

Congressional report condemns government response to Hurricane Katrina

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14 February 2006

A select committee of the US House of Representatives is set to release a report Wednesday on the US government's handling of Hurricane Katrina. From drafts leaked to various news publications this week, it is already clear that the report presents a picture of an extraordinary lack of preparation and a completely incompetent response, which contributed to the deaths of over 1,000 people and the virtual destruction of a major American city.

Advance reports in the *Washington Post* on Sunday and the *New York Times* on Monday indicate that the House committee focused on the administration's failure to act before or after the hurricane to prevent mass casualties. "It remains difficult to understand how government could respond so ineffectively to a disaster that was anticipated for years, and for which specific dire warnings had been issued for days," the report notes. "This crisis was not only predictable, it was predicted."

Coming from a panel comprised entirely of Republicans—the Democrats refused to participate on the grounds that a Republican-controlled investigation would be a whitewash—this statement is all the more significant. It refutes the claim of the Bush administration that the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina could not have been foreseen. The stunning degree of governmental ineptitude that was displayed to the world in the aftermath of Katrina has compelled such admissions from a panel chaired by a longtime congressional Republican leader, Representative Tom Davis of Virginia. At the same time, as was to be expected, the report does not call for anyone to be held accountable for the disaster and does not address any of the fundamental issues.

It had long been known that if a major hurricane struck New Orleans directly, the levee system protecting the city would likely fail, the city would be inundated with water, and about 100,000 would be trapped without adequate transportation to leave. However, the Department of Homeland Security, which includes the Federal Emergency Management Agency, did nothing to aid city residents as the storm approached, despite clear warnings from many fronts that Katrina could be the hurricane that had been feared.

The department, headed by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, "failed to anticipate the likely consequences of the storm and procure the buses, boats and aircraft that were

ultimately necessary to evacuate the flooded city prior to Katrina's landfall," the report states.

Soon after the hurricane hit, the report notes, eyewitness accounts from FEMA officials in New Orleans stated that the city's levees had been breached, and this information was reported to top administration officials on the day of the hurricane. Former FEMA head Michael Brown testified last week that he personally told White House officials on the day of the hurricane that its consequences were catastrophic. However, even after it was clear that the city would suffer massive flooding, the federal government did not respond, leaving thousands of residents trapped in their homes or in the squalid conditions of the Superdome and Convention Center.

The White House did not "substantiate, analyze and act on the information at its disposal," the report notes. More than 24 hours after the hurricane hit, Bush said that New Orleans had "dodged a bullet," even as waters continued to rise, engulfing thousands of homes. Not until the morning of August 31, two days after the hurricane hit, was there a federal order to evacuate the city.

Local and state officials are also blamed, including Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, both Democrats. Local officials did not prepare an evacuation plan for those who would not be able to escape on their own. Moreover, the report notes that Nagin and others helped encourage lurid media reports of rapes and murders, later shown to be unfounded.

These conclusions stand in sharp contrast to the utter absence of accountability for the disaster. Not only does the report itself refrain from calling for anyone to be held responsible, but there have been no moves within the political establishment as a whole to punish those who, through their inaction, compounded the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina.

This is a general phenomenon. During the Bush administration's time in office, there have been at least three catastrophes of historic proportions that have led to the deaths of thousands of people: the terrorist attacks of September 11; the invasion of Iraq on the basis of the false claims of weapons of mass destruction; and Hurricane Katrina. Even if one were to accept the official framework within which these events have been placed—that the invasion of Iraq was intended to safeguard

US national security and not to seize control of the country's oil fields, and that September 11 was a "failure of intelligence" rather than a deliberate stand-down within sections of the state—all three episodes have revealed a staggering level of administration and presidential incompetence.

Mass firings of administration personnel and criminal investigations should have been a matter of course. However, aside from the resignation of the Vice President's Chief of Staff I. Lewis Libby after his indictment for perjury and obstruction of justice—the result of the work of an independent prosecutor that has been kept strictly separate from any broader investigation of the administration—no one has been removed from office or otherwise punished. No serious investigations have been carried out to call people to account.

What is to explain this extraordinary state of affairs? On the one hand, the government is committed to the proposition that it can do whatever it wants—spying, illegal detention, torture, war—without any restrictions. As a matter of principle, top officials in the Bush administration and the military consider themselves to be untouchable, impervious to criticism, beyond any legal accountability.

This posture demonstrates, not political strength, but enormous vulnerability. The foundation of US policy at home and abroad is extremely fragile. Any steps to hold people responsible would threaten to get quickly out of control. Investigations like the House report may be necessary at times to provide political cover, to give the appearance that steps are being taken, but in the end they are intended to stabilize the teetering house of cards without addressing any of the basic issues.

In maintaining its position of unaccountability, the administration has no greater ally than the nominal opposition. As in the other great catastrophes of Bush's tenure, the Democrats have shown no interest in seriously attacking the administration for its handling of Hurricane Katrina. Some Democrats have called for the resignation of Chertoff, paralleling previous scattered calls for the resignation of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld after the invasion of Iraq developed into an open-ended guerrilla war. These calls went nowhere and were never followed through. Some have called for an independent investigation, modeled on the 9/11 Commission, which whitewashed government culpability in the terrorist attacks.

The Democrats will not put up a serious opposition to administration stonewalling and whitewashing because they ultimately defend the same interests and accept and rely on the same lies used to promote these interests. They uphold the most fundamental lie of the administration, the "war on terror," the claim that the US government is engaged in a battle to protect the American people against future attacks. This myth has been used to justify a sharp escalation of American militarism and an ongoing assault on basic democratic rights at home.

The House report concedes the obvious contradiction

between the Bush administration's claim to be bending every effort to prepare for a new disaster on the scale of 9/11, and its actual performance during Hurricane Katrina. It states, "If this is what happens when we have advance warning, we shudder to imagine the consequences when we do not. Four and a half years after 9/11, America is not ready for prime time."

However, what the report does not acknowledge, what it cannot acknowledge, is that "America is not ready for prime time" four years after September 11 for the simple reason that nothing the government has done during these four years has had anything to do with protecting the American people from disasters, terrorist or otherwise.

What Hurricane Katrina really revealed was not simply the incompetence of political officials. Certainly there was incompetence, including on the part of the nominal head of government, who was too busy vacationing in Texas to care much or even follow reports about what was going on 500 miles away in New Orleans. What the hurricane revealed were the consequences of decades of neglect of the social infrastructure, decades in which social programs and the conditions of broad masses of the population have been sacrificed to enrich an increasingly isolated and oligarchic elite.

The "war on terror" has been a cover for accelerating this policy, for launching military aggression that had long been planned, for rolling back democratic rights and all constraints on executive power, for increasing military spending at the expense of social programs. Hurricane Katrina itself was used as yet another excuse to cut budget allocations that benefit the poor and hand out more tax cuts to the rich, while escalating spending on "homeland security" and "national defense"—that is, the military-police apparatus.

The refusal to hold top officials accountable is ultimately required to defend this policy, which both parties support.



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