

Hurricane Katrina's aftermath: from natural disaster to national humiliation

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The catastrophe that is unfolding in New Orleans and on the Gulf coast of Mississippi has been transformed into a national humiliation without parallel in the history of the United States.

The scenes of intense human suffering, hopelessness, squalor, and neglect amidst the wreckage of what was once New Orleans have exposed the rotten core of American capitalist society before the eyes of the entire world—and, most significantly, before those of its own stunned people.

The reactionary mythology of America as the “Greatest Country in the World” has suffered a shattering blow.

Hurricane Katrina has laid bare the awful truths of contemporary America—a country torn by the most intense class divisions, ruled by a corrupt plutocracy that possesses no sense either of social reality or public responsibility, in which millions of its citizens are deemed expendable and cannot depend on any social safety net or public assistance if disaster, in whatever form, strikes.

Washington's response to this human tragedy has been one of gross incompetence and criminal indifference. People have been left to literally die in the streets of a major American city without any assistance for four days. Images of suffering and degradation that resemble the conditions in the most impoverished Third World countries are broadcast daily with virtually no visible response from the government of a country that concentrates the greatest share of wealth in the world.

The storm that breached the levees of New Orleans has also revealed all of the horrific implications of 25 years' worth of uninterrupted social and political reaction. The real results of the destruction of essential social services, the dismantling of government agencies entrusted with alleviating poverty and coping with disasters, and the ceaseless nostrums about the “free market” magically resolving the problems of modern society have been exposed before millions.

With at least 100,000 people trapped in a city without power, water or food and threatened with the spread of disease and death, the government has proven incapable of establishing the most elementary framework of logistical organization. It has failed to even evacuate the critically ill from public hospitals, much less provide basic medical assistance to the many thousands placed in harm's way by the disaster.

What was the government's response to the natural catastrophe that threatened New Orleans? It amounted to betting that the storm would go the other way, followed by a policy of “every man for himself.” Residents of the city were told to evacuate, while the tens of thousands without transportation or too poor to travel were left to their

fate.

Now crowds of thousands of hungry and homeless people have been reduced to chanting “we need help” as bodies accumulate in the streets. Washington's inability to mount and coordinate basic rescue operations will unquestionably add to a death toll that is already estimated in the thousands.

The government's callous disregard for the human suffering, its negligence in failing to prepare for this disaster and, above all, its utter incompetence have staggered even the compliant American media.

Patriotic blather about the country coming together to deal with the crisis combined with efforts to poison public opinion by vilifying those without food or water for “looting” have fallen flat in face of the undeniable and monumental debacle that constitutes the official response to the disaster.

Reporters sent into the devastated region have been reduced to tears by the masses of people crying out for help with no response. Television announcers cannot help but wonder aloud why the authorities have failed so miserably to alleviate such massive human suffering.

The presidency, the Congress and both the Republican and Democratic parties—all have displayed an astounding lack of concern for the hundreds of thousands of people whose lives have been shattered and who face the most daunting and uncertain future, not to mention the tens of millions more who will be hard hit by the economic aftershocks of Katrina.

In the figure of the president, George W. Bush, the incompetence, stupidity, and sheer inhumanity that characterize so much of America's money-mad corporate elite find their quintessentially repulsive expression.

As the hurricane developed over two weeks in the Caribbean and slowly approached the coast of New Orleans and Mississippi, Bush amused himself at his ranch retreat in Crawford, Texas. It is now clear that his administration made no serious preparations to deal with the dangers posed by the approaching storm.

In an interview Thursday on the “Good Morning America” television program, Bush reprised his miserable performance of the previous day, adding to Wednesday's banalities the declaration that there would be “zero tolerance” for looters.

The president blanched when ABC interviewer Dianne Sawyer asked about a suggestion that the major oil companies be forced to cede a share of the immense windfall profits they have reaped from rising prices over the past six months to fund disaster relief. He responded by counseling the American people to “send cash” to charitable organizations.

In other words, there will be no serious financial commitment from

the government to save lives, care for the sick and needy, and help the displaced and bereft restore their lives. Nor will there be any national, centrally financed and organized program to rebuild one of the country's most important cities—a city that is uniquely associated with some of the most critical cultural achievements in music and the arts of the American people.

Above all, the suffering of millions will not be allowed to impinge on the profit interests of a tiny elite of multi-millionaires whose interests the government defends.

