automobiles, giving New Orleans the lowest auto ownership rate in the U.S. – even lower than New York City, which has the nation's most comprehensive mass transit system.

When the evacuation order came, public busses were running on a Sunday schedule. The few that were running ceased operating by late afternoon as the system was shut down – no doubt with the bus drivers themselves heading to dry ground. School busses that could have been employed in the evacuation effort were left locked up in mostly low-lying parking lots and were eventually submerged in the flood.

The story continued to grow more sickening. As is the case in urban areas around the world, the poorest people in New Orleans lived in the most environmentally vulnerable neighborhoods – on some of the lowest and quickest-to-flood terrain. As the floodwaters slowly rose, people moved from their first-floor residences to their attics, and eventually from their attics onto their roofs. The water surrounding them was full of raw sewage, decomposing bodies of animals and humans, pesticides, and wharf rats.

Last September, category five hurricane Ivan hit the impoverished nation of Cuba with 160-mph winds. Yet the Cubans, for all of their faults, were able to evacuate 1.5 million people to high ground. Despite losing over 20,000 homes to

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winds and floodwaters, loss of life was negligible. In New Orleans, by contrast, we left the poor, elderly, infirm and otherwise vulnerable behind to die.

Independent media center indybay.org asked (and answered): “What is Cuban President Fidel Castro’s secret? According to Dr. Nelson Valdes, a sociology professor at the University of New Mexico, and specialist in Latin America, ‘the whole civil defense is embedded in the community to begin with. People know ahead of time where they are to go. Cuba’s leaders go on TV and take charge,’ said Valdes.

“Contrast this with George W. Bush’s reaction to Hurricane Katrina. The day after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, Bush was playing golf. He waited three days to make a TV appearance and five days before visiting the disaster site. In a scathing editorial the day after, the New York Times said, ‘nothing about the president’s demeanor yesterday – which seemed casual to the point of carelessness – suggested that he understood the depth of the current crisis.’ ”

Meanwhile, throughout the unfolding disaster, Vice President Cheney refused to discontinue his vacation, and Condoleeza Rice spent the week in New York City seeing Broadway shows and shopping on Fifth Avenue. She was reportedly “in tears laughing” through a performance of Monty Python’s Spamalot while New Orleans was dying before our eyes. Theatergoers in New York, many who had experienced 9/11, were shocked.

The following day, according to WebServices Journal, Rice “was seen spending several thousands of dollars on new shoes at Ferragamo’s on Fifth Avenue. A fellow shopper, unable to fathom the absurdity of Rice’s timing, went up to the Secretary and reportedly shouted, ‘How dare you shop for shoes while thousands are dying and homeless!’ Rice had security physically remove the woman.”

AMERICAN WATER TORTURE

Again, as noted earlier, unlike the terrorist attacks of 9/11, or the tsunami of last December, it’s important to realize how slowly this catastrophe unfolded. There was no tidal wave washing over the city as predicted. And by all indications there probably wasn’t much loss of life during and immediately after the storm. The New Orleans calamity was ultimately the result of benign neglect. Up to five days passed, yet stranded, hungry and dehydrated New Orleans residents were still clinging to their roofs exposed to the elements – and dying by the score.

Lt. Commander Sean Kelly, a Pentagon spokesperson for Northern Command,

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revealed in an interview with the BBC that NorthCom was prepared to send in search and rescue helicopters from the U.S.S. Bataan almost immediately after the hurricane hit. He told the BBC, “we had things ready. The only caveat is that we have to wait until the president authorizes us.” That authorization didn’t happen for days, even though the ship was docked just outside New Orleans, with the ability to deliver up to 100,000 gallons of drinkable water a day, and with doctors, food, hospital beds (only a full-fledged Navy Hospital Ship has better medical facilities) and over 30 helicopters on board available for rescue operations.

