

Recovering New Orleans' dead subordinated to profit and politics

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One of the essential tasks in a disaster recovery operation—after evacuation and care for the living—is the removal of the dead. This is essential both to prevent the spread of disease and to identify the remains of those who were lost. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, however, federal and state authorities did not even begin the process for more than a week.

The delay in retrieving the bodies of Katrina's victims is one of the most telling examples of the indifference of the authorities to the massive human suffering caused by the disaster.

Incompetence and negligence—combined with contracting out the task to a private company—have resulted in a situation where bodies have been allowed to literally rot beyond recognition in the fetid flood waters that still cover large parts of New Orleans.

A major factor contributing to the delay in carrying out this grim task has been the Bush administration's concern about the impact that a rising body count will have on public opinion. Having already come under sharp criticism for the devastating consequences of its botched response to the hurricane, the administration sought to delay for as long as possible news and images of the bodies adding to the mounting death toll.

The ham-fisted attempt of the top military officer in New Orleans, Lt. Gen. Russel Honore, to block any news coverage of the recovery operation collapsed in the face of a legal challenge from the CNN cable television news network. Honore's claim that the principal concern was "dignity" was belied by the blatant failure to do anything to collect bodies that littered the city's streets in the previous days.

The operation was rendered even more sordid by bitter disputes between the local authorities, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the private contractor—Kenyon International Emergency

Services—over the terms of the commercial agreement struck for collecting corpses. Louisiana's Democratic Governor Kathleen Blanco and FEMA officials haggled for days with Kenyon over a business deal giving them exclusive rights to profits from body recovery.

The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* quoted David Passey, a spokesman for FEMA, telling the newspaper he "could not say why active-duty and National Guard soldiers have not been participating in the body collection process even though they constitute the largest relief personnel presence in the New Orleans area."

The paper also cites Ricardo Zuniga, another FEMA spokesman, who "said Monday that the agency's policy barred military and municipal police officers from touching the bodies, except to tag them and report their location to higher authorities."

Spokesmen for Kenyon have said the company arrived in Louisiana in early September, but did not begin working until September 7, and then only on the basis of an oral contract.

The company then threatened to leave, according to Blanco, when FEMA would not provide it with an acceptable written contract. Governor Blanco stepped in, signing a deal with the company, even though she insisted that it was FEMA's responsibility.

The fact that the sensitive and urgent task of retrieving victims' bodies is contracted out to a private corporation is itself testimony to the contempt for Katrina's victims. It is a prime example of how big business and its political representatives subordinate all aspects of social life to profit.

The operation was gripped by chaos as federal and local authorities conflicted over who was really in charge of signing the deal. In 1997, FEMA formed a working agreement with Kenyon to provide disaster

relief services, including mobile morgues and body recovery services, according to a company spokesman. Governor Blanco, too, said, “recovery of bodies is a FEMA responsibility.”

Yet, according to FEMA spokesman David Passey, “From the beginning, the state had indicated that it will collect the bodies.” He directly contradicted Blanco, saying, “The collection of bodies is not normally a FEMA responsibility.”

He claimed that Blanco’s administration had indicated it would take responsibility for the corpses, but then changed its mind, asking for federal assistance. FEMA, according to Passey, then brought in Kenyon on an oral contract on September 7, nine days after the hurricane, while it continued negotiations with company officials.

FEMA offered Kenyon a written contract, but the company rejected the deal. “It was a business decision,” said Bill Berry, a spokesman for Kenyon. The company began work with roughly 115 workers based on the oral contract, which had been set to expire Tuesday. Berry complained that FEMA made no arrangements with the company to help it retrieve bodies.

After Kenyon threatened to withdraw its workers from the disaster region on Monday, the state of Louisiana signed its own contract with the company on Tuesday. According to Reuters, “The contract between the company and the state’s Department of Health and Hospitals runs from September 12 to November 15 at a daily personnel rate of \$118,980, after a 10 percent discount. Kenyon also estimated expenses of around \$639,000 for the first 31 days of its mission, covering everything from body bags to trailers to laundry services for its staffers.” It will also provide for housing closer to New Orleans.

The company says it will increase its staff by the “tens and twenties, if not more,” from its current 115. If it had 150 workers in the area, that would amount to an average of nearly \$800 per employee per day, surely with the bulk of the funds going to company profits and salaries of top executives based in Houston, Texas. And this does not include expenses which will be charged to the state as the company deems fit.

Kenyon, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Service Corporation International (SCI)—which runs one of the largest chains of funeral homes in the country—worked

at the World Trade Center site in 2001 as well as in Thailand to retrieve Australian citizens after last year’s tsunami. It also had a contract with the United Nations in Baghdad in the initial stages of the war to provide “mortuary operations, family assistance and disposition of personal effects,” according its web site.

Based in Houston and publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange, SCI owns 1,500 funeral homes throughout North America, and has been a close political supporter of George W. Bush since his days as governor of Texas.

SCI has been implicated in multiple scandals—involving unlicensed embalmers, the digging up and dumping of bodies to clear space for new graves and more profits and the stuffing of bodies sent for cremation into sheds.

When the company came under investigation in Texas during Bush’s term as governor, an SCI employee threatened the lives of state regulators. Nonetheless, Bush defended its CEO, Robert Waltrip, helping to scuttle the probe.

The Texas legislature, whose members also received political contributions from SCI employees, passed a law overhauling the Texas Funeral Service Commission, the agency in charge of regulating the funeral industry, and the investigators lost their posts.

The controversy led to a lawsuit by the commission’s director against Bush, charging the then-Texas governor with obstructing a legal investigation and having her fired for refusing to go along.

Playing a prominent role in the scandal was Joe Allbaugh, then governor Bush’s chief of staff and later his first appointment as FEMA’s director. Currently, Allbaugh’s private firm is “helping coordinate the private-sector response to the storm,” according to the *Washington Post*.

One of Allbaugh’s top clients is Kellogg Brown & Root, a subsidiary of Halliburton (the company formerly run by Dick Cheney, the vice president), which is already profiting from reconstruction contracts in the Katrina disaster.



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