In the wake of Katrina and Rita

Bush administration to expand military powers, attack social programs

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Less than a month after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and parts of Mississippi, and only a few days after Hurricane Rita hit Texas and Louisiana, the Bush administration is using these disasters as a pretext to expand the domestic role of the military, attack social programs, and further enrich a tiny layer of the population.

As Hurricane Rita made landfall Saturday morning, Bush was in Colorado Springs, Colorado, holed up at the headquarters of the US Northern Command. The Northern Command is tasked with overseeing military operations in North America, including the US. His trip there was a deliberate attempt to promote the military as the most important institution for handling natural disasters.

On Sunday, Bush declared during a briefing with top military leaders that his trip was aimed at establishing whether there was "a circumstance in which the Department of Defense becomes the lead agency. Clearly in the case of a terrorist attack that would be the case," he said, "but is there a natural disaster of a certain size that would enable them to be the lead agency?... That is going to be a very important consideration for Congress."

White House spokesman Scott McClellan later emphasized that Bush believes "very strongly" that Congress should consider putting the military in charge. In the case of a situation such as Katrina, McClellan said, "it's the Department of Defense that has the capability to [stabilize the situation]—the logistics, the communications, the assets to be able to do it quickly..."

These comments are of one piece with the administration's entire response since Katrina struck. After several days during which thousands of stranded residents were left without food and water, in squalid and desperate conditions, with no help from the authorities, the government initiated a military-police operation to "stabilize the situation." New Orleans was transformed into a virtual war zone, with military forces roaming the street toting assault rifles, threatening those who were still trapped in the city.

In his nationally televised speech from New Orleans on September 15, Bush declared that "a challenge on this scale requires greater federal authority and a broader role for the armed forces."

There have been suggestions that Congress should consider repealing or changing the Posse Comitatus Act, which limits the role of the military in domestic policing. On September 17, Pentagon spokesman Lawrence Di Rita called the act "very archaic" and said that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld "is reviewing a wide range of possible changes in the way the military could be used in domestic emergencies."

Prominent Democrats have also joined in urging a more active military role, up to and including the declaration of martial law. According to *Government Executive*, Senator Joseph Lieberman, the ranking member of the Senate Homeland Security Committee and a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said, "The fear ... of federal military usurping state and local authority and, in the worst case, martial law imposed by a president has to give way to the reality of lives on the line..."

The push toward greater military control, however, has nothing to do with "saving lives." Attempts to legitimize a greater role for military in domestic affairs, including discussions of a change or repeal of Posse Comitatus, have long been in the works. Especially since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has been systematically erecting the framework for military rule in the United States. This includes the establishment of the Northern Command, which only began operations in October 2002. Before, the rationale for these moves was the so-called "war on terror"; now it is Hurricane Katrina.

In comments published September 20 on the web site of the *Washington Post*, William Arkin, a former army intelligence agent and expert on military policy, noted, "Even before Katrina, contingency planners at the US Northern Command (NORTHCOM) ... were given marching orders by Rumsfeld to plan for the worst possible contingency domestically. The resulting plan, currently in draft and called CONPLAN 2002 ... is predicated on a scenario in which the Defense Department would have to take 'the lead' from the Department of Homeland Security, civil agencies, and the States, that is, to act without civil authority. I think we call that martial law."

On September 21, Arkin reported the existence of another plan, called Granite Shadow, which "posits domestic military operations, including intelligence collection and surveillance, unique rules of engagement regarding the use of lethal force, the use of experimental non-lethal weapons, and federal and military control of incident locations that are highly controversial and might border on the illegal."

At the same time as the framework for military rule is being strengthened, the Bush administration has announced that it will

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deepen its attacks on social programs and the working class, again using the hurricanes as a pretext.

The government's reactionary social agenda was stated most clearly in a interview with White House Budget Director Joshua Bolten published Monday by the *Wall Street Journal*.

Bolten's interview was aimed at a very specific audience: Wall Street and the corporate elite, as well as members of the Republican Party who have raised an alarm over the spending proposals put forward by the administration following Katrina. He said that Bush had asked him "to see where we can tighten our belt" to balance any new spending with cuts elsewhere in the federal budget.

