

South Asia disaster appeal: White House tries to cover up Bush's moment of truth

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President Bush's public appearance Monday to announce a fund-raising campaign for the victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami is the latest attempt by the White House to recover from a political debacle: its callous and dismissive response to the colossal tragedy in southern Asia that killed 150,000 people.

Flanked by George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, George W. Bush declared that the two former presidents would spearhead a nationwide appeal to raise private contributions for disaster relief. The unusual joint appearance of the president, his father and his Democratic predecessor—they last stood together just after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—underscores the growing alarm in US ruling circles over Bush's public display of indifference to the most extensive natural disaster of the past half century.

Bush remained secluded on his Texas ranch for three days after the December 26 catastrophe, while a White House spokesman announced a derisory \$15 million US contribution to emergency relief. After a barrage of media criticism and hostile comments from government officials in the affected region and UN aid coordinator Jan Egeland, the administration reacted with a public relations campaign featuring a new event or announcement every day.

Last Tuesday the US government more than doubled its relief pledge to \$35 million. On Wednesday Bush appeared before the press to make his first public expression of condolences. On Thursday the White House announced that Secretary of State Colin Powell and Bush's brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, would head a US delegation to visit the devastated area and attend an emergency aid summit in Indonesia. On Friday the administration announced a tenfold increase in its aid pledge, to \$350 million. On Saturday Bush devoted his scheduled radio speech to the South Asian calamity and ordered flags to be flown at half-staff for a week at US installations around the world. On Sunday Bush returned to Washington and Powell appeared on national television interview programs to discuss the disaster relief effort.

The culmination of this series of PR events was the side-by-

side appearance of the three presidents to appeal for private donations to South Asia relief. This was particularly unpersuasive as an antidote to criticism of Bush, however, not only because the president has not made any such personal contribution himself, according to a spokesman, but because ordinary Americans have been most generous with their contributions without any prompting from the US government.

Tens of millions of dollars have flooded into agencies like UNICEF, the American Red Cross, Catholic Charities and CARE. The Internet has played a prominent role in this outpouring: small donors gave more than \$8 million to disaster aid through the link on a single web site, Amazon.com, more than half as much as the initial pledge by the US government.

It would have been far more appropriate if Clinton and the senior Bush had been appealing for greater contributions from the US government, rather than from the American people. It is quite likely that, behind the scenes, that is precisely what they were doing. Among the more experienced representatives of the American corporate elite—among whom these two must be counted—the younger Bush's performance over the last week is regarded as a foreign policy blunder that only compounds the disaster in Iraq, undermining the position of US imperialism in the world.

It may yet prove to be a political blow at home as well, especially if the number of American victims of the tsunami should grow larger. Secretary of State Powell, speaking with reporters aboard his plane en route to Bangkok, Thailand, the first stop in his tour of the disaster zone, revealed that between 4,000 and 5,000 American citizens are unaccounted for in the countries hit by the earthquake and tidal waves, although only 15 are confirmed dead.

There are two components to Bush's evident indifference to the enormous loss of life in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and eight other countries—individual and social. The tragedy in South Asia is a moment of truth, revealing indelibly both the personality of George W. Bush and the

nature of the society over which he presides.

Bush's seeming annoyance at being forced to interrupt his Christmas vacation to make perfunctory comments on the death of 150,000 people reflects more than a racist outlook towards poor brown people on the other side of the world. His general contempt for human life has been a characteristic feature, not only of his presidency, but of his entire political career.

It is well known that Bush was responsible for the death by lethal injection of more than 150 condemned prisoners during his six years as governor of Texas. Less well publicized is the blitheness with which he dismissed their appeals for clemency. According to his Texas and White House counsel, and now nominee for attorney general, Alberto Gonzales, Bush spent less than 15 minutes on average reviewing each death row appeal. He did not approve a single one.

The Texas governor evidently derived personal satisfaction, with more than a touch of sadism, from exercising this power of life and death over helpless human beings. In at least one case, that of Karla Faye Tucker, a born-again Christian whose appeal for clemency was championed by prominent evangelists, Bush is known to have mocked the woman in the last hours before her death, mimicking her desperate pleas for mercy.

Like presidents before him, Bush has shed no tears for the victims of American military action overseas—in his case, the tens of thousands of Afghan and Iraqi citizens killed by American bombs, missiles and bullets. Unlike most presidents, however, he has also displayed a cold and unfeeling attitude to the death of American soldiers in his wars.

In the early stages of the occupation of Iraq, when the US death toll was still in the hundreds, the media briefly made an issue of Bush's refusal to attend a single funeral or to allow the coffins of war victims to be photographed as they returned to the United States through Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Now that the total killed is over 1,300, with 8,000 or more wounded, many of them maimed or horribly disfigured, the media has largely dropped the subject.

This attitude of depraved indifference towards human life is not limited to Bush personally. It is characteristic of the clique around him—as exemplified by the report that Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was using an autopen to place his signature on condolence letters to the families of the dead, rather than signing personally.

Bush, Rumsfeld & Co. reflect the attitudes of the degenerate financial aristocracy of which they are a part. The American ruling elite disposes of the fate of tens of millions of people, in the United States and around the world, with utter imperviousness to the intensity of human

suffering, death and destruction which its policies cause.

Perhaps the most illuminating commentaries on the South Asian catastrophe have appeared in articles in the financial press—*BusinessWeek* magazine, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, among others—and on the business pages of the daily press. This coverage has focused on a cold-blooded calculation of the economic impact of the earthquake and tsunami. On balance, these articles have concluded, the events of the past week were not all that important.

The *Financial Times* cited the estimate by Munich Re, the world's largest reinsurer, that tsunami-related damage will amount to \$14 billion, barely a tenth of the losses from the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan, which killed 5,000 people. "The main reason for the disparity is that the tsunami largely affected economically poor areas with little industry or infrastructure," the newspaper said.

The poverty of the population also means that little of the damage was insured, which will greatly reduce the losses to the world financial system. As one Singapore brokerage economist, interviewed in a business publication, commented, "It will be more of a story of human tragedy rather than economic costs."

There was even a "saving grace" in the calamity: "The disaster spared output at the big Arun liquefied natural gas plant on Sumatra," a huge facility operated by ExxonMobil Corp., which restored production within hours of the quake. Tankers bound for South Korea and Japan have resumed loading LNG and there will be no disruption in fuel supplies for the industrialized countries.

This is the deeper social meaning of Bush's slow and uncaring response to a disaster which took the lives of 150,000 people. While a few hundred million dollars are expended for disaster relief, this is dwarfed by the vast sums flowing through the financial centers of world capitalism. The year-end bonuses on Wall Street alone topped \$15.9 billion for 2004, more than the entire damage inflicted by the greatest natural disaster in decades.

The television coverage of this enormous tragedy has profoundly moved tens of millions of people around the world, provoking an outpouring of sympathy and charitable contributions. But from the ruling class of the United States, it evokes a collective yawn: those who died are, for the most part, marginal to the world economy, and there was not a great deal of money involved.



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