

Hurricane Katrina and the meaning of September 11

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September 11, 2005 marked the fourth anniversary of the worst terrorist attack in US history, with nearly 3,000 innocent people killed as a consequence of the hijacking of the four jetliners that destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon. It also marked two weeks since Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, causing the worst natural disaster in US history and revealing the unpreparedness of the US government at all levels, federal state and local, for a tragedy that was widely forecast and predicted.

According to the official mythology, September 11 “changed everything.” The policies, methods and structure of the US government had to be radically revised in the light of the terrorist attacks, to prosecute what the Bush administration called its “global war on terrorism.”

Nowhere was this mandate more evident than in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, a colossus whose principal task was ostensibly to coordinate federal efforts to prevent new terrorist attacks and intensive preparations to deal with the anticipated consequences of such catastrophes. The creation of the DHS was the principal initiative of congressional Democrats in response to the 9/11 attacks, later embraced by the Bush administration as well.

One of the 22 separate agencies which were combined in the formation of the DHS was the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which for two decades had had the main federal responsibility for dealing with natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes.

The performance of FEMA in Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding of New Orleans is a now-familiar litany of incompetence, indifference and virtual sabotage of preparations before the event and rescue and relief afterwards. FEMA Director Michael Brown was removed from direct supervision of the Gulf Coast operations Friday, sent back to Washington and replaced by a Coast Guard admiral, Thad V. Allen.

Brown is no more than a scapegoat for policies which effectively gutted the functioning of FEMA as a disaster-relief agency. The agency became a dumping ground for political hacks whose principal job qualification was previous service in the Bush election campaigns of 2000 and 2004.

Five of the top eight FEMA officials had little or no professional experience in managing emergency services or

disaster relief. Their prior occupations include lieutenant governor of Nebraska, lobbyist for the US Chamber of Commerce, television reporter, software marketing manager and director of judging for the Arabian Horse Association (Brown’s position before joining FEMA). Three of the five top officials for operations in natural disasters and nine of ten regional directors were working in an acting capacity—i.e., temporary appointments.

More than a year before the hurricane struck New Orleans, the union representing FEMA employees sent a letter to members of Congress warning that “emergency managers at FEMA have been supplanted on the job by politically connected contractors and by novice employees with little background or knowledge” of disaster management. The letter, cited by the *Los Angeles Times* September 9, added: “As ... professionalism diminishes, FEMA is gradually losing its ability to function and to help disaster victims.”

As one current (but for obvious reasons, unidentified) FEMA official told the *Washington Post*, in an extensive study of the failed response to Katrina published September 4, “It’s such an irony I hate to say it, but we have less capability today than we did on September 11.”

Democratic and Republican congressional leaders have begun to point to the contrast between the years of promises of preparedness for new terrorist attacks and the reality of New Orleans. Senator Susan Collins, the Maine Republican who chairs the Senate Homeland Security Committee, posed two questions in announcing public hearings on the Katrina disaster response: “If our system did such a poor job when there was no enemy, how would the federal, state and local governments have coped with a terrorist attack that provided no advance warning and that was intent on causing as much death and destruction as possible?... How is it possible that almost four years to the day after the attacks on our country, with billions of dollars spent to improve our preparedness, that a major area of our nation was so ill prepared to respond to a catastrophe?”

There is, however, a more fundamental issue which neither the US media nor the political establishment is prepared to address, let alone answer. The Bush administration’s performance in the Hurricane Katrina disaster cannot be dismissed as the result of shifting the focus of FEMA from

natural disasters to terrorism. Many of the tasks which FEMA was called on to perform after Hurricane Katrina would have been similar in the wake of a nuclear, chemical or biological attack. Scientists have compared the sheer physical force of the hurricane to the detonation of several atomic bombs over the Gulf Coast—although obviously without the radiation and burning. But the same needs for relief supplies, evacuation and emergency services would exist.

It is clear that, for all the political rhetoric about the “war on terror,” the Bush administration’s primary concern was not that the events of September 11, 2001 could be repeated within the borders of the United States. Instead, it seized on the killing of nearly 3,000 people as an all-purpose political pretext for initiatives which had no demonstrable connection to the events of 9/11—the war in Iraq, the passage of the USA Patriot Act, and an enormous buildup in the powers of the police/military apparatus over the lives of American citizens.

With the war in Iraq increasingly unpopular, the US economy stagnating, and his extreme-right political agenda deeply unpopular, Bush based his reelection campaign on an effort to scare the American people with the prospect of new terrorist attacks. Outside the main political base of the Republican Party in the Christian fundamentalist right, Bush appealed for votes almost exclusively on the basis of fear. But in terms of the actual preparations to relieve mass suffering if those fears were realized, the administration did little or nothing.

The most sinister interpretation of this inaction is that the Bush administration had good reason to believe that 9/11 was not likely to happen again. This would square with the mass of evidence suggesting the US government was aware of the preparations by Al Qaeda for a terrorist attack and even facilitated them by protecting many of the key hijack organizers from arrest.

Such is the clear implication of the recent revelations about Able Danger, a Pentagon data-mining project that reportedly identified four of the future hijackers, including Mohammed Atta, in 2000. The Pentagon unit was barred from supplying information about the four to the FBI, more than a year before the 9/11 attacks, and its identification of the future hijackers as Al Qaeda operatives working in the US was suppressed by the 9/11 commission, which made no mention of Able Danger in its report last year.

It is clear that the US government conceives of response to a mass casualty event not from the standpoint of humanitarian aid or saving lives, but as a threat to its own authority. Its principal concern in post-attack planning is how to preserve what is referred to in official terminology as “continuity of government”—maintaining the chain of military command, up to and including the commander-in-chief in the White House.

The government response to Hurricane Katrina has, in fact, demonstrated that the focus of so-called anti-terrorist preparations since 9/11 has been the working out and rehearsal of plans to impose martial law and military rule. That is why

when the massive dimensions of the hurricane’s impact became clear, the federal government had no serious plans in place to effectively respond, and turned to the only option that had been prepared—the military option.

One conclusion being drawn from Katrina is that longstanding restrictions on the use of the military within the United States should be scrapped. The *Los Angeles Times* reported Sunday that “the Bush administration was studying whether to expand the president’s powers to deploy the US military in natural disasters.”

White House counselor Dan Bartlett told the *Times* in an interview that the administration was reviewing whether federal troops could be given police powers. A top congressional Republican, Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner, has conducted closed-door meetings with Bush aides and military officials to discuss changes in the Posse Comitatus Act, which forbids the use of troops in domestic policing.

The events surrounding the Hurricane Katrina disaster have placed in sharp relief the calculated exploitation of the 9/11 bombings by the Bush administration, with the collaboration of the Democratic Party and the media, to vastly undermine democratic rights at home while pursuing a policy of unbridled militarism and war abroad. This is being carried out in the interests not of the American people, but rather of a financial aristocracy that controls all levers of political power and is embarked on a policy of global hegemony.

Four years after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the American working class must make a sober assessment of the vast changes that have been effected, and recognize that its basic rights are under threat as never before. The chasm between the wealthy few and the broad masses of the people has never been greater, and the international trajectory of the American ruling elite is leading toward ever more bloody military conflagrations.

It is necessary to draw the requisite conclusions: The working class must take its fate and that of humankind into its own hands, by establishing its political independence and embarking on a struggle for political power, to end the scourges of war, poverty and repression by reorganizing society on socialist foundations.



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