

As death toll in New Orleans mounts:

## What is the meaning of Bush's “responsibility?”

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As the official death toll from the Hurricane Katrina disaster pushed toward the 700 mark, President Bush delivered a carefully crafted remark to a White House press gathering Tuesday that translated the next day into newspaper headlines around the world reading, “Bush takes responsibility.”

In reality, he did no such thing. The US president's supposed “buck stops here” moment was yet another episode in his administration's long and despicable efforts to deceive the American people.

In the face of the US government's abject failure in responding to the Katrina catastrophe, Bush declared, “To the extent that the federal government didn't fully do its job right, I take responsibility,” adding that he wanted “to know what went right and what went wrong.”

He then went on to declare that he would “defend the people who are on the front line of saving lives.” This is a variation on the “support the troops” propaganda campaign aimed at intimidating opposition to the criminal war that is claiming soldiers' lives. Now the US president will try to wrap himself in the mantle of the grim recovery effort in New Orleans, the better to hide the blame his own policies bear for a sizeable number of the bloated corpses rescuers are having to fish out of the city's fetid waters.

Bush's exceedingly half-hearted and conditional acceptance of responsibility means precisely nothing. It is part of a public relations campaign mounted by White House advisor Karl Rove in an effort to shift the public discussion of New Orleans away from burning questions raised by the disaster.

First and foremost these are the immense gulf between wealth and poverty exposed by the devastation of New Orleans and the gross indifference, negligence and incompetence of the government when it comes to defending the lives of ordinary Americans or alleviating their suffering.

What does it mean to “take responsibility?” The State of Louisiana has provided one definition by bringing criminal

charges of negligent homicide against the owners of a nursing home where 34 patients drowned in the flooding.

“They were warned repeatedly that this storm was coming,” declared Charles Foti, Louisiana's attorney general. “In effect, their inaction resulted in the deaths of these people.”

As horrible as are the deaths of these 34 elderly people, helpless to flee the flood waters that quickly rose over them, they are hardly the only ones.

In the nearby Memorial Medical Center, there are the bodies of at least 45 patients, most of whom apparently died in the brutal heat while waiting for a rescue that failed to come for days. There are the dozens more bodies pulled out of the Superdome and the Convention Center, where tens of thousands were left without food, water or medicine waiting for a long delayed evacuation. And there are hundreds if not thousands more corpses still to be recovered from the city's flooded streets and homes.

Whatever the guilt or innocence of the nursing home owners, the state attorney general's words—“They were warned repeatedly that this storm was coming. In effect their inaction resulted in the deaths of these people”—serve just as well as an indictment of the Bush White House. There are unassailable political and moral grounds—whatever the strictly legal ones—for trying the president of the United States and top government officials for negligent homicide.

Such was the indifference of the president to the horrors inflicted upon the working class and poor people left stranded in New Orleans—an aspect of his criminal negligence—that his staff members had to record news reports of the disaster onto a DVD and insist that he look at them, *Newsweek* magazine reported.

“How the president of the United States could have even less ‘situational awareness,’ as they say in the military, than the average American about the worst natural disaster in a century—is one of the more perplexing and troubling chapters in a story that, despite moments of heroism and acts of great

generosity, ranks as a national disgrace,” *Newsweek* declared.

The fleeting and muted acceptance of responsibility by Bush represented merely a tactical retreat from the propaganda campaign pushed by the administration just the day before. This consisted of cautioning against pursuing a “blame game” in response to the disaster, all the while attempting to shift as much blame as possible onto state and local officials.

Even after the White House statement, the president’s political and media supporters are continuing this cynical approach. The White House clearly felt, however, that it was no longer tenable for the president himself.

The evidence against the administration is overwhelming. Its claims that Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco failed to make a timely request for aid from the federal government have been thoroughly debunked by the non-partisan Congressional Research Service.

The agency issued a report this week finding that the governor had made just such a request on August 27, nearly two days before the hurricane made landfall. In it she warned that “the incident is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the State and affected local governments and that supplementary Federal assistance is necessary to save lives...”

Meanwhile, a Knight-Ridder report reviewing internal government memos found that Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff—not the hapless and incompetent scapegoat, FEMA chief Michael Brown—was responsible for organizing a national response to the disaster.

“Even before the storm struck the Gulf Coast,” the article states, “Chertoff could have ordered federal agencies into action without any request from state or local officials.”

It was only on Aug. 30, fully 36 hours after the hurricane had hit, and with New Orleans under water, that Chertoff issued a memo declaring Katrina an “Incident of National Significance” and handing over authority to Brown. The memo, the Knight Ridder article states, indicates that Chertoff was “confused about his lead role in disaster response.”

The head of Homeland Security was “confused” about his role? This is an administration that has justified its entire political agenda of aggressive war abroad and assaults on the social conditions and democratic rights of the American people at home with the claim that it is all part of its preoccupation with their safety. All of this stands exposed as a criminal fraud.

In the words of Louisiana’s top prosecutor, “They were warned repeatedly” and “their inaction resulted in the deaths” of still uncounted hundreds and thousands of people.

For Bush to really take responsibility for what is seen

throughout the world as an abomination would require an independent investigation of the New Orleans disaster leading to the criminal prosecution of the president and other top officials. Such a probe would have to examine not only the actions—or rather inaction—of the White House and top officials, but also the policies of social deprivation and cutbacks in funding for both disaster relief and flood protection that have been pursued by the administration, as well as its predecessors, for many years.

The political establishment in the US will obviously mount no such investigation. The Republican-controlled Senate Wednesday voted down even a timid half-measure proposed by Senator Hillary Clinton (Democrat-New York), which called for a 9/11-style commission—a prescription for another blue-ribbon whitewash.

The Democratic Party has no interest in really pursuing the issues raised by New Orleans any more than it wished to wage a fight over the administration’s launching of a war based on lies in Iraq. In both cases, its principal concern, like that of the Republicans, is defending the interests of the ruling financial elite and suppressing any challenge from below.

Significantly, Senator Mary Landrieu, the Louisiana Democrat who had sharply criticized both the abysmal federal response and the underhanded attempt to blame the state’s officials, welcomed Bush’s “responsibility” remark.

“The president’s comments today will do more to move our country forward from this tragedy than anything that has been said by any leader in the past two weeks,” Landrieu said. “Accountability at every level is critical and leadership begins at the top.”

No one has been held accountable for anything. The Democrats, like the Republicans, are anxious to “move forward from this tragedy,” i.e., sweep it under the rug, because it has exposed an immense social crisis and an explosive class divide that threatens the stability of the two-party system and American capitalism itself.



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