

On 10-year anniversary of Katrina

Former presidents Bush and Clinton celebrate transformation of New Orleans

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31 August 2015

Former president George W. Bush flew into New Orleans Friday to speak at a local charter school as part of the week-long slate of official events commemorating Hurricane Katrina. The ceremonies were capped on Saturday, the anniversary of the date when the storm made landfall, with remarks by former president Bill Clinton at the city's professional basketball arena. Bush and Clinton's remarks followed those of President Obama on Thursday.

Taken as a whole, the dozens of speeches, roundtable discussions, parades and public conferences marking the tenth anniversary of the worst natural disaster in American history—compounded by decades of poverty and neglect—leave no doubt that the ruling elite considered it an occasion worthy of celebration. The Katrina catastrophe, which was seized upon by the political establishment to carry out a restructuring of class relations in the city, was presented as a net positive. Indeed, the word “celebration” featured regularly in the events.

The appearance Friday morning by George W. Bush drives this point home. No other politician is so singularly identified with the brutal and callous indifference to the plight of the city's poor, mostly black residents that typified the government response to the disaster. His return to the city 10 years later is tantamount to a criminal returning to the scene of the crime. Yet Bush was welcomed with open arms by Mitch Landrieu, the city's Democratic mayor, and then given a hero's welcome at a local charter school with hardly a protest from any section of the city's political establishment.

Speaking at Warren Easton Charter High School on the edge of the black working class neighborhood of Treme, where he also spoke on the one-year anniversary of Katrina, Bush seemed completely at ease. The polite applause from the auditorium was punctuated only by a

small handful of protesters as the event wound down to a close. As the BBC put it, “Ten years ago, the idea that President George W. Bush would receive several standing ovations in front of a predominantly African-American audience in New Orleans, might have been unimaginable.”

The choice of venue was itself significant. Warren Easton was closed down for a year after Hurricane Katrina, and the building was briefly considered for conversion into condominiums before it was finally reopened the following school year as a charter school, in part with funding from the foundation of former first lady Laura Bush. The administrators and board members for the school's charter operator declared in the media that they were thrilled to host Bush once again. Bush, Landrieu, and a school administrator even posed for pictures with the school's marching band.

Bush's 15-minute address at the school portrayed Katrina as an essentially random disaster for which he bore no particular responsibility. Pivoting away from the human loss of the storm, Bush invoked the supposed humanitarian role played during Katrina by occupying National Guard troops and local police officers. “I hope you remember what I remember, and that is 30,000 people were saved in the immediate aftermath of the storm by US military personnel, by Louisiana law enforcement, and by citizens who volunteered,” Bush said.

In fact, the deployment of 7,000 National Guard troops to the city—not for humanitarian reasons but for the purpose of protecting private property—effectively preempted any delivery of aid to the tens of thousands of residents stranded in the ruins of the city for days. The New Orleans Police Department was ordered by then-mayor Ray Nagin (since convicted on racketeering charges) shortly after the storm to cease rescue operations

in order to crack down on “looters” attempting to procure food and medical supplies for their families.

In addition to whitewashing his own role and that of the ruling elite as a whole, Bush focused his remarks on praising the wholesale conversion after the storm of the city’s public schools into privately run charters. Engaging in historical revisionism in order to portray charter schools as having some sort of popular mandate, Bush absurdly portrayed the charter school “reforms” as being the result of initiatives by city teachers, all of whom were in fact laid off after the storm to ease the transition to charter schools. “Isn’t that amazing,” Bush trumpeted, “The storm nearly destroys New Orleans, now New Orleans is a beacon for school reform.”

If Bush’s remarks passed largely without comment, it is because the entire political establishment agrees with them. They were virtually indistinguishable in content and tone from those made by Barack Obama a day earlier where, speaking from the sparsely populated ruins of the Lower Ninth Ward, he proclaimed that New Orleans “became a laboratory for urban innovation” after the storm, and is now “as entrepreneurial as any place in the country” (See Obama hails “entrepreneurial” transformation of New Orleans)

In keeping with this view, Donna Brazile, vice chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee, hailed Bush’s handling of the disaster to the press inside Air Force One while en route with Obama to New Orleans.

“Well, I’m one of those individuals that believes that under President Bush’s leadership we got it right,” Brazile said, “It was slow. ... The federal government had to figure out its role, and it took a while for the federal government to really figure out how to help us. And I think once the president made the decision that New Orleans would be rebuilt ... the president made a commitment and I think he kept his word.”

The brief remarks by Clinton the following evening were, if anything, even more aloof. The former president spoke at an event titled “Katrina 10 Commemoration: The Power of Community” in downtown New Orleans at the Smoothie King Center, home arena of the city’s professional basketball team. The atmosphere, replete with neon lights beaming down from the rafters and big screens flanking the stage, more resembled a rock concert than a commemoration of a disaster that claimed the lives of more than 1,800 people. Speeches by Clinton, alongside Mayor Landrieu, Democratic congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, and members of Congress from Louisiana,

were interspersed with musical performances by local acts.

None of the political issues raised by the storm and its aftermath entered into Clinton’s remarks. Instead, Clinton declared the anniversary a cause for raucous celebration. Clinton jovially recounted the times he had visited the French Quarter, which largely escaped the flooding and was immediately returned to working order after the storm while hundreds of thousands remained stranded.

“Lord only knows how many miles I have run through the French Quarter,” Clinton said. “Nothing sounds like the French Quarter. When I was president, I came here 10 times.” Clinton concluded his remarks by saying: “Laugh tonight and dance to the music. You earned it. And tomorrow, wake up and say, ‘Look at what we did. I bet we can do the rest, too.’”

Large numbers of city residents, however, were in no mood to celebrate. The city’s *Times-Picayune* newspaper was compelled to admit as much on Saturday, evidently concerned that scores of corporate-sponsored events had apparently failed to capture public attention, when it noted that one of the most-visited article on the paper’s web site on Saturday was a list of non-Katrina-related events.

The ruling elite, however, has every reason to celebrate. American capitalism quickly seized upon Katrina as an opportunity to remake a major American city in the interests of the rich. The entire city was converted into a test bed (or “laboratory,” to use Obama’s term), for wholesale privatizations, austerity measures and gentrification. Many of these methods have since been exported to other cities, most notably Detroit, devastated not by any natural catastrophe but by decades of deindustrialization.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the storm, the *World Socialist Web Site* commented, “The catastrophe unleashed by Katrina has unmistakably revealed that America is two countries, one for the wealthy and privileged and another in which the vast majority of working people stand on the edge of a social precipice.” The same may be said of the official commemorations 10 years later.



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