

The New York Times and the Joplin tornado's "silver lining"

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The death toll from the May 22 Joplin, Missouri tornado now stands at 138, making it the deadliest tornado in the United States in over 60 years. The massive storm left hundreds more injured and destroyed thousands of homes and apartments.

Initial costs of the disaster are between \$3 billion and \$5 billion, but the economic shockwave will be felt for years. Thousands of residents lost their jobs. A major hospital that employed nearly 2,500 residents was destroyed. Two nursing homes, entire apartment complexes and multiple school buildings were obliterated. Water and sewerage systems, cell phone towers, roads, and other infrastructure were also affected. It is an unmitigated disaster for the people of the city, and indeed for the entire region, within which Joplin functions as an economic hub.

Under these conditions, the *New York Times*, the leading publication of US liberalism and the country's main national newspaper, published an article Tuesday, prominently displayed on the left column of its front page, under the headline, "Reconstruction Lifts Economy After Disasters."

The central purpose of the piece, authored by Michael Cooper, is to downplay the significance of the disaster, praise the possibilities for corporate profit-making and divert public anger over the absence of any significant government assistance. The article made its appearance at the same time that the *Times* largely dropped its coverage of aftermath of the storm, following President Obama's brief weekend visit to the city (during which, according to the headline of an earlier article in the *Times*, he delivered a "message of comfort").

The *Times* article begins by declaring that, "There is no silver lining to a funnel cloud, as anyone who survived the tornadoes can attest." After this pro forma disclaimer, Cooper quickly moves on to find precisely

such a "silver lining." "But reconstruction can help rebuild local economies as well as neighborhoods."

The article goes on to trumpet the "stirrings of economic activity." The large box store Home Depot, which collapsed on numerous people May 22, "began selling lumber and other supplies from a parking lot there on Tuesday as it prepared to open a 30,000-square-foot temporary store." Tamko Building Products, we are assured, "is well-positioned to prosper once reconstruction fully kicks in. Its main product—roofing shingles—is always in demand after a tornado."

"No one would suggest that disasters are a desirable form of economic stimulus," the *Times* again backhandedly acknowledges before continuing: "But economists who have studied the impact of floods, tornadoes and hurricanes have found that after the initial anguish and huge economic disruptions, periods of increased economic activity frequently follow as insurance money and disaster relief flow in to jump-start rebuilding."

There is no "silver lining"... but. Disasters are not the preferred "economic stimulus"... but Home Depot is selling more lumber. The complacency is nauseating.

Like the wealthy layer of society it represents, the *Times* cannot conceal its indifference to the ruination of thousands of lives. Nowhere does the article even mention that at least 134 Joplin residents (at the time of the writing) were killed in the tornado. Many of the dead were poor, elderly, young children, families living in unsafe housing with nowhere to shelter.

Nor does the *Times* note the fact that thousands of Joplin residents, rendered homeless by the storm, will not be able to rebuild because they lack insurance. Others will be under-compensated by insurance companies and slapped with higher premiums. Over 6,000 residents who have applied for federal help

confront long waits and insufficient assistance, much of it in the form of loans which they will have difficulty repaying.

As a substitute to a government program to rebuild Joplin, the *Times* lauds the creation of a few hundred temporary, low-wage laborer jobs: “Even as the natural disasters eliminated thousands of jobs, the needs of recovery have created others. Companies like Unified Recovery Group, which is clearing storm wreckage in Alabama and Tennessee, are hiring workers and subcontractors to cart off debris. Construction companies are hiring, too.”

The paper adds, “As insurance claims are paid, a further economic stimulus lies in the shopping that some people will do to replace lost goods.”

The article amounts to an apologia for the response of the Obama administration, and the Bush administration before it, to one disaster after another. Responsibility for recovery efforts have been left to local governments on the brink of insolvency, with “the private sector” and “market forces” determining the scale and shape of reconstruction. The administration—whose modus operandi was best summed up by former chief of staff Rahm Emanuel when he said, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste”—simply dispenses religious invocations and pledges of government aid that is not forthcoming.

The model for this “reengineering” following a disaster was provided by the Bush administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina, which was seized on as an opportunity for corporate profit-making, land speculation, the dismantling of the public school system and the clearing out of large sections of the population. Five years after Hurricane Katrina, the city has 100,000 fewer residents. The poorest segment of the population, which disproportionately bore the burden of the catastrophe, remains impoverished, displaced, or still struggling to rebuild.

Cooper's article takes note of Katrina only to proclaim that the economy had fully recovered a few years later.

The Joplin tornado struck just under a month after tornadoes demolished towns throughout the Deep South in late April. In Alabama, 243 people were killed, thousands were injured, and tens of thousands saw their homes damaged or destroyed.

In the weeks since, the Federal Emergency

Management Agency has offered only a few dozen single-wide trailers to homeowners and a few million dollars in clean-up aid. Damage estimates range upwards of \$5 billion for that storm system. A month after the disaster, Tuscaloosa, which suffered a direct hit and 41 deaths, has only cleared away a fragment of the millions of tons of rubble. Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox told *USA Today* in a May 26 interview that the city had raised only \$1.3 million for disaster relief.

The response of the *Times* to the Joplin tornado recalls its role in the BP Gulf of Mexico oil eruption, where the newspaper played a critical role in downplaying the scale of the disaster. The newspaper published a major article two weeks after the spill entitled “Gulf Oil Spill is Bad, but How Bad?” dedicated, as the WSWS noted at the time, to “chloroform[ing] mounting public anger against BP and the Obama administration.” The article appeared at the same time that the Obama administration and BP were deliberately underestimating the scale of the spill, which became one of the worst environmental disasters in US history.



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