

One year after Katrina disaster: No accountability for US political elite

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President Bush visited New Orleans Tuesday, the anniversary of the city's virtual destruction by Hurricane Katrina, and blandly admitted the indifference with which the US ruling elite responded to the greatest natural disaster in American history.

Local, state and federal governments had all failed to meet the needs of the people of the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf coast, he said, recalling the "terrible scenes that we never thought we would see in America: citizens drowned in their attics, desperate mothers crying out on national TV for food and water, the breakdown of law and order and a government, at all levels, that fell short of its responsibilities."

Bush added, "I take full responsibility for the federal government's response." What exactly this "taking full responsibility" actually means he did not say. Only one federal official has been removed over Katrina—FEMA director Michael Brown, who was seeking to leave the agency even before the hurricane struck, and served as useful scapegoat for the bankruptcy of an entire political system.

No local or state officials have lost their jobs either, including Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans, who was reelected in May, and the governors of Louisiana and Mississippi, Democrat Kathleen Blanco and Republican Haley Barbour.

The anniversary commemoration ceremonies in both states were exercises in political cover-up, with the inevitable invocations of God—to distract attention from the human responsibility for the deaths of nearly 2,000 people—as well as paeans to the efforts of individuals to rebuild their lives, although such efforts cannot possibly be sufficient to meet the enormous social needs in the wake of Katrina.

The scale of the crisis bears repeating:

* A death toll of 1,600 in Louisiana, most of them

New Orleans residents, including 300 who died in other states of the lingering health effects of the disaster, as well as 231 people in Mississippi

* More than 250,000 homes destroyed or damaged beyond repair

* The displacement of 278,000 workers from their jobs

* The displacement of 116,000 households, comprising nearly one million people, to mobile homes and other shelters

* The ongoing closure of half of New Orleans public transportation, 60 percent of its public schools, two thirds of its hospitals and half its retail food establishments.

In comparison to the vast scale of this devastation, the rebuilding effort remains puny. In Mississippi, 17,000 families have applied for federal grants for home repairs, but checks have been distributed to only a few dozen. Overall, only five percent of severely damaged homes are being rebuilt. Less than 40,000 residential building permits have been issued in the hurricane-devastated region, enough to replace less than one-sixth of the destroyed homes.

Congress has appropriated nearly \$110 billion for disaster relief and recovery—only a fraction of the total need. Even this has been delivered only haltingly, with barely \$44 billion actually expended, and much of this flowing into the coffers of US corporations, rather than reaching the survivors of the disaster. The most critical infrastructure work, the rebuilding and strengthening of the levee system around New Orleans, remains unfinished, with widespread fears that another category 3 storm like Katrina, let alone a larger category 4 or 5 hurricane, would drown the city again.

Bush brought no new aid for either the Mississippi Gulf Coast or the New Orleans metropolitan area.

Instead, he offered a bribe to the Louisiana and Mississippi state governments, in the form of a larger portion of royalties from offshore oil and gas production in the Gulf of Mexico. This does not mean any increase in the payments made by the oil companies, now reaping gargantuan profits, only a redistribution of income from the federal to the state governments—with the long-term goal of lightening the regulatory burden on the oil companies, since state governments will quickly become dependent on the added revenues and even more subservient to Big Oil than Washington.

Bush also promoted his right-wing social agenda, urging approval of additional federal funds for students who choose to go to private and religious schools rather than public schools. He preached the gospel of business deregulation, declaring his sympathy for local officials who “are concerned about nitpicking rules. There clearly needs to be some more entrepreneurship here at the local level.”

This sentiment was echoed in the editorial Tuesday in the *Wall Street Journal*, which declared that the slow disaster recovery effort was due, not to insufficient federal effort, but to too much: more resources should be devoted to building up the local infrastructure of capitalism, the newspaper argued.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin chimed in with a similar appeal at the interfaith prayer service Tuesday, held at the Convention Center that became the site of mass suffering and a symbol of government indifference during the Katrina disaster. He preached the gospel of personal responsibility, declaring, “If government can’t get you your check on time, it says you need to do something. It says your neighbors need to come together and all you need to do is cook a pot of red beans and they’ll bring over the hammers and the nails.”

The notion that such individual efforts can make a dent in the situation is preposterous. Such invocations represent nothing more than an effort by the politicians of both parties to excuse their own criminal negligence and off-load the blame onto the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

Bush’s talk of “taking responsibility” is nothing more than the empty profession of empathy that politicians of both big business parties, Democratic and Republican alike, regularly employ in the face of

calamities brought on by the profit system. Bush’s predecessor, Bill Clinton, was a more skilled practitioner of this type of demagogery, tearing up almost on command. Bush, by contrast, can barely conceal his disinterest.

One widely reported incident was revealing. Bush walked into a crowded New Orleans restaurant, Betsy’s Pancake House, on Tuesday morning, accompanied by aides and a press retinue. Waitress Joyce Labruzzo asked him, “Mr. President, are you going to turn your back on me?” Bush replied, “No ma’am, not again,” while his entourage roared with laughter.

What was so funny? The president of the United States was admitting publicly that he had willfully ignored mass suffering in a large American city, in the course of which nearly 2,000 people died and hundreds of thousands lost everything. In the face of such a declaration, a civilized audience would have felt shame and regret, and would have shunned the speaker as a moral leper.



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