

New Orleans and Baghdad—two sides of the same policy

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As US National Guard troops—just returned from Iraq—moved into New Orleans Friday with “shoot-to-kill” orders, and Blackhawk helicopters flew over the city, the essential unity between the policies pursued by Washington at home and abroad found stark expression.

Lt. Gen. Steven Blum of the National Guard said half of the 7,000 National Guardsmen arriving in Louisiana had shortly before been serving overseas and were “highly proficient in the use of lethal force.”

Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco declared, “They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot to kill... and I expect they will.”

The reaction of the Bush administration to the catastrophe of its own making in the invasion of Iraq and its response to the disaster unleashed by Hurricane Katrina on the US Gulf Coast have both revealed gross incompetence and a criminal contempt for human life. Both have led to soaring death tolls and immense suffering.

There are direct connections between the humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq and the one that is unfolding in New Orleans. Barely a month ago, Lt. Colonel Pete Schneider of the Louisiana National Guard complained to the media that essential equipment the force had taken to Iraq last October—humvees, high-water vehicles, generators and refuelers—had been left in the country. He stressed that in the event of a serious natural disaster, the lack of the equipment could pose problems in mounting a speedy rescue and relief response.

The failure of the levee and the flooding of 80 percent of New Orleans are linked to repeated budget cuts carried out by the Bush administration since the war in Iraq began.

In the 2004 budget, the Army Corps of Engineers requested \$11 million for a hurricane protection project in the New Orleans area. It was allotted just half that amount, \$5.5 million. In the 2005 budget, the Corps requested \$22.5 million, and received one quarter of its request, \$5.7 million. In the 2006 budget, the Bush administration proposed an appropriation of just \$2.9 million.

Where the money meant to reinforce the levees and protect New Orleans went was no mystery to local officials. Walter Maestri, emergency management chief for Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, told the *Times-Picayune* in June 2004: “It appears that the money has been moved in the president’s budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq, and I suppose that’s the price we pay. Nobody locally is happy that the levees can’t be finished, and we are doing everything we can to make the case that this is a security issue for us.”

Meanwhile, FEMA—the Federal Emergency Management Agency—the principal agency for dealing with such disasters, has been “systematically downgraded and all but dismantled by the Department of Homeland Security,” as Eric Holdeman, the director of the Office of Emergency Management in King County, Washington, wrote in the *Washington Post* this week. Instead, disaster relief resources have been shifted to the so-called “global war on terrorism,” the all-purpose pretext for US military aggression abroad.

Vast funds expended on the Iraq war and other acts of US militarism have been drained away from social spending at home. With the upcoming approval of yet another emergency spending bill for Iraq, Congress will have appropriated \$250 billion for the war. Washington is spending on average \$5.4 billion a month on the war. Thus, the Pentagon will expend in less than two months

the equivalent of the entire relief package that the Bush administration has requested for New Orleans and the devastated Gulf Coast.

The outrage of New Orleans' abandoned citizens, who shout "we want help" and ask angrily why Washington has proven incapable of supplying the most basic forms of organization or relief, strangely echoes protests by the people of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities.

With the US occupation now halfway into its third year, three out of four Iraqi families report irregular electricity. Cuts in water supply are frequent, and fully 40 percent of urban households report sewage in the streets. A nationwide health crisis is growing worse, child malnutrition is widespread, and the carnage against civilians continues every day.

This chaos and gross negligence have characterized the US occupation since day one. After US troops rolled into Baghdad, mobs were allowed—if not actively encouraged—to systematically loot Iraqi government facilities, schools and hospitals, deepening the immense destruction already wrought by American bombs, shells and missiles.

As a pre-invasion memo leaked from the Blair government in Britain earlier this year warned, Washington had decided upon war but had given "little thought" to the invasion's aftermath. That is, as it prepared to militarily occupy a war-ravaged country of 27 million people, the Bush administration had no concern or even plans for what would happen to them.

It is a tragic irony that thousands of young men and women in the Louisiana and Mississippi National Guard are deployed in Iraq, sent to kill and be killed for a lie. Not a few of them are drawn from poor and working class families that have suffered the worst from Hurricane Katrina. The Bush administration and its Democratic allies—having abandoned their fabricated claims about weapons of mass destruction—now insist that these troops are fighting a war to bring "democracy" to Iraq.

But the national disgrace in New Orleans poses an obvious question: what can a government that abandons its own people to die in the streets and presides over levels of social inequality that shock the conscience of the world teach anyone about "democracy?"

Iraq was from its origins a predatory war—an exercise in international plunder. It was aimed at employing

overwhelming military force to seize control of vital energy resources and thereby assert the geopolitical hegemony of American capitalism against its economic rivals.

The plundering of Iraq has gone hand-in-hand with the looting of the American treasury at home by means of unending cuts in social spending together with massive tax cuts for the top income brackets. These policies are carried out by a government and a two-party political system that is dedicated to serving interests of a financial oligarchy and is as indifferent to the lives of the poor and working class in New Orleans as it is to the people of Iraq.



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