

As Katrina's toll emerges

US ruling elite rejects policy shift to confront disaster

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Even as the horrifying toll from the catastrophe that has struck New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast emerges ever more starkly, America's ruling elite is expressing its determination that the immense suffering not be allowed to impinge on its own self-enrichment.

With the partial receding of floodwaters that have covered the city of half a million, the grim evidence of Katrina's murderous impact is surfacing in the form of bloated and decomposing corpses. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin warned over the weekend that "it wouldn't be unreasonable to have 10,000 dead" in the city.

Among the tragic discoveries were the bodies of 22 people who drowned after lashing themselves together to a pole in the Bernard Parish village of Violet, just east of New Orleans, in what was apparently an effort to avoid being swept away by the rising waters of the Mississippi River.

The New Orleans *Times Picayune* Tuesday quoted National Guard troops who spoke of some 40 bodies stored in the uncooled freezer of the city's Convention Center, many of them people who had died while waiting in vain for the long delayed rescue operation.

"The scene of rotting bodies inside the Convention Center reflected those in thousands of businesses, schools, homes and shelters across the metropolitan area," the newspaper reported.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who heads the agency that failed so miserably in preparing for or responding to the hurricane disaster, expressed the concern within the administration over the continuing political impact of the horrors emerging from New Orleans.

"We need to prepare the country for what is coming," he declared on the "Fox News Sunday" television program. "We are going to uncover people who died in the houses, maybe got caught in the floods. It is going to be as ugly a scene as any you can imagine."

Meanwhile, the disaster has left more than a million people homeless, with no national plan for providing them with either emergency aid or new housing. These dispossessed victims include not only the hundreds of thousands of people evacuated to shelters, but many hundreds of thousands more who were able to flee to safety, but have since seen their bank accounts emptied by motel and food bills.

Addressing the needs created by this natural disaster—which was immensely compounded by the utter failure of the government to prepare for or alleviate it—would require the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars for the construction of low-cost housing, the creation of decent jobs, the organization of social services and the rebuilding and reinforcement of the region's flood control system.

The financial oligarchy that rules America has no intention of mounting such an effort. Its spokesmen increasingly suggest that much of the city be simply bulldozed and its residents—particularly the city's predominantly poor and black population—be scattered to the winds.

Meanwhile, major oil corporations as well as construction giants such as Halliburton are seeking to reap windfall profits from the destruction.

The concerns of this ruling layer were spelled out Tuesday in an editorial published by the *Wall Street Journal*, whose editorial board enjoys the closest political relations with the right-wing Republican elements who dominate the Bush administration.

Titled "Bush and Katrina," the editorial warned against the Bush administration bowing to the growing outrage over its handling of the disaster and allowing itself to be shifted from its political agenda. Forced, like many Republicans, to acknowledge "the obvious initial failure of the Department of Homeland Security in its first big post-9/11 test," the newspaper nevertheless urged Bush to "reassert presidential leadership" by rejecting any significant relief operation.

"Clearly there is an issue of how much federal money to pour into a city that is below sea-level and would still be vulnerable to another Category Four or Five storm," the *Journal* wrote. It derided the "impulse to throw money at everything."

Instead, the newspaper proposed that the White House seize on the desperate problems facing the people who have lost everything in New Orleans and other areas on the Gulf Coast as a pretext for throwing even more money to the rich!

"An alternative would be to name the entire stricken area an enterprise zone for some period of time, which would offer both tax incentives and regulatory waivers to stimulate investment," the editorial declared. "There's a danger here of tax breaks for floating casinos, but the greater risk is spending \$20 billion or more solely on the priorities of local politicians."

The real danger seen by the *Journal*, which speaks for Wall Street and the super-rich, is the draining of profits from big business to ameliorate the desperate conditions of the hurricane's survivors.

Instead, the disaster, like the war in Iraq before it, is viewed as an opportunity to reap even bigger windfalls for select corporations. Thus, the newspaper demanded that the shutdown of oil facilities in the Gulf be utilized to "remove obstacles to more oil and natural gas drilling."

Finally, the editorial advised the administration reject any criticism of tax cuts and budget reductions that transfer funds from social services—and flood control—into the personal portfolios of the American plutocracy.

"Economic leadership also means instructing Americans on the link between tax cutting and the economic vitality needed to fund both Katrina relief and the war on terror," the *Journal* stated. It added, "Republicans have been far too defensive on tax cuts, and Katrina is an opening to explain their necessity and to push for making them permanent."

The immediate catalyst for this argument was no doubt the decision by the Senate to remove from the top of its agenda a debate on the proposed permanent repeal of the estate tax, a measure that affects only the top 3

percent of all inheritances—those worth \$7 million nor more.

