

New Orleans: the specter of military dictatorship

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The appalling incompetence and negligence that characterized the government's response at the outset of the human tragedy unleashed by Hurricane Katrina have now given way to ruthlessly efficient methods of military occupation and repression in the ravaged city of New Orleans.

For four critical days, Washington proved incapable of mounting any credible effort to rescue the tens of thousands of largely poor and working class New Orleanians who were left to their fate in the city's flooded streets, many of them losing their lives not to the surging waters, but to the lack of food, water or medicine.

Now the city has been inundated with troops, federal agents and cops of all descriptions, turning it into one of the most heavily armed camps on the face of the globe. Combat-equipped soldiers and police wearing helmets and flak jackets are going door to door in the city to enforce a mandatory evacuation at the point of a gun.

City authorities claimed Friday that they have yet to order forced removal of residents and would do so only with "minimum force." In many cases, demands by armed troops have proven sufficient to drive people from their homes. "When you get 15 M16s pointed at you and they line you up against the wall, it's kind of scary," one New Orleans resident told the *Washington Post*, explaining why she was leaving.

In other cases, however, the official assertions are belied by televised images of cops and troops kicking in the doors of homes and dragging people away in plastic cuffs. The New Orleans Police Department acknowledged Friday that it had arrested 200 people that day.

With an estimated 10,000 residents still in the city, far worse is yet to come. Many justifiably fear that if they leave they will have no homes to come back to. "They are trying to get this neighborhood for the rich people," one man told the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* Thursday.

The first 11 days of the disaster have revealed two political truths about present-day America. First, for all the talk about beefing up "homeland security" against an alleged terrorist threat, the US government has developed no serious civil defense plans to protect the American people from mass disasters, either natural or man-made.

Second, in the wake of September 11, 2001, Washington has exploited the terrorist attacks to concentrate ever-growing power in its military-police apparatus, while elaborating extensive preparations for martial law nationwide.

At its outset, the disaster exposed the Bush administration and the government agencies responsible for emergency relief as totally unprepared. Preventive measures that could have avoided the massive loss of life and displacement of people were not taken. Money

requested by the US Army Corps of Engineers to reinforce the levees that are supposed to protect the city from flooding was systematically cut over a period of years, with the funds diverted to pay for the war in Iraq.

In the period immediately preceding the hurricane's landfall, no serious efforts were made to evacuate the tens of thousands of residents who lacked transportation or the means to get out of the city on their own. In its aftermath, a general state of confusion and paralysis appeared to grip every layer of government, delaying emergency relief efforts precisely at the point when they could have saved the most lives.

The principal agency responsible, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), was clearly not up to the task, its capabilities having been severely downgraded over the past several years. This degeneration accelerated rapidly after FEMA was folded into the Department of Homeland Security, with funding and resources diverted into the "global war on terrorism." Meanwhile, under the Bush administration, the agency's top ranks turned into a political patronage dumping ground.

The *Washington Post* revealed Friday that five of the eight top positions at FEMA are occupied by former Bush presidential campaign workers and other Republican political hacks. None of these five have any experience in emergency operations or disaster relief.

On Friday, FEMA's director, Michael Brown, was relieved of his duties as the nominal head of relief efforts in the Gulf Coast disaster zone. The move represented an attempt at damage control following a firestorm of criticism over Brown's incompetence and evidence that he falsified his resume. While leading Democrats have demanded Brown's outright firing, the presence of such an individual at the head of FEMA is merely symptomatic of the agency's gutting.

Significantly, Brown's replacement as head of the Gulf Coast disaster operation is Vice Admiral Thad Allen, the third-ranking officer in the US Coast Guard. In announcing the shift, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said that having a senior officer take charge would facilitate "inter-action with the military forces" that now effectively control New Orleans. This shift at the top formalizes what had already become the militarization of the response to the disaster.

Confronted with the inability of FEMA and other civilian agencies to organize a relief effort, the government had no option but a military one. Once it decided to use it, there were definite consequences.

While there was no adequate planning for disaster relief, the military and the Homeland Security Department had well developed and rehearsed blueprints for imposing martial law and the suppression of civil unrest. These have been the key focus of planning at both the

Pentagon and the Homeland Security Department in the four years since the September 11 attacks.

