

Obama in New Orleans: The callous face of the US ruling elite

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17 October 2009

In a brief, four-hour stopover in New Orleans en route to a fund-raising dinner with millionaire Democrats in California, President Barack Obama made perfunctory promises to the people of the devastated city, barely disguising his indifference to their plight.

The visit, coming one day after the stock market soared above 10,000 and the *Wall Street Journal* estimated that compensation at major banks and financial firms would hit a record \$140 billion this year, underscored the chasm that separates rich and poor in Obama's America.

Obama has waited nine months from his inauguration to visit the city which in 2005 became a worldwide symbol of the failure of the Bush administration and the callousness of the US ruling elite, as more than 1,000 Americans died and hundreds of thousands of poor and working class people lost everything in Hurricane Katrina.

The New Orleans visit was intended as a photo-op, with heartwarming footage of cheering school children and grateful citizens, but the reality of growing popular disillusionment and anger intruded when a college student challenged Obama during his appearance at a town hall meeting at the University of New Orleans.

Gabriel Bordenave, 29, cited the continued stalling by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on funds to rebuild the main health care facility for the poor of New Orleans, Charity Hospital. "I expected as much from the Bush administration," he told Obama, "but why are we still being nickel-and-dimed?"

Obama responded defensively with political boilerplate. His administration was "working as hard as we can as quickly as we can," he said, citing unspecified "complications" in coordinating efforts with state and local governments—although he had just defended Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin when they were booed by the crowd during introductions.

"I wish I could just write a check," he continued, and someone in the audience shouted out, "Why not?"

Obama was visibly put out, first by Bordenave's question,

then by the interruption. He proceeded to lecture his critics: "You say, why not? There's this whole thing about the Constitution." He then continued that in Washington, "everyone will attack you for spending money, unless you are spending it on them."

This was a thinly concealed slur. His audience of hurricane survivors, Obama was suggesting, were just another special interest group seeking money from the federal government. Bordenave later told the *New York Times*, "I kind of thought (the Constitution reference) was a blow-off answer."

While claiming that his administration would not follow the example of its predecessor in ignoring the suffering caused by Katrina, Obama mimicked one of the most notorious episodes of the Bush presidency. Bush left his Texas ranch to fly over the hurricane zone in early September 2005, on his way to Washington. Obama stopped off in New Orleans for three hours and 45 minutes on his way to a fundraising event in San Francisco.

At the Westin St. Francis Hotel, nearly 1,000 well-heeled supporters packed a ballroom, paying up to \$1,000 each, while 160 high rollers chipped in \$34,000 per couple for dinner with the president upstairs. Obama was introduced at the dinner by Mark Gorenberg, managing director of the venture capital firm Hummer Winblad. Joining them at the podium was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, whose husband is a multimillionaire real estate investor.

Obama's performance in New Orleans was so callous and arrogant that it drew criticism from two African-American columnists usually in the administration camp, both writing on their newspapers' web sites. Jim Mitchell of the *Dallas Morning-News* observed that the president "snaps at a person who asks a very reasonable question—why the area doesn't have a full service hospital back up and running so many years after Katrina." He added that Obama's response was "snide, elusive, and surprisingly, politically tone deaf."

Eugene Robinson of the *Washington Post* called Obama's "brief display of drive-by compassion" in New Orleans "by far the worst outing of his presidency thus far." Dismissing Obama's claim that it was difficult to expedite the flow of

funds to the storm-ravaged area, he wrote: “We now know that our government can make hundreds of billions of dollars available to irresponsible Wall Street institutions within a matter of days, if necessary. We can open up the floodgates of credit to too-big-to-fail banks at the stroke of a pen. But when it comes to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, well, these things take time.”

The contrast is indeed stark. While Obama boasted of having freed up \$1.5 billion in federal funds for Gulf Coast recovery projects since taking office, this compares to more than \$12 trillion made available to Wall Street financial interests—8,000 times more. Obama’s new money for Katrina recovery is less than one week’s expenditure on the war in Afghanistan.

The indifference of the president was demonstrated in the perfunctory character of his tour of the hurricane zone. He stopped at a public charter school in the Lower Ninth Ward, the same school visited by George W. Bush during one of his post-Katrina jaunts. The school sits in an area that remains 75 percent uninhabited. Then the presidential motorcade made its way to the University of New Orleans field house for an hour-long town hall, and Obama was on his way back to the airport.

Obama did not bother to visit the other areas hardest hit by Katrina, including the vast New Orleans East area, which remains the site of mile upon mile of flood damage, or the Mississippi and Alabama Gulf Coast.

It was not that Obama lacked time to go to these areas. The day after his stopover in New Orleans, he was back in the region for an event with George H. W. Bush, to mark the 20th anniversary of the former president’s “A Thousand Points of Light” foundation, at Texas A&M University. In all, Obama spent far more time with venture capitalists and Bush loyalists than with the people of New Orleans.

The visit to the Bush foundation was particularly provocative. It amounted to a message to the American people that when the next disaster hits, they should look to private charity, not the federal government, for assistance.

This is in keeping with the record of the Obama administration on reconstruction of the storm-ravaged Gulf Coast. Last month, the Institute for Southern Studies published a survey of 50 community leaders from coastal Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, who gave the Obama administration a D+ for its recovery efforts, only slightly better than the D- they awarded the Bush administration.

The only area where Obama rated a C- was in his willingness to “publicly acknowledge the challenges facing recovering Gulf Coast communities.” In other words, Obama is better than Bush in talking about recovery, but gets the same D’s for doing anything about it.

The administration’s lowest scores came on the biggest reconstruction issues: helping displaced families return home, rebuilding infrastructure, increasing protection against hurricanes, and reviving the coastal economy through job-creation.

The *New Orleans Times-Picayune* cited an Obama administration document revealing that the Second Congressional District of Louisiana, which comprises most of Orleans Parish and the entire city of New Orleans, was receiving the lowest amount of funding for any congressional district in the country from the economic stimulus package passed last February.

The social needs in the area remain enormous. According to a study by the Brookings Institution, there are 62,557 homes vacant or abandoned in Orleans Parish, about one third of the total number of homes in existence before Katrina. A survey showed that 40 percent of these abandoned or vacant homes showed signs of habitation, in some cases by the former owners attempting to rebuild, in other cases by squatters and the homeless.

The Katrina Recovery Index published by the Institute of Southern Studies gives a glimpse of the dimensions of the social crisis in New Orleans, more than four years after Katrina:

- 100,000 displaced persons from New Orleans are now living in Houston, Texas.
- The percentage of households with children in New Orleans has fallen from 30 percent to 20 percent.
- Only 752 federal housing vouchers have been issued in New Orleans; since the waiting list for vouchers was established, 16 people on it have died.
- Rents in New Orleans are up 40 percent since Katrina.
- Demand for emergency food relief at New Orleans-area food pantries is up 35 percent.
- 60 percent of New Orleans school children now attend privately-operated charter schools.
- 43 percent of the city’s medical facilities have not reopened since Katrina.
- Two-thirds of the city’s population reports chronic health problems, up 45 percent since 2006.
- The suicide rate in New Orleans is up 200 percent since Katrina, while only one local hospital provides in-patient mental health care.
- Louisiana ranks 50th among US states for overall health care quality.



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