Instead, tens of thousands were holed up at the official evacuation points at the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center only to find themselves waiting for days without sanitary facilities, sometimes without food or water or medical care – still waiting for evacuation or for help of any kind. And more dead bodies started to pile up. Some people needed dialysis. Some needed insulin. Some were just old and frail or newly born. Many of them died.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) used to have a plan for responding to a hurricane hitting New Orleans. It involved activating a hospital ship at the first sign of a storm and following the storm up into the gulf – knowing it would make landfall somewhere. And the hospital would be on the scene 24 hours later. The National Guard, mobilized at the first hint of a storm, was supposed to be on the scene within hours, and so on. But the Bush administration folded FEMA into the Department of Homeland Security, replacing the director of FEMA with Michael Brown, a political appointee with no emergency response experience. He was fired from his previous position managing horse shows as head of the International Arabian Horse Association.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, in calling for Brown to be fired from his FEMA post, angrily told reporters, “If George Bush is serious about finding out what went wrong, he need only look in the mirror. He appointed a man to head FEMA who had no credentials or qualifications for the job.”

Furthermore, in addition to the poor leadership at FEMA, 6,800 of the best-trained and best-equipped members of the Mississippi and Louisiana National Guard are fighting in Iraq. Many of the Louisiana National Guard’s deep-water vehicles, helicopters and Humvees are also in Iraq – crippling the Guard’s ability to respond to the very type of mission they are chartered to respond to.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, there was no effective FEMA

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response. A hospital ship (based in Boston) wasn't activated until two days after the storm, and wouldn't be able to respond for another week. FEMA responded to the storm by issuing press releases claiming things were under control when they weren't – claiming they were delivering food when they weren't. On their website they asked people to donate money to a relief organization co-founded by radical televangelist Pat Robertson, on whose TV show fellow televangelist Jerry Falwell once described the 9/11 attacks as God's wrath against the homosexuals and the ACLU.

Under the Bush administration's reorganization plan, FEMA will officially lose its disaster preparedness responsibilities – instead focusing more on mass detention centers (concentration camps) and other “War on Terror” functions. No agency has been designated to pick up this responsibility. FEMA is already dropping the ball.

LOOTING AND RIOTING

Let's not forget the media reports of “looting” and “rioting.” New Orleans residents were left to die or fend for themselves. Many opted for survival – foraging for water, food and other supplies. And there were also looters – morons and junkies wading through floodwaters with plasma TVs on their heads. New Orleans was always one of this country's poorest, and hence, most crime infested cities. New Orleans thieves and rapists didn't change their ways just because the apocalypse was at hand – they continued to victimize their neighbors as they always have. Only now, the victims were also blamed for the crimes as media reports tarred all stranded New Orleans residents as descending into chaos, raping and killing each other – even though such mayhem was never national news before Katrina and was certainly unrepresentative of how New Orleans residents responded to the calamity.

This is ultimately a story about race and class. New Orleans was 67 percent black. Because of an economic legacy dating back to slavery days and a general lack of opportunities for black folks in Louisiana, about half of the city's black population lived below the poverty line. The people unable to escape New Orleans before the storm were primarily black – and overwhelmingly poor. They didn't have the physical means to leave or the money to stay in hotels once they evacuated. This is also why the photos of the collapse of New Orleans show black

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faces almost exclusively. These are the people America left behind to die. These are the people the federal government was in no hurry to rescue. I'm not saying this was deliberately planned out, as in genocide, but there's no arguing that this certainly is how the chips fell.

CHOOSING TO STAY?

Michael Brown, the Bush administration's FEMA chief, confronted with reports that thousands were dying in New Orleans, explained that the victims bore some responsibility for their own fates because they "chose" not to evacuate. The media initially trumpeted this story of irresponsible black folks staying behind, ostensibly to loot. Nationally distributed photos showed white people "finding" supplies as they waded through floodwaters with cases of soda or water. Near identical photos of black people carrying water had captions describing them as having "looted" a store.

I'm sorry, but when you are left behind to die, you have not only the right, but also the obligation to find unused supplies that can save human lives. In many media reports, white people were praised for just such heroism while black folks were demonized. A blog published by New Orleans-based employees of the DirectNic Internet domain company refer to the city as the "Planet of the Apes."

In one personal correspondence to a family member in New York that was shared with me, a white flood victim staying in a French Quarter hotel with Internet access writes: "Our biggest adventure today was raiding the Walgreen's on Canal [Street] under police escort. The pharmacy was dark and full of water." He goes on to explain, "We basically scooped the entire drug sets [sic] into garbage bags and removed them. All under police escort. The looters had to be held back at gun point." A racial double standard is so ingrained into Louisiana society that the author/looter couldn't see the irony of his own words. CNN reports that police officers, many of whom were deployed without provisions, also commandeered food, water and fuel from wherever they could find it. But they weren't "looting."

