

Bush visits New Orleans on Katrina anniversary: returning to the scene of the crime

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Working class residents of New Orleans responded with anger and protests to the visit paid by George W. Bush Wednesday on the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, a tragedy which led to the loss of more than 1,800 lives and massive devastation in the region.

Bush administration neglect and indifference contributed to the deaths and mass suffering and continues to be responsible for the plight of countless thousands of present or former New Orleans and Gulf Coast residents.

As nearly every media account admits, substantial sections of New Orleans remain in ruins; 40 percent of the population has not returned; only a fraction of those who have applied for federal house-rebuilding grants have received it; the murder rate has doubled; suicides, domestic violence and rape have increased sharply; the homeless population has also doubled, and many of those are living in the city's estimated 80,000 abandoned dwellings.

The Atlanta-based Southern Education Foundation released a report August 29 that decried the federal response. It noted, "Not since the Great Depression of the 1930s has the United States witnessed so many of its own students thrown out of school."

A major US city was damaged catastrophically, an entire layer of the population has been plunged into misery and the federal government has made no centralized effort to restore the city or ameliorate the conditions of its working-class residents. In the face of this, on the second anniversary of the hurricane, Bush hobnobbed with the local elite, lied and uttered platitudes.

On Tuesday night, the president began his visit to the area by having dinner with various celebrities at Dooky Chase, a well-known New Orleans restaurant that has been closed since the hurricane two years ago and plans to re-open in a few weeks. The following morning Bush spoke at the city's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School for Science and Technology. Subsequently, Bush traveled to Mississippi, where he posed in front of the US 90 Bridge between Bay

Saint Louis and Pass Christian; the bridge, destroyed in the storm, was partially reopened to traffic in May 2007.

In response to Bush's visit, one thousand people marched Wednesday in a protest through New Orleans' impoverished Lower 9th Ward, a neighborhood that still lies in ruins. Signs accused Bush of murder and angry demonstrators denounced the government for failing to act. Gina Martin, one of those on the march, told the Associated Press (AP), "Bush was down here again making more promises he isn't going to keep. The government has failed all of us. It's got to stop."

A bystander, Clarence Russ, 64, commented to the AP, "There was supposed to be all this money, but where'd it go? None of us got any," said Russ, whose house, the wire service noted, "was the only restored home on an otherwise desolate block."

A local Baptist minister, Rev. Marshall Truehill, told the media, "People are angry and they want to send a message to politicians that they want them to do more and do it faster. Nobody's going to be partying."

Media accounts reported widespread anger, frustration and skepticism. The AP noted that some residents "had no use for the protesters." Not because they had any use for Bush but because protest, in the words of one resident, James Chaney, "doesn't get us anything. It doesn't get anyone to help us."

Bush's comments had an air of unreality about them. He spoke optimistically about the region's recovery at the various stops along his route. At the famed soul food restaurant Tuesday night, the president greeted Democratic Governor Kathleen Blanco, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and "distinguished leaders in this community, and quiet heroes who have helped bring optimism and hope to New Orleans."

At the charter school, where he made his most extensive remarks, Bush explained, "My attitude is this: New Orleans, better days are ahead. It's sometimes hard for people to see

progress when you live in a community all the time. Laura and I get to come—we don't live here, we come on occasion. And it's easy to think about what it was like when we first came here after the hurricane, and what it's like today. And this town is coming back. This town is better today than it was yesterday, and it's going to be better tomorrow than it was today."

It's difficult for many residents to see progress, because for them there is no progress. According to a recent study by the Institute For Southern Studies, "The Katrina recovery is failing. As of mid-August [2007], 60,000 people are still living in 'temporary' FEMA trailers because of hold-ups on aid programs and insurance. Schools and hospitals are shuttered, good jobs are scarce and daily threats to health and wellbeing aren't addressed."

The *Los Angeles Times* observed, "Off his [Bush's] route in the Lower Ninth Ward, there was even more evidence [of devastation]: entire blocks deserted, with no sign of rebuilding attempts, and store after store boarded up."

Remarkably, Bush felt the need to tell New Orleans citizens, still reeling from one of the worst natural and social disasters in US history, that they hadn't been abandoned. "[W]e're still paying attention. We understand," he said, adding later, "And so I come telling the folks in this part of the world that we still understand there's problems and we're still engaged."

He returned to this theme in Mississippi, asserting that people in the area were worried that "the President and other folks in Washington other than the Mississippi officials are going to forget what took place down here. So one of the reasons that Laura and I have come back is to remind people that we haven't forgotten, and won't."

In part, this is an attempt to argue that the disaster recovery is not the federal government's problem and that state and local governments and private organizations and individuals have to carry the burden. Beyond that, however, that the president of the United States should even raise the possibility of Washington's 'forgetting' about the Hurricane Katrina disaster and its ongoing consequences is enormously revealing. In fact, the 'worries' of Mississippi residents are well placed. The American ruling elite regards the fate of its ordinary citizens with precisely this kind of arrogant indifference.

The Bush administration remembers Katrina victims, perfunctorily, when it comes time for such anniversaries. It was widely noted that the president failed to mention the disaster at all in his 2007 State of the Union address. Neither "hurricane," "Katrina," "New Orleans" nor "Gulf Coast" merited a single reference.

Of course, for a certain social layer, there has been a silver lining. Bush is not purely delusional when he speaks of

recovery and renewed prosperity. For giant contractors, casino and hotel operators, real estate developers and speculators and swindlers of various stripes, Katrina has proven a boon. Billions have gone into their pockets.

The Institute For Southern Studies report notes that \$3.5 billion in tax breaks have gone to "jumpstart business in Gulf Opportunity or 'GO' Zones across 91 parishes and counties in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. But many of the breaks have been of questionable benefit to Katrina survivors. Take for instance the \$1 million deal to build 10 luxury condos next to the University of Alabama football stadium—four hours from the Gulf Coast.

"Federal contracts for rebuilding and recovery have also been marked by scandal, fraud and abuse. One of the leading watchdogs on this issue has been Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), whose office released a study in August 2006 that identified 19 Katrina-related contracts worth \$8.75 billion that experienced 'significant overcharges, wasteful spending or mismanagement.'"

The Katrina disaster remains an open wound. None of the issues bound up with the terrible events of August and September 2005 have been resolved. It is noteworthy that Bush, Gov. Blanco and Mayor Nagin, all complicit in the massive disaster, remain in office two years later.

This is a commentary on the decayed state of American institutions. Polls, according to CBS News on August 29, reveal that only 20 percent of those surveyed thought the federal government's response was adequate; 77 percent said the government could have done much better. Less than half saw any progress in the recovery of the region. Providing some idea of the scope of the tragedy, 29 percent of those surveyed indicated they knew someone directly affected by Katrina.

Yet no high official has been held accountable, and there are no moves in that direction. Obligated to report Bush's idiocies in New Orleans and Mississippi, no one in the American media bats an eye and the Democratic presidential hopefuls merely issued pro forma statements.



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