

One year since Hurricane Katrina: New Orleans left to rot

The Editorial Board
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The wretched state of New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast region devastated by Hurricane Katrina one year ago today is a testament to the indifference, incompetence and brutality of the American ruling elite.

Virtually nothing has been done to clean up, let alone rebuild, working class districts reduced to rubble by the storm. Thousands of the city's ruined houses remain untouched. City officials have indicated that, after Tuesday, they may simply order that flood-damaged houses be bulldozed.

More than 1,800 people died in the Katrina disaster and no one knows how many corpses remain decomposing in shattered houses. Dead bodies continue to be discovered.

There is no plan in place, twelve months after the storm, to rebuild New Orleans or other affected portions of the Gulf Coast, or make whole the hundreds of thousands of residents who were displaced and dispersed across the country. The Bush administration washes its hands of any responsibility, while state and local officials point the finger at Washington and at one another.

With the exception of the tourist districts and more affluent areas, New Orleans has been left to rot by the federal, state and local governments. The federal aid that has been provided has gone overwhelmingly to the financial elite and wealthy social layers. The mass of working class victims of the storm have received little or nothing.

The so-called rebuilding efforts have been little more than government-subsidized boondoggles for speculators, profiteers and corporate cronies of the Bush administration. *Newsweek* magazine accurately termed the official recovery drive "mostly an opportunity for Southern companies owned by GOP campaign contributors to make some money in New Orleans." One of the first measures enacted, even before the creation of the so-called "Gulf Opportunity Zone," was the slashing of wages for workers involved in reconstruction efforts.

A recent *New York Times* article provides a partial but chilling picture of contemporary life in New Orleans. "The Lower Ninth Ward," the *Times* reports, "still a barren wasteland, is unlikely to be rebuilt anytime soon, if at all..."

"[O]ne plausible recent [New Orleans] population count, based on Postal Service data, put the figure at 171,000, well below City Hall's claim of 250,000. The population is thought to be roughly what it was around 1880.

"From the living zone near the river, a trip north of any distance is sobering: blocks of sagging houses not so much empty as dead, and heaps of rubble and garbage with dogs and rats among them. At odd intervals, the occasional householder can be spotted on a porch, looking out with a furrowed brow, trying to make a go of it in the ruins.

"New Orleans now, often rudderless, filthy and still deeply scarred by the storm, is hemorrhaging some of the people it can least afford to lose. In the professional classes, nearly half the doctors and three-fourths of the psychiatrists have left, the largest synagogue says its congregation is down by more than 10 percent, and a big local moving company reports a 'mass evacuation.'..."

"Tens of thousands in the African-American working-class backbone remain unable to return. They have been replaced by hundreds of Hispanic workers who have done much of the heavy lifting in the reconstruction, and live in rough conditions. In the meantime, the only thriving industry is the back-street drug trade, pessimists note. ...

"Banks, for instance, are insisting on unusually high collateral in real estate deals, and for good reason, given a homicide rate that is double its pre-hurricane level and no guarantee that neighborhoods will return to life. Basic services—water, electricity, garbage pickup—are intermittent. ...

"A year after the storm, there are no plans for large-scale infrastructure and redevelopment in the city."

A modern metropolitan area of more than 1.3 million people in 2004, one of the country's 40 largest, is now "basically a nonfunctioning city," in the words of the head of one local non-profit group—and there are no serious plans to rectify the situation.

In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, various explanations and rationales were offered for the government's disarray and indifference. Apologists for the Bush administration argued that the storm was unprecedented, the confusion was regrettable but unavoidable, and so forth. Liberal critics pointed the finger at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and government mismanagement and incompetence.

The present state of the hurricane-affected areas, one full year later, demonstrates that the depopulation of working class sections of New Orleans and the demise of the pre-existing city are not simply the result of natural forces, human error or even mere incompetence.

The decision not to rebuild large parts of the city and to abandon those forced to flee is a deliberate policy. In the midst of the unfolding disaster last year, a decision was made at the highest levels that no matter how severe the toll of death and destruction, there would be no retreat from the "free market" policies—tax cuts for the rich, deregulation, starving of the infrastructure, dismantling of social programs—that had turned a natural disaster into a social catastrophe.

As Louisiana Republican Congressman Richard Baker was heard telling lobbyists in Washington in September 2005, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did."

Nothing, not the destruction of a major city, not the uprooting of hundreds of thousands and the transformation of many of them into modern day Okies, was to stand in the way of the further enrichment of the American plutocracy.

In recent days the media has been making the predictable noises. Pundits and correspondents utter expressions of regret, sympathy for the victims, tributes to the 'resiliency of the human spirit,' even muted criticisms of Bush and FEMA. All this serves only to conceal certain essential truths: (1) that American society is entirely dominated by an oligarchy whose social policy is driven by one aim: to allocate to itself an ever-greater share of the social wealth; and (2) the existing socio-economic order is organically incapable of meeting the elementary needs of its population.

