

# US media hails martial law general in New Orleans

By Bill Van Auken  
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The abject failure of American capitalist society in face of the human tragedy in New Orleans, and the disaster's exposure of the stark social polarization in the US, have proven deeply unsettling for the ruling elite and the more comfortable sections of the upper middle class.

In search of reassurance, the media has latched onto an unlikely hero—the US Army general who is overseeing what amounts to martial law in New Orleans, directing thousands of heavily armed troops in this largely deserted American city littered with floating corpses.

The media is systematically promoting Lt. Gen. Russel Honore. He is portrayed as the antidote to the miserable incompetence and negligence exhibited by every level of government in the first four days following the hurricane, when the poor, the elderly, the sick and infant children were left literally to die in the streets without aid.

Honore was first hailed by New Orleans' Democratic Mayor Ray Nagin as “one John Wayne dude,” a characterization that the television networks, followed by the print media, gleefully echoed. Now he is the subject of lengthy panegyrics in the press, extolled as the city's savior. Among the sickest and most fawning of these tributes was a piece published Monday in the “Style” section of the *Washington Post*.

“There's the swagger, and that ever-present stogie,” it reads. “There's the height and heft of his physique. And that barking voice with its font of perhaps impolitic obscenities... not to mention his penchant for not suffering fools, as is the prerogative of a three-star general.”

No cliché is spared in extolling the martial law commander. He doesn't speak, he “barks.” He doesn't walk, he “strides.” He is, the *Post* reporter tells us, “a

soldier's soldier, the man you want in the trenches with you, the kind of man who'll cover your back.”

The tone of the article, written by *Post* reporter Lynne Duke, is that of a lovesick schoolgirl, lacking a shred of objectivity, much less critical skepticism. Duke's colleagues working the story in New Orleans may have a somewhat more jaundiced view of the general, having been subjected to harassment and restrictions at the hands of the military.

Honore's “barking” has not infrequently been directed at anyone questioning the government's role in New Orleans. A prominent target of his “impolitic obscenities” has been reporters asking why relief did not come sooner.

He declared last week that he would impose “zero access” for the press on the long-delayed operation to recover the city's dead. The general claimed that it was a matter of “dignity,” though, given the failure to do anything to collect corpses rotting in the sun for 10 days, this seemed less than credible. The general was forced to rescind his censorship order in the face of court challenge by the CNN cable news network.

As head of the military's Task Force Katrina, Honore played a principal role in engineering an intervention that delayed any significant aid to the tens of thousands of people left without water, food, shelter or medical assistance during those first horrific four days.

His agenda was that of the Pentagon, which ordered the city sealed—no relief in, no evacuees out—until the military could intervene with overwhelming force to impose law and order and defend private property. He acted on the basis of plans and doctrines designed not for relief of human suffering, but suppression of civil unrest. The result was many more needless deaths. All this is conveniently forgotten in the media's lionizing of the “take-charge” general.

Lynne Duke was previously the *Post's* Johannesburg, South Africa correspondent, publishing a memoir of her “newswoman’s African journey” under the title *Mandela, Mobutu and Me*.

Her experiences in Africa convinced her of the advisability of US military interventions on the continent. Thus, in 2003 she wrote:

“The United States obviously cannot police the entire world... But it’s the way Washington decides where to intervene, and for whom, that stirs indignation... If the United States can help Kosovo Albanians, Iraqis, Bosnians, Israelis and Palestinians trying to settle their conflicts, why can’t it help Africans? Many may be forgiven for believing it is about race and the lesser value that the United States places on African lives.”

It is no surprise that someone who believes that racism has deprived Africans of the kind of “help” that Washington has bestowed upon the Iraqis would find in the military and a “barking” general the solution to the profound social crisis revealed by the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

She is hardly alone, however. If anything, a piece entitled “‘Man of Action’ What City Needed,” released Sunday by the Associated Press, was even more explicit. “To troops, he’s the ‘Ragin’ Cajun,’ an affable but demanding general barking orders to resuscitate a drowning city,” the article declared. “To his country, he’s an icon of leadership in a land hungry for a leader after a hurricane exposed the nation’s vulnerability to disasters.”

The content of these articles is both ridiculous and ominous. It would seem that those who seek to shape public opinion in America are promoting the idea that the country’s immense problems—and its “hunger for a leader”—may be answered by the rise of a military man on horseback.

There is an objective basis and a profound political logic behind such conceptions. The “vulnerability to disasters” of which the AP speaks is the product of more than a quarter century of attacks on social programs in general, and civilian disaster relief capabilities in particular.

Meanwhile, spending on the military has been exempted by Democrats and Republicans alike in their attacks on “big government,” leaving the Pentagon the only agency with the resources to mount a response to an event like Katrina. FEMA (Federal Emergency

Relief Agency), which is ostensibly in charge of such operations, proved itself utterly unprepared and ineffectual, in the end serving primarily as a stalking horse for the military, diverting and blocking aid until there were sufficient “boots on the ground.”

While FEMA had made no serious preparations for responding to the catastrophe, the Pentagon had a well-rehearsed strategy and the troops to implement it. In tandem with the growth of militarism abroad and the attacks on democratic rights at home, the US military has made extensive preparations for the takeover of American cities and the imposition of martial law throughout the country.

It is not merely a matter of turning to the military out of expediency, however. There are deep concerns within America’s financial oligarchy about the country’s political stability. The gulf separating the super-rich at the top of the economic ladder—who control both major parties—and the great majority of American working people has become so great as to render any form of democracy unworkable.

The storm that hit New Orleans brought this social chasm starkly into the open and, with it, the potential for social upheavals. The greatest fear within the American establishment is that out of this deepening crisis there will emerge a mass political challenge to the profit system. These are the conditions in which a martial law general is being offered as an “icon of leadership.”

The shameless promotion of General Honore must serve as a political warning. There is no significant section of the US ruling elite that is committed to the defense of democratic rights and the maintenance of democratic forms of rule. To defend its vast wealth and power against the social demands of the majority, the American plutocracy is prepared to resort to the methods of police-military dictatorship.

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