Once these plans were taken off the shelf and the military was called in, its own protocols and doctrines drove the intervention, with deadly consequences.

First, the city was effectively sealed off, with residents seeking to flee the disaster turned back at gunpoint and those trying to bring in relief supplies turned back. The Red Cross, which has played the leading role in countless previous disasters, was never allowed to enter the city. This took place as a horrified world watched people dying in the hungry crowds that waited outside the New Orleans Convention Center and amid the squalor of the Superdome.

The order for the military to go in came only after the Pentagon was assured that it could intervene with overwhelming force. Senior commanders spoke in terms of a “combat operation” and “storming” the convention center, where people were waiting to be evacuated.

Now the city is bristling with automatic weapons and is patrolled by troops in armored vehicles fresh from Iraq. The obvious question is what is this massive armed force doing in New Orleans, a city that is largely submerged under water and nearly deserted? This level of military occupation is on its face absurd, but it has been executed according to existing plans for martial law that are the product of protracted secret deliberations.

The central focus of this military operation has been the establishment of law and order, the protection of private property and, to those ends, the forced evacuation of the remaining residents of the city.

The most chilling revelation coming out of New Orleans is that for America’s ruling elite and its state apparatus, the lives of ordinary Americans count for nothing. This has found its most grotesque expression in the failure of the authorities for a full 10 days to make any effort to recover the bodies of the storm’s victims, which lie rotting in the streets.

The storm’s survivors complained bitterly about the media’s referring to them as “refugees,” understandably bristling over a term that suggests that the largely poor and black masses of newly homeless are foreigners in their own land. Yet, the reality is that many of them have been treated more as criminals than victims.

Those loaded onto trucks in the mandatory evacuation are not told where they are going. As the *Salt Lake Tribune* reported, one planeload of evacuees was informed that they were being shipped off to Utah only after their plane had taken off from New Orleans International Airport. There also were multiple reports that those being dispersed across the country are in many cases subjected to restrictions on their movements and behavior that come close to penal confinement.

Both the lack of preparation in terms of civil defense or humanitarian relief and the turn towards martial law have deep roots in the social structure and political system of the United States.

For more than a quarter century, both Democratic and Republican administrations have pursued a policy designed to transfer wealth from the vast majority of working people to the financial elite. They have systematically slashed every program aimed at ameliorating conditions of poverty in order to award ever fatter tax cuts to those at the top of the economic pyramid. In the process, the ruling elite has created conditions of profound social inequality and instability that have erupted to the surface with the disaster in New Orleans.

The deepening of social inequality has been accompanied by an unprecedented attack on basic democratic rights—conducted under the

pretext of a “war on terrorism” and “homeland security”—and an increasing reliance on military force, both at home and abroad.

The events in New Orleans provide a sobering warning of the immense dangers posed by these developments. The assumption of extraordinary and unconstitutional powers by the president, the development of a secret shadow government, revealed in the aftermath of September 11, the passage of the Patriot Act, the establishment of the Homeland Security Department, and the creation of a US Northern Command, the first such military command to prepare and conduct nationwide operations on US soil, have together established the framework for a police-military dictatorship. In New Orleans, such a regime is being given a dry run.

The response of the Democrats to the momentous events in New Orleans is one of impotence and duplicity. They themselves, of course, are implicated in the failure to adequately prepare for or respond to the disaster, on the national, state and local level. They have acted as full partners of the Republicans in the buildup of the military, as well as in the imposition of the Patriot Act and other attacks democratic rights.

Now the Democrats’ principal demands have been for the sacking of the hapless FEMA Director Brown—likely to be chosen as a scapegoat by the Bush White House itself—and the convening of an “independent commission,” along the lines of the 9/11 panel, to probe the New Orleans disaster and—inevitably—produce a similar whitewash. The party has advanced no alternative program or proposals for the relief of the millions whose lives have been devastated by the catastrophe, nor has it raised the slightest objection to the handing over of control to the military.

The outrage felt by broad masses of American working people over the appalling treatment of the hurricane disaster victims must be joined with a political understanding of the stark dangers that are posed by these developments.

These dangers cannot be countered within the framework of the existing two-party system. They require an irrevocable break with the Democratic Party and the emergence of a new, independent political movement of the working class fighting for the socialist reorganization of society.



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