George W. Bush responded to a reporter's query by explaining that there will be "zero tolerance" for looting, even, according to Bush, if someone is "looting" food or water – this after flood victims were left to fend for themselves for four days. Louisiana's Democratic governor, Kathleen Blanco, added a "shoot to kill" provi-

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sion to Bush's "zero tolerance" proclamation, placing "restoring order" and protecting property as a priority over rescuing still-stranded victims. When National Guard troops from thirteen states finally made their way into New Orleans five days after the storm, the scene looked more like an occupation than a rescue. Many troops aggressively pointed their rifles at hungry black survivors who approached them seeking aid.

Such behavior is expected when the orders say, "Shoot to kill," and many of the shooters are freshly back from grisly duty subduing Iraqi cities. As governor Blanco put it, "These troops are fresh back from Iraq, well trained, experienced, battle-tested and under my orders to restore order in the streets." She went on to add, "They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill and they are more than willing to do so if necessary, and I expect they will."

The "too dangerous to rescue" myth was also employed by FEMA as rationale for ordering rescue teams to stand down early in the crisis. Louisianans are a tough lot, and many private boat owners from areas surrounding New Orleans immediately entered the city as flooding began, creating an ad hoc rescue flotilla. Many survivors tell of strangers in small fishing boats plucking them out of second-story windows or off roofs, depositing them high and dry on highway overpasses. The Federal government put a stop to such heroism while failing to replace the independent effort with one of their own.

One day after the storm, as Bush played golf and attended a fundraiser, foreign leaders sought to mobilize a relief effort to quickly get help to the submerged city. Russia offered to send planes of food to New Orleans. Cuba, which was cited by the United Nations as providing a model for hurricane response, offered to deploy 1,100 doctors and 26 tons of medical supplies – with the first 100 doctors arriving wherever they were needed within 24 hours, the rest following within 72 hours. The feds, however, prevented Cuba, Russia, Venezuela and a host of other governments from mounting relief efforts which could have reached survivors well before American National Guard troops were deployed.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the Bush administration was unable to explain their behavior, their incompetence, or their indifference. Even a presidential P.R. trip to New Orleans four days after the storm led to more pain and suffering, as

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Bush's security forces ordered all search and rescue helicopters grounded for the duration of his visit. Bush continued to protest that nobody foresaw a levee break. Obviously he missed the nine-plus articles published by the Times Picayune during the last two years, which warned of just such a breach, and which outrightly condemned his administration for halting programs to prevent such a breach.

Presidential spokesperson Scott McClellan explained that the levee breach was "more of a design issue," yet the Bush administration had also defunded engineering studies examining the levee designs. And McClellan, in his worst boldface lie, told reporters "flood control has been a priority of this administration," adding, "this is not a time for finger pointing."

That's exactly what this is, however – a time for finger pointing. Five days of depraved indifference to human life on the part of the Bush administration, coupled with obstructionism, has now cost thousands of human lives. Victims who survived and died alike were treated as though they were less than human – left to wallow in some of the most atrocious conditions humans have had to survive in this country since the days of slavery.

ETHNIC CLEANSING

The vast majority of the victims who were put in death's path, not by a storm alone, but by a host of government policies, were black. Their problems didn't begin with Hurricane Katrina. Prior to the storm, New Orleans' black population had to struggle against hundreds of years of political and economic marginalization. Most recently, black New Orleans residents struggled to stay in their homes as their low-rent communities were threatened by gentrification.

Today the region's largest black city – also the base of power for the Louisiana's Democratic party – is in ruins. Most New Orleans residents didn't own their own homes; about 40 percent of those who did lacked adequate insurance. People who struggled to stay in their affordable New Orleans homes are now gone – shipped off to out-of-state "refugee centers." New Orleans will be rebuilt, but who will have a say in how that rebuilding will take place? It's doubtful that the traditionally disenfranchised population will have much power in shaping the new New Orleans.

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A front-page story in the New York Times on September 6 cited that shares of Halliburton soared to 52-week high in anticipation of the billions of dollars of reconstruction work the company will likely receive. Meanwhile, now that evacuation is finally in progress, the entire population of poor black folks who lived in New Orleans are being shipped as far away from the city as possible, far away from the billions of dollars of reconstruction jobs.