Bush, in comments made Monday in Biloxi, Mississippi, combined his usual non sequiturs, inane jokes, banalities and lies with one essential message: this is not our problem, it's yours.

Washington, he repeated time and time again, would merely assist, but the planning and initiative had to come from local governments, "faith-based" organizations and private citizens. Speaking in a region where 353,000 homes had been destroyed, he declared, "Rebuilding neighborhoods means rebuilding one house at a time." He boasted that, one year after the storm, "We've now removed about 98 percent of the dry debris," praised the "pristine" condition of Mississippi's Gulf Coast beaches, and spoke of a "Renaissance" in Mississippi.

Bush's stupid and callous platitudes echoed similar sentiments voiced the previous week in a joint op-ed piece in *USA Today* by former presidents Bill Clinton and the senior George Bush. Symbolizing the bipartisan unity of the Republican and Democratic parties, the two former presidents passed over the negligence and ineptitude that left hundreds dead and a city virtually destroyed, and portrayed the Katrina disaster as a tribute to "the American spirit."

Never has the world seen such a display of institutional and political bankruptcy in a major industrialized country.

The wholesale discrediting of the entire political establishment in the eyes of the people in the first weeks of the disaster has been compounded by the subsequent official response. This experience, combined with the neo-colonial adventure in Iraq, will have deep-going and explosive consequences for mass consciousness in the US and around the world.

Hurricane Katrina laid bare before a shocked and horrified people what had been concealed by all of the institutions of the existing economic and political system. It revealed the rotten core of American capitalism.

The crisis of the American profit system was suddenly exposed one year ago in the utter failure of the US ruling elite to take elementary measures to prepare for a major hurricane, and the incompetence and indifference that characterized its response. What has occurred since has only amplified that exposure.

The entire world has looked on with disbelief and outrage at the results of decades of deregulation, privatization and the gutting of public agencies and programs established in a previous period to provide a measure of physical and economic security for ordinary people.

Katrina revealed the immense social cost of the manic pursuit of individual wealth and corporate profit, to which every institution is subordinated. The chilling reality—burned into mass consciousness by the images of abandoned victims, rotting corpses and survivors left to chant, "We need help!" amidst devastation and squalor—is inescapable: As far as the American ruling elite is concerned, the lives of the broad masses of people count for nothing.

In the 1930s, American capitalism was discredited in the eyes of tens of millions of Americans because of the unwillingness and inability of the system to respond to the human tragedy produced by such catastrophes as the Dust Bowl in the Southwest and Midwest and the industrial collapse that followed the 1929 stock market crash. A process of mass political radicalization ensued.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, an astute representative of the American ruling class, proceeded from the need to make certain concessions to popular discontent, in the interests of saving the capitalist system from social revolution. Against the fierce resistance of most of his own class, he initiated a program of social reforms. But even during his presidency, large-scale projects in government-run social development, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, never became a model for broader measures to alleviate poverty and social inequality. In the end, such efforts at social planning proved incompatible with the contradictions and requirements of the profit system.

A similar process of deep-going political radicalization is underway today, but under conditions in which American capitalism has far fewer

internal resources—economic, political and moral—than it did at the time of the Great Depression. There is no section of the US ruling elite today that proposes a social reform policy.

Since the 1970s, in tandem with the decline in the world economic position of American capitalism, the US ruling elite has renounced the entire concept of social reform and worked to dismantle the previously established social welfare programs and restrictions on corporate activities.

Despite their efforts to make some political points at Bush's expense, the Democrats have no alternative policy. New Orleans' Democratic mayor, Ray Nagin, a wealthy former executive at cable operator Cox Communications and a contributor to Bush's election campaign in 2000, speaks for the entire shady nouveau riche when he promotes a "market-driven" response to the hurricane disaster.

The repudiation of social reform and relentless redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top have created unprecedented levels of social inequality. Corruption and criminality pervade American big business, and find their consummate political expression in the person of the current occupant of the White House and his co-conspirators.

While the rich and the super-rich amass ever greater fortunes, the majority of working people live on the edge of economic disaster. This is the underlying reality that was suddenly exposed by the hurricane.

What are the lessons to be drawn from this experience? A system based on private ownership of the means of production and production for profit is incompatible with the needs of the people. The intrinsic anarchy of such a system becomes, under conditions of an increasingly globalized and complex world, a menace to human life.

The two-party system exists to serve the interests of the American plutocracy. An independent political movement based on a democratic and socialist program for a fundamental restructuring of economic life must be built to meet the social needs of the broad masses of working people.



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