

As hurricane disaster mounts, Bush scapegoats state, local officials

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The Bush administration has set out to shift attention from its own responsibility for the enormous damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. With the federal government coming under increasing criticism for its shocking display of indifference and negligence, the White House is seeking to transfer blame onto the backs of local and state authorities.

In his weekly radio address on Saturday, delivered live from the White House Rose Garden, Bush sought to focus blame on state and local governments for failing to deal with the hurricane's aftermath. "The magnitude of responding to a crisis over a disaster area that is larger than the size of Great Britain," he said, "has created tremendous problems that have strained state and local capabilities. The result is that many of our citizens simply are not getting the help they need, especially in New Orleans. And that is unacceptable."

Bush's remarks echoed an earlier statement he made while in Biloxi, Mississippi. "I am satisfied with the response" of the federal government, he said. "I'm not satisfied with the results." In other words, he and his administration bear no responsibility for the deaths of thousands of people, left to drown, starve or expire for lack of water and medical care for days on end after the hurricane hit and levees broke—a catastrophic scenario about which many warnings had been issued, only to be ignored by Washington.

The plight of the tens of thousands trapped in the flood, not to mention the hundreds of thousands more who escaped but lost their homes and jobs, is, in fact, entirely bound up with the systematic gutting of emergency relief agencies and systems, compounded by the huge diversion of resources and manpower to prosecute the war in Iraq. And the lack of any coordinated federal response once New Orleans was flooded and nearby Gulf Coast towns were ravaged has made it clear that no serious rescue and relief preparations were made in the days preceding the hurricane's impact, when the massive storm was headed toward the region.

But, according to Bush and other administration officials, the blame for the catastrophe lies elsewhere.

In his radio address, Bush went on to say that the "federal government will do its part" in responding to the disaster. In other words, the federal government is only one of many agencies with responsibility—along with state and local authorities, private charities and the "private sector."

Despite all the criticisms of federal inaction, and despite enormous public anger, such language is carefully chosen to signal that the administration will not allow the hurricane's devastation to shift its basic social policy, which is based on privatization, deregulation and dismantling of any semblance of a social safety net. There will be no coordinated or serious federal recovery effort to provide decent jobs, new homes, schools or other social necessities to those whose lives

have been destroyed. Whatever reconstruction takes place in New Orleans and towns such as Biloxi, Mississippi will be geared to the profit interests of corporations and big investors.

On Saturday US Labor Secretary Elaine Chao announced that the government would spend a paltry \$60 million to provide a mere 10,000 temporary jobs for workers who have been forced to evacuate the area. There were 600,000 non-farm jobs in the New Orleans metropolitan area, almost all of which have disappeared. The US is currently spending upwards of \$200 million a day on the war in Iraq.

The president's attempt to shift blame onto the states and localities is part of a broader campaign by administration officials. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said on Saturday that the federal government was unable to respond more quickly in part because "our constitutional system really places the primary authority in each state with the governor."

Michael Brown, the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a part of the Homeland Security Department and the agency tasked with responding to natural disasters, pinned the blame on the mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, for failing to evacuate the city on time. "If the mayor does not have the resources to get the poor, elderly, and disabled, those who cannot, out," he said, "or if he does not even have police capacity to enforce the mandatory evacuation, to make people leave, then you end up with the kind of situation we have right now in New Orleans."

According to an article in Sunday's *Washington Post*, the administration is also seeking to secure federal control over local police and National Guard troops. The newspaper reported, "Louisiana officials rejected the request after talks throughout the night, concerned that such a move would be comparable to a federal declaration of martial law. Some officials in the state suspected a political motive behind the request." The newspaper quoted an unnamed state official as noting, "Quite frankly, if they'd been able to pull off taking it away from the locals, they then could have blamed everything on the locals."

While state and local officials are far from blameless in failing to prepare for the hurricane, the main reason that residents have remained stranded for such a long period of time is that the federal government took days to respond to the crisis. An editorial in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* attacked the government's failure to act, noting, "Despite the city's multiple points of entry, our nation's bureaucrats spent days after last week's hurricane wringing their hands, lamenting the fact that they could neither rescue the city's stranded victims nor bring them food, water and medical supplies. Meanwhile there were journalists, including some who work for the *Times-Picayune*, going in and out of the city."

The statements by administration officials have been accompanied by continued attempts to suggest that no one could have prepared for the hurricane. Chertoff said on Saturday that the combination of a hurricane and the breach of New Orleans' levee system was a "perfect storm" that "exceeded the foresight of the planners, and maybe anybody's foresight." He added that the disaster was "breathtaking in its surprise."

