

Bush's vision for New Orleans: a profiteer's paradise

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16 September 2005

Striding across a deserted field to a podium in Jackson Square, a landmark in a desolate city, President George W. Bush addressed the nation Thursday night in a rare nationally televised prime-time speech.

The very fact of the speech was indicative of a growing fear not only within the Bush administration, but within the American ruling elite as a whole, that the squandered lives and national humiliation resulting from the government's failure to respond to Hurricane Katrina was a defining event—one that threatened to fuel popular opposition to the entire social and political system.

Bush himself, the epitome of the backwardness and indifference of the American establishment, was among the last to recognize that something major had occurred, with ominous implications for the financial aristocracy whose interests he serves.

This sense of crisis and foreboding largely accounts for the rhetorical sops Bush threw out to the victims of the government's neglect and the millions more horrified by the display of contempt for the lives of ordinary people—the talk of “outrage,” the fleeting mention of poverty, racism and inequality, the “I am responsible” refrain.

These flourishes were for mass consumption—and deception. The substance of the speech was a series of signals to Wall Street and corporate America that not even the destruction of a major city will alter the very policies that produced the debacle. The centerpiece of the so-called recovery plan announced by Bush was the creation of a Gulf Opportunity Zone, encompassing parts of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

“Within this zone,” Bush said, “we should provide immediate incentives for job-creating investment, tax relief for small businesses, incentives to businesses to create jobs, and loans and loan guarantees for small businesses, including minority-owned enterprises, to get them up and running again.”

In other words, the new city that rises out of the flood waters of New Orleans will be a showplace for the unfettered exploitation of workers, who will be stripped of

protections such as the Davis Bacon Act, which requires federally subsidized construction projects to pay prevailing wage rates, while companies that secure government contracts will get huge windfalls in the form of tax cuts and other handouts.

“It is entrepreneurship that creates jobs and opportunity,” Bush continued, “it is entrepreneurship that helps break the cycle of poverty, and we will take the side of entrepreneurs as they lead the economic revival of the Gulf region.”

With these euphemisms Bush reaffirmed the program of deregulation, privatization and the gutting of all government controls over corporate profit-making that has played a central role over nearly three decades, under Democratic as well as Republican administrations, in starving the country's infrastructure and making virtually inevitable the type of disaster that engulfed the Gulf Coast.

On this basis, trillions of dollars have been transferred, through tax cuts and the destruction of social programs, from the working class and poor to the wealthy, creating unprecedented social inequality and turning the country into a plutocracy. Bush's prescription for addressing the Katrina disaster was a bigger dose of the same medicine that produced the catastrophe in the first place.

Corporate profiteering from the disaster is only the tip of the iceberg. Bush's allies in the Republican-controlled Congress are urging that reconstruction be accompanied by measures limiting victims' right to sue, establishing school vouchers, lifting restrictions on federal funds for religious groups, suspending environmental regulations on new oil refineries, waiving the estate tax, and enacting a flat tax. “The desire to bring conservative, free-market ideas to the Gulf Coast is white hot,” said Representative Mike Pence of Indiana.

Bush repeatedly signaled in his speech that there would be no federally run and nationally coordinated program to rebuild the Gulf Coast, much less address the conditions of poverty and decaying infrastructure that exist throughout the country. He spoke of the federal government as a “partner” with state and local authorities. But the planning would be

left up to “Governor Barbour, Governor Blanco, Mayor Nagin and other state and local leaders” who would have the “primary role in planning for their own future.”

He even insisted that the “engineering decisions” for improving New Orleans’ flood protection system would be made locally. As though the complex task of erecting a system of levees and other barriers to protect against flooding from the Mississippi, a river that traverses a series of states and much of the center of the country, can be carried out in piecemeal fashion.

This rejection of “big government” applies, however, only to those federal functions left over from the past that have to do with protecting the physical and economic security of working people. When it comes to maintaining law and order and protecting the property of the wealthy, however, Bush is emphatically in favor of federal power and the use of military force.

Acknowledging that “the system, at every level of government, was not well coordinated, and was overwhelmed in the first few days,” Bush concluded: “It is now clear that a challenge on this scale requires greater federal authority and a broader role for the armed forces—the institution of our government most capable of massive logistical operations on a moment’s notice.”

Thus the failure of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Homeland Security Department in Hurricane Katrina is used as the justification for making the military takeover of New Orleans a precedent for future and broader exercises in martial law. The posse comitatus law, Bush implied, which bars the military from domestic policing, must be weakened or repealed outright.

One of the lies exposed by the Katrina disaster was that the Homeland Security Department and the other measures adopted under the banner of the “war on terrorism” were motivated by a desire to protect the American people. The gutting of FEMA and the lack of any serious planning by the Homeland Security Department for a major natural disaster revealed that the entire concentration in the four years since 9/11 has been on preparing the military to defend the state and the ruling elite by means of martial law and mass repression.

When Bush mobilized the military to occupy New Orleans, he at first demanded that the state’s National Guard be placed under federal control. In so doing he was clearly seeking to implement plans for martial law that had been worked out and rehearsed. Now he is suggesting that such steps be legitimized and sanctioned in advance.

There is a close connection between the cheap-labor, super-exploitation “Gulf Opportunity Zone” Bush proposes and his call for more authority to deploy the military in the nation’s cities. The former means a further decline in the

living standards of the working class and even greater social inequality; the latter indicates how the ruling class plans to deal with the social opposition that will inevitably result.

Sprinkled throughout Bush’s speech were the inevitable invocations of God. This served not only to satisfy the Christian fundamentalist core of Bush’s political base, but also to reassure Republican congressmen and the media that there would be no retreat from the basic right-wing framework of his administration’s policies.

At the same time, he made a point of praising the joint fund-raising efforts of the senior George Bush and ex-president Bill Clinton, pointing thereby to the fundamental consensus of both parties of American big business.

As for the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the hurricane, there was no commitment to provide them with homes and jobs in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, reimburse them for their losses, and make them whole. Nor was there any acknowledgment that poverty and inequality are national issues—not a peculiarity of New Orleans.

Hurricane Katrina exposed before the American people and before the world the ugly truths about American society: the pervasiveness of poverty, the staggering concentration of wealth, the crumbling infrastructure, the gutting of government agencies responsible for protecting the people. Bush’s speech underscored the utter inability of the existing economic and political system to address these questions.

The political and social forces responsible for the destruction of New Orleans cannot be entrusted with its reconstruction. They can produce nothing other than a monstrosity—a testament to greed and exploitation.

The massive allocation of resources required to end the blight of poverty, provide decent jobs, housing, education and medical care, and restore the country’s infrastructure is impossible under a system in which all social needs are subordinated to the private accumulation of wealth and corporate profit.

The advanced planning required to meet the needs of a mass and complex society conflicts with the inherent anarchy of the capitalist market.

To marshal and deploy the necessary resources on the basis of a rational plan geared to the needs of the people, the private ownership and control of the means of production must be ended and replaced with public ownership under the democratic control of the working people, that is, with a planned socialist economy.



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