From the Astrodome in Houston, 350 miles from New Orleans, Barbara Bush, on the radio show, “Marketplace,” said of the desperate, lost, sick and confused people forced out of their homes: “What I’m hearing, which is sort of scary, is that they all want to stay in Texas. Many of the people in the arena here were underprivileged anyway. This is working very well for them.”

A middle-aged black woman didn’t agree, “I have no idea where my family is. I am in this city all by myself. I don’t know how long I can keep my sanity.”

Federal policies have allowed New Orleans’ black community to drown. A new city will take shape in place of the culturally unique city the world adored. Middle-class homeowners will get insurance money to rebuild. Landlords will be compensated for their losses. The French Quarter will once again host tourists, probably as the jeweled center of a tacky-tacky, sanitized, Disneyesque sort of “Las Vegas by the Bayou.” But will the black community that struggled since slavery days to survive in Southern Louisiana ever be able to return to and reclaim the city and heritage this flood took from them? Will their historic culture of resistance to white supremacy continue to flourish? And if history proves the answer is no, what else can we call this other than “ethnic cleansing?”

Joseph Wetmore, Neil Oolie and Jamie Moses contributed research for this story.

2. MORE KATRINA SHAME

REMEMBER ALL THOSE STORIES of mayhem, murder and rape in the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center? The tales of sexually abused corpses being found in the restrooms. They never happened. There are no corpses. The mental images of such mayhem, however, were compelling. In their wake, pundits called for a military occupation of New Orleans. And for the first time since the civil war, we all stood by dumbfounded as an entire American city was illegally put under military control – ostensibly to hold the cannibals at bay.

Likewise, remember all those stories about armed gangs opening fire on rescue aircraft? Well, according to the FAA, these attacks were also myths. There were, however, armed gangs. The most notorious of which wore the uniform of the Gretna (Jefferson Parish) Sheriff's Department. The Gretna posse posted themselves on the Highway 90 bridge connecting their dry unflooded community with New Orleans. There, for days, they opened fire, shooting over the heads of flood survivors trying to evacuate by foot out of New Orleans. According to paramedics, the good ol' Gretna boys even made at least one incursion across the bridge into New Orleans, attacking and disbursing flood evacuees awaiting evacuation in a makeshift camp on the median of the Ponchartrain Expressway – seizing their "looted" food and water.

I suppose the Gretna Sheriff's attack on evacuees could be written off simply as just one more episode in Louisiana's long racist history. But it seems more complicated than that. Jefferson Parish, of which Gretna is a part, is about one third black. And some of the evacuees whom they turned back were white. They were, however, allowing evacuees in cars to cross the bridge. So maybe it's about class. Maybe they were turning poor folks back since they weren't worthy of sanctuary on Gretna's hallowed ground. But I still think the real story is about more than social class.

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Police officers are trained professionals, supposedly capable of working under extreme pressure, and they are supposed to offer the first line of support when disaster strikes. No doubt there will be plenty of forensic sociology going on to see what made them snap – what turned the supposed good guys into some of the gnarliest devils this awful tragedy has sired.

THE FEAR FACTOR

I think it's fear. As individuals and as an organization they were shitting their pants with fear. They believed the hype. New Orleans had descended into chaos. And now the cannibal vampire zombies were marching over the bridge to decimate Jefferson Parish. And, according to witnesses, they turned people – old people, nursing home residents, children, and of course women and men back into the desperate straights of New Orleans.

This fear is the bastard child of a racist society. That's why whites were so quick to believe that the predominantly black city across the canal had descended into a violent self-destructive chaos. Ultimately, the blame must lie with a media culture that was quick to play the race card, and churn out unsubstantiated stories of mass mayhem in black neighborhoods of New Orleans.

As evacuees are finally settling into the relative safety of their new digs, they're coming forward with thousands of stories of selfless bravery, sacrifice and countless communities pulling together to help each other and to save lives. I'm sure there were rapes, murders and thefts as well. But that shouldn't have been the story of the day and it shouldn't have set the tempo for the ensuing media coverage which eclipsed the far more numerous stories of heroism.