Bush made a similar claim on Wednesday, saying, "I don't believe that anyone could have foreseen the breach of the levees." In fact, it has long been known that a category four or stronger hurricane would overpower the levees and lead to massive flooding. Computer models predicted tens of thousands of deaths, but nothing was done to prepare for the event.

In making these statements, Chertoff is in part attempting to cover for the responsibility of his own Homeland Security Department in undermining the ability of the federal government to respond to natural disasters. FEMA became part of the Department of Homeland Security when the latter organization was created in 2002. Over the past three years, FEMA's response capacity has been eroded by underfunding and neglect. The agency has focused almost entirely on attacking democratic rights and beefing up the military-police apparatus of the state on the pretext of waging a "war on terrorism."

The *Washington Post* on Sunday quoted a veteran FEMA official as saying, "We have less capacity today than we did on September 11... We've lost a lot of what we were able to do then." The *Post* noted that Bush allies such as former FEMA head Joe Allbaugh and current FEMA head Michael Brown "were critical of FEMA's natural disaster focus and lectured senior managers about the need to adjust to the post-9/11 fear of terrorism." The newspaper quoted the unnamed veteran FEMA official: "Allbaugh's quote was 'You don't get it.' If you brought up natural disasters, you were accused of being a pre-9/11 thinker."

The Bush administration's campaign of political damage-control comes amidst increasingly ominous indications of the high toll of death, destruction and misery in New Orleans and surrounding areas. Administration officials have begun sounding warnings in an attempt to prepare public reaction. "We need to prepare the country for what's coming" Chertoff said on the television program "Fox News Sunday." "We are going to uncover people who died, maybe hiding in houses, got caught by the flood... It is going to be about as ugly a scene as I think you can imagine."

The death toll is expected to number in the thousands, and perhaps the tens of thousands. In New Orleans, one morgue at St. Gabriel prison alone is preparing for 1,000 to 2,000 bodies. Mayor Nagin said on Saturday that city officials were preparing to send refrigerated trucks through the city to collect bodies. He suggested that there may be too many bodies to bury them all, and instead they would be cremated.

According to most reports, some 42,000 people had been removed from emergency shelters and evacuated from New Orleans by Saturday. Officials estimated that a similar number remain to be evacuated, but it is not clear where these individuals are. Pre-hurricane estimates suggested that somewhere between 100,000 and 140,000 or more people would not be able to comply with, or would not heed, evacuation orders.

Even according to government estimates of the number of people left to be evacuated, this leaves anywhere between 18,000 and 58,000 people unaccounted for. An unknown number of people have been stranded on roofs or in attics for days without food or water. How

many have drowned? How many have died in the past five days of dehydration, heat exhaustion or from other causes? At this point it is impossible to know.

An unknown number of dead were also left in the Superdome, where thousands of residents spent days in hellish conditions as they waited for a way to leave the city. A National Guardsman refused entry to one Reuters photographer, saying "it doesn't need to be seen, it's a make-shift morgue in there. We're not letting anyone in there anymore. If you want to take pictures of dead bodies, go to Iraq."

It is likely that there have been enormous casualties in parts of Mississippi and Louisiana that have yet to be searched by rescue workers. The hurricane actually passed slightly to the east of New Orleans, striking most directly parts of a peninsula jutting into the Gulf of Mexico.

An indication of the damage in these areas came with the discovery of the devastation of the small town of Chalmette, which is home mainly to fishing and oil workers. Perhaps hundreds have died in that town alone.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported on Sunday, "Sheriff Jack Stephens said 31 residents of a nursing home died in their sleep when the floodwaters filled the facility. The bodies of another 21 residents of a subdivision were found tied together, presumably as a way to stay together during the flooding."

Chalmette Fire Chief Tommy Stone lashed out at the rescue effort of the federal and state governments. "I want the world to know that federal and state help did not show up here right away," he said.

Also on Saturday, Bush announced that he was sending 7,200 additional active duty troops to New Orleans—2,200 from the Army's 82nd Airborne, 2,700 from the 1st Calvary Division and 2,000 from the Marines. According to federal law, these troops cannot be used for domestic law enforcement. However, a Bush spokesman left open the possibility that the administration would override the law by declaring an emergency.

Handling the tens of thousands of residents remaining in the city is being treated mainly as a military operation. On September 2, the *Army Times* quoted Brigadier General Gary Jones, commander of the Louisiana National Guard's Joint Task Force, as warning, "This place is going to look like Little Somalia. We're going to go out and take this city back. This will be a combat operation to get this city under control."

On Sunday afternoon there were reports that police shot eight people allegedly carrying guns in New Orleans, killing five or six of them.



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