

The politics of the “blame game”

Bush rejects responsibility in Hurricane Katrina disaster

By Patrick Martin
9 September 2005

The Bush administration’s response to the social disaster unfolding in Louisiana and Mississippi is to deny any responsibility for the horrifying conditions facing more than one million people. White House officials, from Bush on down, have rejected all criticism of the federal government’s failure to prepare before Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf coast or respond adequately afterwards.

“I’m not going to engage in the blame game,” Bush press spokesman Scott McClellan said repeatedly at a press briefing Wednesday, when reporters sought a response on whether Bush had confidence in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Director Michael Brown. Bush and his congressional Republican defenders used the same phrase to rebuff any effort to think critically about the destruction of New Orleans and much of the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf coast, the biggest natural disaster in US history.

What is the meaning of this banal but mind-boggling phrase? Is there nothing to be learned from the cataclysm which has killed thousands, if not tens of thousands, in New Orleans and surrounding areas? Is it the case that no individual or institution can be held accountable for failures in myriad areas, from the planning and maintenance of adequate infrastructure to the preparation and execution of rescue and reconstruction?

This is a government and a ruling elite—Democratic as well as Republican—that endlessly preach the gospel of “personal responsibility” for the great mass of Americans who work for a living. When it comes to cutting federal social programs for the poor or restructuring the Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security systems, Bush is all for “personal responsibility.”

Finding a job, securing adequate health care coverage, paying for college education, saving for retirement—these are all obligations which should, in the view of the Republican Right, be placed squarely on individuals. That was the logic of the recent congressional passage of a “bankruptcy

reform” bill, signed into law by Bush, making it much harder for workers to escape the burden of debts caused, in the majority of cases, by sudden or severe illness, inadequate health insurance, or layoff. The bill takes effect October 17—just about the time many Katrina victims may be compelled to file for bankruptcy.

But when it comes to the performance of the ruling elite itself, including high government officials like Brown, Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, and Bush himself, that is another matter. Any attempt to fix responsibility, hold officials accountable, or remove them—even though the consequence would be departure to a well-paid retirement, not the colossal losses facing the victims of Katrina—is rejected out of hand.

One measure of the indifference at the White House came in an incident recounted by House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, who described a conversation with Bush on Tuesday when she urged him to fire Brown. “He said ‘Why would I do that?’” Pelosi told the *New York Times*. “I said because of all that went wrong, of all that didn’t go right last week.’ And he said, ‘What didn’t go right?’”

Bush & Co. denounce the “blame game” even as reports continue to emerge of gross indifference and incompetence, if not outright sabotage, in the operations of FEMA and other federal agencies responsible for disaster planning, relief and reconstruction. On Thursday, NBC found thousands of trailer homes still parked at a Georgia facility, although the state of Mississippi ordered them from FEMA more than a week ago to provide emergency housing. There were reports of hospital ships held offshore, doctors, nurses and other medical workers diverted from the disaster zone, and hundreds of buses blocked from entering the New Orleans area for post-storm evacuations.

Hurricane Katrina has laid bare the essential irrationality of the profit system and the human cost of the colossal social inequality it engenders, and discredited the claims, incessantly repeated by the media and political

establishment, that the capitalist market is the solution to all social problems.

The expenditure of a few billion dollars, to strengthen the New Orleans levees and revitalize the downstream delta marshland and barrier islands that long provided natural protection to the city, would have sufficed to prevent hundreds of billions in damages and save thousands of lives. But an economic system driven by the profit motive and a political system controlled by the biggest financial interests prevented such an elementary exercise in prudence and forethought.

Last year a planning exercise dubbed “Hurricane Pam” simulated a direct hit on New Orleans by a storm weaker than Katrina. The scientists and disaster management professionals who engaged in this simulation predicted inundation of the city and the death of tens of thousands. The response of the Bush administration was to propose hundreds of billions of additional tax cuts for the wealthy, while cutting spending on the New Orleans levees by more than 50 percent.

After virtual silence for a week, spokesmen for the Democratic Party on Wednesday began to criticize the Bush administration’s conduct, some more stridently than others, calling for an independent bipartisan commission to investigate the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. But these criticisms focused on a handful of officials, particularly Brown and Chertoff, while obscuring the deeper social issues.

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid sought to reduce the disaster to Bush’s personal laziness, sending a letter to the Homeland Security Committee demanding answers to questions about Bush’s vacation and whether it had any effect on the federal government’s response.

Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004, said in an interview, “What you see here is a harvest of four years of complete avoidance of real problem-solving and real governance in favor of spin and ideology.” Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean said, “The idea that somehow government didn’t care until it had to for political reasons, it’s appalling.”

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton appeared on several television news programs opposing the plans by the Republican leadership for an investigation of the Katrina disaster by a special House-Senate committee which would have a majority of Republicans. “I don’t think the government can investigate itself and I don’t think the government should be distracted from the main job, which is the recovery process that needs to go on,” she said on ABC’s “Good Morning America.”

Clinton, Reid and Pelosi are all pushing for the

establishment of an independent bipartisan commission modeled on the panel which delivered its report last year on the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. This only shows that what the Democrats are seeking is a cover-up more sophisticated than the crude one proposed by the Republicans.

All of the official investigations into 9/11, the lies used to justify the war in Iraq, and the Abu Ghraib torture scandal have served to protect the key institutions of the American state—the military and intelligence agencies, the White House, Congress—while at most a handful of underlings are punished or removed from their positions. The routine of whitewash and cover-up has become stereotyped and almost farcical.

In the case of Katrina, Bush first proposed an investigation on Tuesday—one which he claimed he would head himself. Then congressional Republicans proposed an investigation they would control. They were followed by the Democrats demanding a procedure in which they would have equal influence. (There are, of course, Democratic officials to protect as well, in the New Orleans and Louisiana governments and the Clinton administration).

Working people should reject all such investigations as futile and fundamentally dishonest. The government and its top officials, beginning with Bush and Cheney, must be held accountable, not just their political stooges like Brown. More than that, every major institution of the American ruling elite is implicated in the disaster: Congress, the Democratic and Republican parties, the military, the media.

The root cause of the disaster is the profit system itself, which all of these institutions uphold. Working people and young people must draw definite political conclusions from the destruction of New Orleans: it is time to build an independent political movement of the working class to replace the capitalist system with a socialist economy that is democratically and rationally planned to serve human need, not profit.

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