PROPERTY OVER PEOPLE

Once the seed of fear was planted, it spread like an out-of-control virus. Officials predictably gave the order to suspend life-saving search and rescue operations and instead focus on stopping "looting" and restoring "order." When historians revisit the great flood of New Orleans, this will be the great shame – the order to value property over human life. To value the property of the wealthy over the lives of the poor.

One week after Katrina hit, New Orleans was under military occupation. The

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National Guard was not there to help when people were clinging to roofs. But they were there, along with regular Army troops and mercenaries from the Blackwater Corporation, to point guns in the faces of New Orleans residents who had just survived a week of hell. There are reports of troops, freshly back from urban combat in Iraq, kicking in doors in New Orleans to evict survivors from their own homes. These mostly young and inexperienced troops, almost all of whom lack the professional training required of urban police officers, and, like the Gretna Sheriff's Deputies, scared shitless. Their training and their experience equips them to secure hostile territory as invaders fighting an insurgency in war-torn Iraq. In New Orleans, they're using war jargon, with one Guardsman who returned from Iraq explaining to Democracy Now!'s Amy Goodman, that his mission was to "clear" buildings from "enemies" or "hostile people." New Orleans residents who are refusing to vacate their mostly undamaged houses report troops raiding their homes during the middle of night, threatening them at gun-point. It's the fear thing again, coupled with an unclear mission.

It's also illegal. The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 makes it illegal for U.S. regular military personnel (who are now working along with National Guard) to engage in domestic law enforcement activities. They can fix bridges, rescue people, feed people, but not point weapons at citizens. There are a number of reasons for this. The most obvious is that electorates in democracies should control the military – not be controlled by the military.

OTHER SHAME

The militarization of an American city is not the only assault on our democracy. While we were all focused on the Gulf Coast, a federal appeals court ruled that the president can order the indefinite incommunicado detention of American citizens without them being charged with a crime. The ruling was made in the case of U.S. citizen José Padilla, who the Bush administration claims is associated with al Qaeda. The administration argued, get this, that they couldn't try Padilla because he might be found innocent. The legal argument was that if found innocent, he could go on to threaten the United States. The actual ruling was written by Judge Michael Luttig, who pundits believe is on Bush's short list for nomination as a Supreme Court justice. That would be right in line with the Bush team's

interviewing Judge John Roberts for a Supreme Court slot while he was hearing a case concerning whether or not Guantanamo visitors had POW rights. Roberts ruled, no, and was subsequently nominated for the Supreme Court. With Hurricane Katrina dominating the news, his confirmation hearing, like Luttig's decision, are going by more or less unnoticed. This season's biggest disaster is yet to come.

3. WORSHIPPING DEMONS AND LOOTING THE KATRINA CASH COW

PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS often advise clients who are clearly guilty of some wrongdoing, to publicly admit their guilt. The theory is that the public is more likely to forgive someone who admits to their obvious faults, then to forgive someone who insists on compounding their wrongdoing with denials. Hence the world was treated to what may be the best performance of George W. Bush's political career. In the spirit of Richard Nixon's classic "Checkers" speech, we got Bush's "we could have done better" speech – an extraordinary piece of understatement.

The speech was good. It was a pure Karl Rove head-on attack on reality. New Orleans residents, wealthy and poor alike, will have the right of return. And they'll have homes, schools, jobs and hospitals when they get there. Endemic poverty, never an issue for this administration, will be addressed. Unemployed workers from the region will be rehired to rebuild the region. Bush even addressed the rationale for affirmative action, explaining that blacks have histor-

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ically been locked out of economic opportunities in the Gulf region. Liberal stalwart Ted Kennedy couldn't have given a better speech.

The problem is that while Bush's performance was superb, it was just that, a superb performance, with the emphasis on performance. Displaced New Orleaners listening to Bush's speech, told reporters that he spoke great words, but they were just words – the jury is out until there is action. And even then, what action could possibly make up for the depraved indifference to human life demonstrated by federal officials early on as this disaster unfolded.

SCREW THE VICTIMS

Rather than act on Bush's rhetorical promises, his administration and his allies in Congress are moving ahead in business-as-usual fashion, continuing to screw hurricane survivors while covering up their own tracks. The day before Bush made his 'we'll do everything possible' speech, Senate Republicans killed an attempt to establish a bipartisan commission to investigate the federal government's handling of the response to Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans levee breaks – this as hundreds of reports are emerging of federal officials preventing thousands of aid workers, boats, and truck loads of donated food and water to enter the region. The Senate's action came on the same day that Knight Ridder uncovered federal documents showing that it was Homeland Security Chief Michael Chertoff, and not FEMA Chief Michael Brown, who had the authority to dispatch immediate aid to the region. Brown, who was certainly inept, took the fall while Chertoff escaped responsibility – in effect living on to screw up the next disaster. And there will be no investigation.