Bolten said that the administration would begin by pushing through previous proposals to eliminate 150 non-mandatory federal programs and cut $35 billion in mandatory entitlement programs, including major cuts in Medicaid and food stamps. These cuts, however, would not be sufficient. "Other mandatory spending has to be on the table beyond what was in the budget resolution," he said.

The budget director assured his audience that there will be no shift in the administration's tax policy, which includes $2 trillion in tax cuts, overwhelmingly to the wealthy, over the next 10 years. "A shift away from the president's tax policy—which would mean imposing a tax increase—would jeopardize" economic growth.

Also off the table will be cuts in "homeland security" and the military. "The president's priority is to provide for national security and protect the homeland, and I don't think he'll be interested in doing anything that undermines those priorities," Bolten said. Instead, the administration will push to extend cuts in the major entitlement programs, which include Medicaid and Social Security. "[T]he entitlements are the real long-term threat to the federal budget," he said. "Long term, we need to go back to take a long [look] at the entitlements and be sure they're on a sustainable basis."

Bolten's remarks underscored the fact that the government will do very little to help the vast majority of those whose lives have been devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The bulk of government spending will go to rebuilding roads, water systems and other infrastructure necessary for the city to resume business operations. Other funds would go towards tax cuts for corporations (the creation of a "Gulf Opportunity Zone") and a few small initiatives, including the so-called Urban Homesteading Act, which will do nothing for most evacuees.

The contempt that the administration has for the masses of working class people who have seen their homes and jobs destroyed was displayed in Bolten's comments on how the government will handle federal flood insurance. Only about half those in the area devastated by Katrina have this insurance, and traditional private insurance does not compensate for flood damage. "The federal government's responsibility is with respect to those who bought insurance," Bolten said. The rest will get nothing. "It seems to me it undermines the purpose of an insurance scheme and creates a great deal of moral hazard," he said, if those without insurance are compensated.

The response of the Bush administration to Hurricane Katrina bears definite similarities to its response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. The so-called "war on terrorism" initiated after these attacks has been used to justify a wholesale attack on democratic rights. The administration has sought to arrogate to itself the ability to detain prisoners, including US citizens, indefinitely without trial and has implemented other anti-democratic measures such as the Patriot Act. At the same time, the role of the military in domestic affairs has been sharply increased.

The September 11 attacks were used as a pretext to carry out these policies and others that had long been planned by the American ruling elite, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

After September 11, the administration sought to focus blame on existing laws that supposedly prevented the sharing of intelligence between the different agencies of the government. This served a dual purpose. On the one hand, it created the conditions for repealing these laws and increasing the power of the intelligence apparatus. On the other, it served to divert attention from the government's own responsibility, including its decision not to act to stop individuals who were known to be planning a terrorist attack.

In the same way, the administration is now focusing attention on the Posse Comitatus Act and the absurd contention that it was the constraints placed on the military that produced the hurricane disaster. The goal is the same: to justify eliminating these constraints while obscuring the government's role in the tragedy.

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, and in particular the tragedy inflicted on the people of New Orleans, was a consequence of policies carried out by the American ruling elite. For decades, it has slashed social programs, undermined social infrastructure and deepened inequality—all to increase the self-enrichment of an increasingly isolated oligarchy.

With an incredible degree of brazenness, the administration is now preparing to use the disaster as an excuse to justify an intensification of these very same policies.

The most critical prop for the administration in pursuing these aims is once again the supposed opposition party. The comments by Lieberman express the basic thinking of the Democratic leadership. The party has focused its demands on the creation of a commission to investigate the government response to the hurricane, which like the 9/11 commission would only serve to whitewash the government's responsibility.

The right-wing social policy and the militarization of American society are two sides of the same coin. The class inequalities so graphically revealed by the hurricanes will inevitable produce social upheavals. In the face of mounting opposition to its policies—revealed in public outrage following Katrina and growing demand for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq—the ruling class has only one response: build up its repressive apparatus.

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