Under conditions in which US newspapers and television screens are filled with images of the many hundreds of thousands of working and poor people who have lost everything, the concentration of the Senate's efforts on legislation that would benefit only a tiny fraction of the population at the very top of the social pyramid was perceived by the Republican leadership in the Senate as too provocative.

The repeal of this tax—further depriving the government of funds for relief efforts—has been merely postponed to a more politically opportune time.

The decision was taken on the advice of the Democrats. The Senate's Democratic Minority Leader Senator Harry Reid of Nevada had warned the Republican leadership to shelve the measure. "It doesn't look right," he said Monday.

As has happened so many times before, the Democratic Party has stepped in to play its role as a critical prop for the administration, helping to conceal the real implications of its policies. Prominent Democratic leaders have come forward to aid Bush by deflecting and suppressing attempts to raise political criticism or broader social issues.

Chief among these is former President Bill Clinton, who has established close personal ties with the Bush family. Clinton's appearance with President Bush and former president George H.W. Bush is a declaration of political solidarity between the two parties of big business. In an attempt to divert attention from the inaction of the federal government, Clinton and the elder Bush have begun a campaign to collect donations from private individuals.

Appearing together with the former president Bush, who has repeatedly denounced attempts to play the "blame game," Clinton said Monday, "I think there should be an analysis of what happened. The time to do that is after some time passes."

In an earlier interview with CNN, Clinton defended the response of the Bush administration. "People are doing the best they can and I just don't think it's time to worry about that [the disastrously slow government response]," he said. "I'm telling you, nobody ever thought it would happen like this."

This is a lie. Computer models have long predicted that a category four hurricane such as Katrina would overpower the levee system protecting New Orleans, drowning the city and killing perhaps tens of thousands. While it was known that additional funds were needed to reinforce the levee system, the Bush administration cut money for this vital infrastructure year after year.

Clinton's attitude has been reflected in statements of all the leading Democrats. Hillary Clinton declared on September 2 that "there will be time enough to figure out what we could have or should have done to try and avoid some of what has happened." On Monday, she called for the formation of an investigation panel to be modeled on the 9/11 Commission. Like the 9/11 Commission, any such panel would be a whitewash.

The Democrats have failed to offer any serious alternative program to deal with disaster relief, for to do so would require a challenge to the same big business interests represented by both major parties.

Instead, in a mass email to Democratic activists, the party's chairman Howard Dean wrote, "America is at its best when we realize that we are one community—that we're all in this together. That means that each one of us has the responsibility to do what we can to help the relief effort." He invited the party's base to send their personal donations to the Red Cross.

The solidarity of both parties on the question of blame has roots much deeper than personal ties between politicians. The events of last week have laid bare the deep class divisions in the United States. They have exposed the economic, political and moral bankruptcy of American society.

The "let them eat cake" indifference of the ruling elite towards the

tragedy that has befallen millions of people found its consummate expression in the words of the president's mother, Barbara Bush, after she participated in the brief photo-op with her husband and Clinton at the mass shelter set up in Houston's Astrodome.

"What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality," she told a radio interviewer. "And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them."

The conception that sleeping on a cot on a crowded stadium floor is some kind of boon is a measure of the unspeakable contempt toward the great majority of working people that guides the policy of the entire ruling elite. Many of those whom the former first lady saw in the Astrodome have lost not only their jobs and their homes in the disaster, but their children and other loved-ones who disappeared in the storm and flood.

The Bushes' personal indifference to the enormous suffering is a reflection of a general outlook of the American ruling class as a whole. Over a period of decades, both Democratic and Republican administrations have gutted every program established since the New Deal of the 1930s to improve social conditions and protect the most vulnerable sections of the population from destitution.

The money slashed from social programs as well as the real wages of the vast majority of the working population has been transferred to the financial oligarchy, which has enjoyed a historically unprecedented accumulation of personal wealth. The result is a society in which the gulf between wealth and poverty has never been so extreme and in which the events unfolding in New Orleans might as well be happening on another planet as far as this ruling stratum is concerned.

While millions of ordinary Americans, and indeed working people all over the world, have responded to the terrible suffering on the US Gulf Coast with horror, sympathy and real support, those who rule America view it from the standpoint of naked class interests.

The policies and interests defended by this ruling layer cannot be allowed to determine the response to the disaster unleashed by Katrina and the abject failure and incompetence of the Bush administration and American capitalism.

The demand must be raised for a massive relief effort not only to rebuild the city of New Orleans and the shattered lives of the storm's victims, but also to eradicate the conditions of poverty that left so many vulnerable to the hurricane's effects.

The realization of such a socially necessary program is inconceivable outside of a political break by masses of working people with the big business-dominated two-party system and the emergence of a new independent political movement fighting for the socialist reorganization of society.



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