Also, as Bush delivered his speech about endemic racism, his Education Department was preparing a request to waive the McKinney-Vento Act – the federal law that bans placing homeless children in segregated schools. They're filing the request so that they can set up "separate but equal" educational facilities for children of the New Orleans Diaspora, instead of integrating them into public schools in Texas, Utah and other states housing large populations of evacuees.

And while Bush promised to hire unemployed victims of Katrina to help in the rebuilding effort, his administration is using the disaster as a rationale for requesting to waive federal laws requiring contractors receiving federal funds to hire

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workers at prevailing regional wages – this supposedly to “expedite” reconstruction. Democracy Now! reports that one New Orleans hotel chain, owned by a major contributor to the Republican Party, and slated to receive federal contracts to house emergency workers, already moved ahead and brought in Mexican citizens from Texas to work at sub par wages refurbishing their properties.

In the weeks leading up to Bush’s speech, Americans opened up their wallets and broke all previous records for charitable giving, donating hundreds of millions of dollars for hurricane relief. And the Bush administration joined suit, promising a \$60 billion down payment on what will be at least \$100 billion in federal funding for the disaster area. At the same time we were giving, various administration-connected firms were stepping up, like pigs at the feeding trough, putting their hands out to receive.

DISASTER PROFITEERS

Foremost among the Katrina profiteers is the Halliburton Corporation, which received a no-bid contract for rebuilding military facilities damaged by the storm. Dick Cheney was Halliburton’s CEO until 2000 when he left that position to run for Vice President. He still receives nearly a quarter million dollars per year in deferred compensation from the corporation. Halliburton also received over \$9 billion in federal contracts as a result of the Iraq invasion. A recent Pentagon audit questions over \$1.03 billion of those charges, documenting almost a half billion dollars worth of “unsupported” costs. Halliburton is a major donor to the Republican Party – recycling government war, and now disaster relief, funding into Republican campaigns. In essence, the longer the Iraq war goes on, the greater the Gulf coast damage is, the more taxpayer money gets funneled to support Republican campaign ads.

Another early recipient of Katrina funding is the Shaw Group. Like Halliburton, the Shaw Group is represented in Washington by lobbyist Joe Allbaugh, who is Bush’s former campaign manager and his first FEMA chief. Allbaugh stepped down as FEMA chief to begin working for Halliburton when the U.S. invaded Iraq – undoubtedly at the time seeing more payola in war than disaster. If early contracts are any indication, we can expect lots of grubby Republican Party connected fingers helping themselves to relief funds.

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At the state level, Louisiana contracted to pay the Kenyon subsidiary of Texas-based Service Corporation International (SCI) \$119,000 per day for removing corpses from the New Orleans area. SCI has made headlines previously for dumping hundreds of bodies that they were contracted to bury. SCI paid out over \$100 million to settle lawsuits filed by the families of the deceased whose corpses the company desecrated. Another lawsuit charges that three SCI-owned funeral homes contracted with an unregulated crematorium that stockpiled rotting bodies in sheds and outdoor piles instead of cremating them. The Louisiana contract puts Kenyon in charge of counting the dead.

A key problem here is that we're not only putting one of the most corrupt federal administrations in history in charge of allotting \$60 billion in relief funding – they in turn will be allotting much of that money to two of the most corrupt statehouses in the nation. The Washington D.C. based Corporate Crime Reporter compiled a study of state governments, looking at the rates in which officials were convicted of crimes. Their final report ranked Mississippi as the most corrupt state government, and Louisiana as the third most corrupt in the nation. The real looting on the Gulf Coast has barely begun.

