

Politically driven hysteria over the New York City snowstorm that wasn't

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Tens of millions of people in America's largest metropolitan area this week were subjected to dire warnings of a "historic snowstorm," declarations of states of emergency and the virtual lockdown of New York City's eight million residents for a doomsday event that turned out to be a dusting of a few inches of snow.

State and local authorities—including Mayor Bill de Blasio, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie—defended themselves Tuesday and Wednesday over accusations of fear mongering, insisting that it was better to be safe than sorry. But their statements and actions in the hours before the storm cannot be interpreted so benignly.

The authorities and the news media created an atmosphere of impending catastrophe, triggering a run on supermarkets and gas stations for food, fuel and emergency supplies. Having done their best to shock and disorient the public, they then issued a series of "emergency" measures and "public safety" orders, including halting public transit and all automobile traffic under the threat of fines or even arrest.

The National Guard was also deployed in New York State for "storm response."

The response of the authorities follows an all too familiar pattern in "post 9/11 America."

There is a deliberate effort to keep the American people in a constant state of fear—over terrorism and "national security threats," and warnings about outbreaks of Ebola and other diseases. Real or exaggerated threats are utilized to declare states of emergency, suspend democratic norms and condition the population for armed troops on the streets.

The national news media—centered in New York City—takes up a large portion of its daily reporting with coverage of floods, mudslides, earthquakes, tornadoes

and lightning strikes. This sensationalist storm chasing is in lieu of any serious analysis of world events and helps conceal how the decisions made by the ruling elite each day imperil the world's people.

Then, with the utmost hypocrisy, the same politicians responsible for these antisocial policies—whether Cuomo, de Blasio, Christie or Obama—turn around and posture as defenders of "public safety."

According to media reports, state and local authorities had access to three major forecast models: the NAM (North American Mesoscale), the GFS (Global Forecast System), and the ECMWF (European Center for Medium Range Weather Forecasting). "In this case," CNN reported, "the NAM and the ECMWF both showed 2 feet of snow or more for New York City, while the GFS (which has just been upgraded this winter) showed a more conservative 6 to 12 inches."

The authorities and the media chose to present the worst-case scenario to the public. On Sunday—a day before the predicted snowfall—the mayor declared. "This will most likely be one of the largest blizzards in New York City history. It is not business as usual."

Before any snow began to fall, the governors of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut then declared states of emergency and imposed travel bans affecting tens of millions of residents. "This blizzard is forecasted to be one of the worst this region has seen, and we must put safety first and take all the necessary precautions," Governor Cuomo said in a statement. "Commuters and drivers need to get home before the storm completely cripples our transit networks and roads."

By 6 p.m. Monday night, Cuomo ordered the shutdown of all transportation, saying only emergency vehicles would be allowed on the streets of New York City—and roads in 13 state counties—as of 11 p.m. "If you violate this state order," he said, "it's a possible

misdemeanor; it's fines up to \$300." The governor also activated the New York National Guard, which dispatched 260 soldiers and airmen.

As the storm approached, the chairman of the Metropolitan Transit Authority, Thomas Prendergast, said there would be no reason to close the subway system, which is largely underground and protected from the snow, because "We'd be able to run trains."

By 11 p.m., however, even as it was becoming apparent that the worst snowfall was well to the east and north of New York City, Cuomo, apparently without consulting with Mayor de Blasio or the New York City transit command center, went ahead and shut down the subway system, the only remaining transportation in the city. This was the first time trains were halted because of snow in the 110-year history of the system, which serves more than four million commuters each day.

As it turned out, the subway system actually continued to run in order to keep the tracks clear, just without passengers.

"The closure will strand people and put lives at risk, not because the subways can't run, but because Cuomo wants to look good," a "transit insider" told the *Atlantic*. "I think it's a horrible, purely political decision, not based on anything that's needed. It seemed like cutting out a necessary lifeline unnecessarily."

With no bus service, taxis or cars running, the subway shutdown left late-shift workers trapped with no way to get home, forcing many to spend the night at their workplaces or anywhere else they could find to sleep.

The following day, millions of New Yorkers woke up to a rather pleasant winter morning—with a few inches, not feet, of snow on the ground. While the travel ban was lifted at 8:00 a.m. Tuesday, rail and subway service was running only on a limited basis and the streets remained largely deserted.

Schools did not reopen until Wednesday, when city and state workers also returned to work contemplating the loss of a day's pay in one of the most expensive places to live in the world.

On Tuesday, Mayor de Blasio defended the actions of the state, saying, "We are going to be very forceful in our messages to people when we sense danger."

One factor that no doubt contributed to the hysterical

response of de Blasio and the rest of the political establishment is concern over the eruption of social and class tensions in the financial center of American capitalism and one of the most unequal cities in the world. Every natural disaster uncovers the deep class chasm in America.

After Hurricane Sandy in 2012, the city's then-mayor, billionaire Michael Bloomberg and the utility giants made sure electricity was quickly restored to the New York Stock Exchange and the luxury high-rise apartments in Manhattan, while working-class and poor residents of the city were abandoned without water and electricity.

Aside from these considerations, the ruling class saw in the storm an opportunity to promote an atmosphere of hysteria and create new precedents for extraordinary state actions. Fearful of the eruption of popular opposition over the immense levels of social inequality and the retrograde policies of both big-business parties, the response of the political establishment to every potential disruption of the continued accumulation of wealth by the super-rich, even uncertain prospects of a heavy snowfall, is police state measures: lockdowns, shelter-in-place orders, etc.

This week in New York City, we saw the methods of the "war on terror" deployed to fight snowflakes falling from the sky.



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