

Obama in Joplin: More empty promises to disaster survivors

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President Obama's visit to Joplin, Missouri Sunday was his third tour in a month at the site of a monumental natural disaster. He visited Tuscaloosa, Alabama April 29 after a spate of tornadoes struck across the South, then spoke with victims of the Mississippi River flooding in Memphis, Tennessee May 16.

The appearances follow what is now an established ritual. The president arrives and is shown scenes of devastation by local dignitaries. He shakes hands with disaster relief workers and hugs survivors. He then speaks before a local audience assembled for the purpose, usually invoking religious consolation and promising federal aid.

And a few hours afterwards, he is gone, the survivors soldier on, the television cameras turn away, and the federal response remains pathetically inadequate to the scale of the human suffering and material damage inflicted in the catastrophe.

Joplin confirms the pattern. A huge tornado, one of the strongest and largest ever recorded, devastated the city of 50,000 one week ago. It cut a swath a mile and a half wide and six miles long, killing 142 people, injuring more than 900, destroying or damaging 8,000 buildings. Some 44 people remain missing and unaccounted for.

Obama flew over the city on Air Force One, getting an aerial view of the destruction, met Governor Jay Nixon at the tarmac, and made a walking tour of some of the damage. Then he joined local government and clergymen to address a memorial service on the campus of Missouri Southern State University.

There was little difference in tone between Obama's remarks and those of the preachers who preceded and followed him. Like them, he emphasized the incomprehensibility of the tragedy, a key component of

the antirational, religious outlook. Like them, he emphasized individual charitable efforts, not the work of government agencies responsible for disaster relief. Like them, he quoted extensively from the Bible.

There were promises aplenty. "Your country will be with you every step of the way," he declared. "The cameras will leave, but we're not going away. That's not just my promise, it's America's promise."

The actual content of these promises is more than dubious. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the main distributor of emergency supplies and immediate financial aid, is grossly underfunded, and has been compelled to borrow nearly \$18 billion from the US Treasury to cover expenses dating back to hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

So far this year, FEMA has distributed \$149 million in aid, in response to disasters that have already caused hundreds of times that much in damage. The Mississippi River floods alone are believed to have caused more than \$9 billion in damage, while FEMA had paid out a total of only \$19.1 million as of March 31.

On May 24, the House Appropriations Committee approved \$1 billion in additional funding for FEMA disaster relief. But House Republicans said the \$1 billion would be paid for by cutting other appropriations, beginning with a \$1.5 billion Energy Department loan program for the production of fuel-efficient vehicles.

Comparing his visit to the Missouri city with his trip last month to Alabama, Obama said, "When we were in Tuscaloosa a few weeks ago, I talked about how I hadn't seen devastation like that in my lifetime," he said before the memorial service Sunday. "When you come here to Joplin, and it is just as heartbreaking, and in some ways more devastating," he added.

“Obviously, it is going to take years to build back.”

Neither the press nor the local politicians questioned this timeline, which is clearly based on a perspective of limited, even negligible, outside assistance. While Obama purports to take a less callous approach, such remarks confirm that the Democrats, like the Republicans, are committed to leaving the people of Joplin in the lurch.

Only a few hours after Obama’s appearance in Joplin, ABC News broadcast a report on the conditions in Tuscaloosa, one month after the tornado hit the city. Huge piles of debris still litter the city, where nearly 7,000 homes were destroyed on April 27.

Shirley Billingsley, 69, said her family worry they’ll have to sleep outside their wrecked home while they wait for emergency aid. “Obama came in and he said, ‘We’re gonna help everybody’,” she told ABC. “That’s a lie! Tell him Shirley said it, and she lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.”



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