FAITH BASED RIP-OFFS

Of course, Bush, in his 'confronting reality' speech, addresses the misappropriation of relief funds issue, promising, in essence, that the wolves can be trusted to watch over the henhouse, as he explained that there will be federal oversight monitoring the distribution of our \$60 billion. He also spoke highly of "faith-based" relief initiatives. Given Bush's penchant for head-on crashes with reality, it shouldn't come as a surprise that one of the first Katrina rip-offs was a "faith-based" initiative aided and abetted by FEMA. Immediately after Katrina struck, FEMA posted a list of charitable organization on their website, highlighting three. One of the three highlighted organization was Christian Jihadist Pat Robertson's Operation Blessing.

Operation Blessing was busted in 1994 after collecting money under the guise of supporting the airlift of Rwandan refugees. According to a report in The Nation, they used their planes to transport diamond-mining equipment for a company that Robertson owned in partnership with the military ruler of Zaire, Mobutu

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Sese Seko. The Virginia Office of Consumer Affairs concluded that Robertson “willfully induced contributions from the public through the use of misleading statements and other implications,” using the nonprofit Operation Blessing as a front for his profit making ventures. Virginia’s Republican Attorney General, Mark Earley, intervened and thwarted any criminal prosecution of Robertson, who, according to *The Nation*, in turn donated \$35,000 to Earley’s reelection campaign. This made the never-charged swindler, Robertson, Earley’s largest contributor. Earley is now head of his own “faith-based” service agency, providing hurricane relief services in Louisiana.

Meanwhile, on Pat Robertson’s 700 Club television show, correspondent Gary Lane went on the air days after the hurricane and chastised the non-Christian religious beliefs held by some of the evacuees stuck in the Superdome.

DEMON WORSHIP

Other religious leaders took Robertson’s attack to a higher level, arguing that Katrina, and in turn, the New Orleans levee break, were the wrath of a vengeful god. Michael Marcavage, a former Clinton White House intern, and current director of Repent America, maintaining the high level of accord we’ve come to expect from Clinton White House interns, argues that “God destroyed a wicked city.” The reason Marcavage gave for his demon God’s wrath was that New Orleans was about to host “Southern Decadence,” a week-long gay pride festival. Marcavage also argued that New Orleans had it coming because of the “Girls Gone Wild” video series, which was shot in New Orleans, and, it seems, viewed very closely by Marcavage. “Let us not forget,” Marcavage implores, “that the citizens of New Orleans tolerated and welcomed the wickedness in their city.”

The Kansas-based Westboro Baptist Church brings Marcavage’s hate speech to the next level. On their “God Hates America” website, they describe New Orleans as “a putrid, toxic, stinking cesspool of fag fecal matter,” asking followers to “Pray for more dead bodies floating on the fag-semen-rancid waters of New Orleans.”

A host of anti-abortion activists have also joined in the fray, claiming that the satellite shot of Hurricane Katrina, at one moment in time, somehow, with lots of imagination, resembled an eight week old fetus. Though the resemblance was hardly clear, anti-abortion zealots quickly proclaimed the destruction of New

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Orleans and its five women's health clinics, to also be an angry God's wrath.

Then there's the Zionist crowd. Ultra rightist Israeli Rabbi Ovadia Yosef argues that Katrina was God's punishment for George Bush's support of Israel's Gaza pullout. Israeli Christian columnist Stan Goodenough made the same argument, juxtaposing images of Jewish settlers in Gaza and residents in New Orleans both being forced from their homes. Yosef is a well known wacko in Israel, who once argued that the six million holocaust victims brought their fate on themselves since they were the reincarnations of evil people. Goodenough (yes, that's his real name) is a relative newcomer on Israel's crowded wacko scene.

Meanwhile, across the sand flats, there's a whole different spin, ultimately leading to the same conclusion. Muhammad Yousef Mlaifi (no relation to Rabbi Yosef, of course), director of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Endowment's Research Center, wrote in the Arabic daily Al-Siyassa, that "The terrorist Katrina is one of the soldiers of Allah..."

And back in Washington, no surprise, we get even more medievalism from the hallowed halls of Congress. There, Republican Representative Richard Baker of Baton Rouge, explained, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did."

Of course none of these spiritual Neanderthals quite explained why their angry wrathful gay and abortion hating God chose to smite a score of Bible Belt cities in Mississippi and Alabama, toppling hundreds of church steeples and instantly leveling towns and cities with a direct hit from Katrina.

I also don't see these deathmongers as worshiping the same God that most Americans worship. They describe a wrathful spiteful hateful dark sort of demon – more like a politician than a deity.



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