

# The New York Times and Bush's New Orleans speech

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17 September 2005

The debased and servile state of the US media was on display in its response to President Bush's Thursday night speech in New Orleans. Press reports and commentaries were largely favorable, depicting Bush's words as a serious effort to grapple with issues of poverty and inequality that have never before been on the radar screen of this administration, and his proposals as a significant pledge of federal aid to the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Among the most deplorable commentaries was the lead editorial of the *New York Times*, the principal voice of the "liberal" establishment in America. The newspaper gushed over Bush's speech, describing it as "principled, disciplined and ambitious."

The *Times* claimed that Bush "forthrightly acknowledged his responsibility for the egregious mishandling of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He spoke clearly and candidly about race and poverty. And finally, he was clear about what would be needed to bring back the Gulf Coast and said the federal government would have to lead and pay for that effort."

The newspaper compared Bush's performance to his supposedly exemplary role in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks: "Once again, he has delivered a speech that will reassure many Americans that he understands the enormity of the event and the demands of leadership to come."

The *Times* did express concern that after 9/11 and the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, which the newspaper supported, Bush turned to the invasion of Iraq, about which the *Times* now has doubts—not so much because of Bush's lies about a connection between Iraq and 9/11, as because the US occupation has become bogged down in a protracted guerrilla war.

The response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster should be more thought out, the newspaper advised. "This

time, Mr. Bush must come up with a more coherent and well-organized follow-through." Presumably, this was an appeal to Bush not to respond to the drowning of New Orleans by invading Cuba, or perhaps abolishing Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

What criticism the *Times* made of the White House was in reference to Bush's dismissive attitude towards the domestic responsibilities of the federal government. Federal agencies like FEMA proved incapable, under the leadership of Bush loyalists, of providing any serious emergency relief. Only "a focused federal effort" can accomplish such tasks as housing hundreds of thousands of now-homeless people and providing for their employment and the education of their children, the newspaper concluded.

The *Times* was silent about the social and political meaning of the actual measures that Bush announced in his speech, which were later elaborated in press briefings by White House aides. The centerpiece is the establishment of a Gulf Opportunity Zone, in which most taxes and federal regulation of business will be waived in order to "encourage entrepreneurship." The Environmental Protection Agency has already suspended enforcement of most anti-pollution laws in the zone.

There are also plans to issue tuition vouchers that could fund private and religious schools, rather than rebuilding the public school systems in the disaster area, an Urban Homesteading Program on federal land, and \$5,000 Worker Recovery Accounts with federal money that could be used for job retraining.

All these initiatives are merely a rehash of longstanding policy proposals from the Bush administration. They are "disaster-relief versions of proposals Bush made during his first term and in his 2004 campaign—proposals for urban enterprise zones,

home-ownership subsidies for low-income families and job-training accounts,” according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

The *Washington Post*, in its analysis of the Bush speech, declared that Bush’s policies “bear the distinctive stamp of a conservative president, a hallmark of an executive who has never shrunk from seeking to implement a right-leaning agenda even in the face of a divided country.”

The *Post* reported earlier in the week that the White House had contacted the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute and similar right-wing think tanks, seeking policy proposals that could be introduced using the Katrina disaster as a pretext. As liberal columnist Paul Krugman noted, the Heritage Foundation “has already published a manifesto on post-Katrina policy. It calls for waivers on environmental rules, the elimination of capital gains taxes and the private ownership of public school buildings in the disaster areas.”

The Bush administration and the congressional Republican leadership are seizing on the scenes of mass suffering in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast to push through policy proposals that they have been unable to enact over the past five years. But the *New York Times* presents this cynical maneuver as though it were the second coming of Roosevelt’s New Deal.

This says more about the *Times*, and the liberal sections of the ruling class and upper middle class for which it speaks, than all the professions of sympathy for the plight of the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The *Times* has no objection when Bush seeks to use the army of displaced people as guinea pigs for ultra-right social experimentation. The newspaper is quite happy to stand reality on its head, and pretend that a government which contributed so heavily to causing the disaster—through its deliberate neglect of basic infrastructure and refusal to confront environmental problems like global warming—can suddenly be transformed into a federal savior.

What brings the leading voice of the “liberal” media together with the ultra-right president? Both defend the interests of the narrow layer of wealthy families at the top of American society. Both react with fear and trepidation to the exposure of the vast social gulf that exists in the United States between this privileged elite and the vast majority of working people. And if social

disorder were to erupt in New York City as it did in New Orleans after Katrina, the *Times* would embrace the same shoot-to-kill policies espoused by Bush and the Democratic governor of Louisiana.

(It should be pointed out that Louisiana’s Democratic governor, Kathleen Blanco, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, and the whole congressional Democratic leadership had a generally approving response to Bush’s speech. There was no criticism of the Gulf Opportunity Zone, although it is well understood that its purpose is to transform the Gulf Coast into a low-wage, high-profit arena of exploitation for corporate America.)

A survey published Friday gives some indication of the depth of the social polarization in New Orleans prior to Katrina. The study of hurricane survivors displaced to Houston, Texas, was conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the Harvard School of Public Health, and the *Washington Post*. It showed that the majority of the evacuees had little or nothing even before the hurricane struck.

According to the survey, seven out of ten evacuees did not have a savings or checking account, and a similar number had no credit cards. Six in ten had family incomes of less than \$20,000 a year. Seven in ten had no insurance to cover their losses from the storm. Half had no health insurance, and four in ten were disabled or suffered from heart disease, high blood pressure or diabetes. One in eight was unemployed before the storm—now all are.

These working-class families were victims of American capitalism long before they became victims of Hurricane Katrina. This is the basic reality that the *New York Times* wants to conceal, which is why it rallies around the ignorant and discredited figure of George W. Bush.



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