Later in the day, Bush described the aftermath of the flood as a “temporary disturbance.”

The ruthless attitude of those in power toward the average poor and working class residents of New Orleans was summed up Thursday by Republican House Speaker Dennis Hastert, who declared “it doesn't make sense” to spend tax dollars to rebuild New Orleans. “It looks like a lot of that place could be bulldozed,” he said.

While Hastert was forced to backtrack from these chilling remarks, they have a definite political logic. To rebuild the lives that have been ravaged by Hurricane Katrina would require mounting a massive government effort that would run counter to the entire thrust of a national policy based upon privatization and the transfer of wealth to the rich that has for decades been pursued by both major parties.

Can anyone truly believe that the current administration and its Democratic accomplices in Congress are going to launch a serious program to construct low-cost housing, rebuild schools and provide jobs for the hundreds of thousands left unemployed by the destruction?

Congress has been virtually silent on the catastrophe in the south. It has nothing to say, having voted to support Bush's extreme right-wing agenda of massive tax cuts for the rich, huge outlays for war in Iraq and Afghanistan and an ever-expanding Pentagon budget, and billions to finance the Homeland Security Department.

The millionaires club in the Capitol is well aware that it voted to slash funding for elementary infrastructure needs—including urgently recommended improvements in outmoded and inadequate Gulf Coast anti-hurricane and anti-flood systems.

The Democratic Party has, as always, offered no opposition. Indeed, the president was gratified to be able to announce that former Democratic president Bill Clinton would resume his road show with the president's father, the former Republican president, touring the stricken regions and drumming up support for charitable donations. In this way the Democratic Party has signaled its solidarity with the White House and the Republican policy against any serious federal financial commitment to help the victims and rebuild the devastated regions.

The decisive components of the present tragedy are social and political, not natural. The American ruling elite has for the past three decades been dismantling whatever forms of government regulation and social welfare had been instituted in the preceding period. The present catastrophe is the terrible product of this social and political retrogression.

The lessons derived from past natural and economic calamities—from the deadly floods of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the dust bowl and Depression of the 1930s—have been repudiated and derided by a ruling elite driven by the crisis of its profit system to subordinate ever more ruthlessly all social concerns to the extraction of profit and accumulation of personal wealth.

Franklin Roosevelt—an astute and relatively far-sighted

representative of his class—had to drag the American ruling elite as a whole kicking and screaming behind a program of social reforms whose basic purpose was to save the capitalist system from the threat of social revolution. Even during his presidency, the large-scale projects in government-funded and controlled social development, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, never became a model for broader measures to alleviate poverty and social inequality. The contradictions and requirements of an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and production for profit resulted in any further projects being shelved.

From the 1970s onward, as the crisis of American capitalism has deepened, the US ruling elite has attacked the entire concept of social reform and dismantled the previously established restrictions on corporate activities.

The result has been a non-stop process of social plunder, producing an unprecedented concentration of wealth at the apex of society and a level of social inequality exceeding that which prevailed in the days of the Robber Barons.

Fraud, the worst forms of speculation and criminality have become pervasive within the upper echelons of American society. This is the underlying reality that has suddenly revealed itself, precipitated by a hurricane, in the form of a collapse of the most elementary forms of social life.

The political establishment and the corporate elite have been exposed as bankrupt, together with their ceaseless insistence that the unfettered development of capitalism is the solution to all of society's problems.

The catastrophe unleashed by Katrina has unmistakably revealed that America is two countries, one for the wealthy and privileged and another in which the vast majority of working people stand on the edge of a social precipice.

All of the claims that the war on Iraq, the “global war on terrorism” and the supposed concern for “homeland security” are aimed at protecting the American people stand revealed as lies. The utter failure to protect the residents of New Orleans exposes all of these claims as propaganda designed to mask the criminality of the American ruling elite and the diversion of resources away from the most essential needs of the people.

The central lesson of New Orleans is that the elementary requirements of mass society are incompatible with a system that subordinates everything to the enrichment of a financial oligarchy.

This lesson must become the new point of departure in the political orientation of the struggles of American working people. Only the development of a new independent political movement, fighting for the reorganization of economic life on the basis of a socialist program, can provide a way out of the chaos of which the events in New Orleans are a terrible omen.



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