

Obama preaches individual responsibility in flooded Memphis

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President Obama descended on the flood-damaged city of Memphis on Tuesday, taking photographs with residents and delivering a commencement speech at a local high school. While offering no substantial federal relief to ruined communities along the swollen Mississippi, the president used the day to promote his rightwing education policies, insisting that poverty could not be cited as an obstacle to achievement.

Speaking before the graduating class at Booker T. Washington High School, Obama extolled the virtues of individual hard work as the key to success, presenting himself as a model. The multimillionaire occupant of the White House, who owes his political fortunes to financial backing from Wall Street and other corporate interests, doled out a somewhat sugarcoated version of the social Darwinist nostrums of free market capitalism.

“Your diploma is not a free pass,” said the president, adding that the students faced many “challenges” and “setbacks” ahead. Having targeted Pell grants to low-income college students for cutbacks as part of his proposed federal budget, Obama knew whereof he spoke.

Booker T. Washington High School was chosen to hear Obama’s commencement speech because the school won the White House’s “Race to the Top” (RTT) Commencement Challenge.

RTT is a competitive federal funding program for public schools that rewards institutions that implement rightwing education policies. This includes the expansion of standardized testing, merit pay for teachers, the firing of instructors who fail to generate adequate test scores, and other punitive measures that shift the blame for the crisis in public education onto educators.

It also includes the expansion of privately owned and run charter schools, a policy designed to undermine the public school system and establish class-based education, with working-class youth receiving inferior schooling.

Having implemented these and other changes, Booker T. Washington High School, which is located in an impoverished, predominantly black neighborhood in

Memphis, saw its graduation rate increase from 55 percent in 2007 to 81.6 percent in 2010.

However, as noted by veteran teacher Gary Rubinstein and cited in a *Washington Post* blog by Valerie Strauss, the statistical increase in the school’s graduation rate directly corresponds with a drop in its enrollment levels.

Between 2007 and 2010, Booker T. Washington shed 25 percent of its student body. Rubinstein, a critic of RTT, attributes this decline to the closure of two housing projects near the school, which led to 200 fewer enrollees. “The poorest, and thus least likely to graduate, kids were exactly the ones that the school lost,” he wrote.

Apart from remarks made during his 35-minute photo op session with Memphis residents at the beginning of the day, Obama left the city without mentioning the devastation in the region. The inundation of parts of the city by floodwaters did not come up in his speech before the city’s students. Aside from driving by a portion of the Mississippi in his limousine on his way to Booker T. Washington High School, the president made no effort to tour the area.

The real attitude of Obama to the working people of Memphis, and the entire region, finds expression in his administration’s refusal to provide grants to help families ruined by the flooding, much less establish a government-funded public works program to rebuild and provide jobs for residents of the flooded areas. Apart from an inadequate increase in temporary housing and instructing residents that they can apply for federal disaster loans, no aid from the White House is forthcoming.

In Memphis, parts of the city remain inundated with filthy water that presents serious health hazards. In addition to bacteria, “snakes and other menacing-type things” are creating “unhealthy waters” and an “unhealthy environment,” warned Bob Nations, director of the Shelby County Office of Preparedness.

According to an estimate by researchers at Ball State University, total damages in the Memphis area alone could reach \$753 million. The cost of repairing public infrastructure, covering crop losses and financing emergency

response alone is believed to make up \$313 million of this total.

There is little chance the appropriate expenditures will be made. The city of Memphis is in the midst of imposing sweeping budget cuts in an effort to close a \$60 million shortfall. Officials are readying plans to privatize garbage pick-up, which will result in the elimination of 500 jobs.

The unwillingness of the White House to take any serious steps towards cleanup or rebuilding is not an oversight. As demonstrated in its proposal to axe \$4 trillion from the federal budget, the Obama administration is determined to dramatically reduce public spending on an array of social programs and services.

As in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the flooding along the Mississippi will lay the groundwork for federal, state and local governments to abandon the maintenance of infrastructure and services, privatize what remains, and transfer responsibility for meeting the needs of the population to “not-for-profit” companies. In Louisiana, the destruction and population displacement caused by Hurricane Katrina was used to vastly expand charter schools and largely dismantle the public education system in New Orleans.

The unwillingness of the federal government to help people is already becoming clear to area residents. The Memphis TN Great Flood of 2011 Facebook page features postings by distraught homeowners.

“If you are reading this and you are a current flood victim or a previous flood victim, get ready. FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] is not being very generous with funding. I called tonight to check the status on my claim and they are giving me less than \$500 to cover the losses in my home,” wrote Pamela Thompson on Saturday.

The effects of the flood continue to be felt all along the Mississippi River. South of Memphis, residents in Louisiana affected by the opening of the Morganza Spillway are continuing to pack up their belongings and leave their homes as part of a region-wide evacuation that is mandatory in some places and voluntary in others.

The spillway was opened in an effort to spare oil refineries downriver and relieve pressure on levees protecting the Louisiana cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Despite the devastation of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, during which 1,600 people died and large portions of the city were destroyed, the levees protecting the city have never been rebuilt to withstand major flooding on the scale of what happened six years ago. While water levels have dropped, inspectors continue to monitor the situation, with concerns remaining about the pressure building up behind the levee walls.

Approximately 2,500 people are in the Morganza Spillway

flood path, with another 24,000 to 25,000 facing the danger of backwater flooding as nearby rivers and waterways become inundated. Waters are continuing to rise after the spillway was opened on Saturday. They are expected to crest in different areas on Tuesday or Wednesday.

Throughout the area, known as “Cajun country,” residents are fleeing and doing whatever they can to protect their homes prior to leaving. In Butte La Rose, Rich Scialoia spent Sunday encasing his house in waterproof plastic, desperate to do anything that might help. Others are ringing their homes with sand bags.

The vast majority of homeowners in the area are too poor to afford flood insurance. For many, the flooding means the destruction of their homes and livelihoods. In the Kings neighborhood of Vicksburg, Mississippi, where most residents live in trailers, Dontaye Buck told the *New York Times*, “Out of the whole community, I would say it’s probably three families with flood insurance.”

Mary Ryder of Melville, Louisiana told MSNBC as she and her family prepared to drive to the other side of town to stay with relatives: “They say we have to leave town. We have nowhere to go. What are we going to do? I have no idea. We need help up here.”

In Saint Landry Parish in Louisiana, representatives from the sheriff’s office and national guardsmen went door-to-door on Sunday telling residents in the low-lying region to get out. In the event that they stayed, officials told them their safety would not be guaranteed.

In Morgan City, a barge is being sunk in Bayou Cheyenne in a last ditch effort to save the town from water coming down the Morganza Spillway and through the Atchafalaya Basin. “A permanent solution would be much better than having to sink a barge on a moment’s notice,” said Mayor Tim Matte. However, this would require a \$6 to \$7 million investment, a cost that outstrips the city’s coffers.



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