

Washington tries to evade political responsibility for Katrina's devastating impact

By Joseph Kay
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In the wake of Hurricane Katrina's devastating impact, Washington, abetted by the US media, has begun a process of historical falsification aimed at obscuring government responsibility for the enormous extent of damage, particularly to the city of New Orleans. Definite decisions were made that served to exacerbate the hurricane's effects and endanger the lives of tens of thousands of people.

In its lead editorial on Thursday, "Katrina's Awful Wake," the *Wall Street Journal* began by declaring, "Right now, the lesson chiefly worth noting is also the most obvious: All the cunning of man cannot defeat the greatest fury of nature." Walter Baumy, chief of engineering for the US Army Corps of Engineers division in New Orleans, said on Wednesday that there was nothing authorities could have done to prepare for Katrina and its aftermath. "There was a plan in place," he said, but the hurricane "was much more than envisioned. The city has never seen anything like this."

President Bush himself declared in an interview on ABC's "Good Morning America" Wednesday, "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees."

Such statements are made for a definite purpose: to draw attention away from the long history of warnings that the city was unprepared to weather a direct hit from a major hurricane. Calls to upgrade the levee system and make other preparations to protect the city from flooding have been ignored for years, as have calls to develop plans to evacuate the tens of thousands of people lacking their own transportation.

With the frequency of serious hurricanes increasing over the past decade, and with a number of close calls including Hurricane Georges in 1998 and Hurricane Ivan in 2004, it was understood that it was only a matter of time before a category four or five storm made a direct hit on New Orleans. Proposals to improve the city's defenses have been rejected as too costly, and even the existing projects to maintain the levee system and restore protective wetland areas have been underfunded.

The existing levee system in New Orleans, which protects the below-sea level city from the water that surrounds it, has been in place for over a century. It has been upgraded numerous times, most recently in response to Hurricane Betsy in 1965. Betsy was a Category 3 storm, and the levee system was designed only to protect the city from a similar intensity storm at best. Hurricane Katrina was a Category 4 hurricane when it struck New Orleans Monday morning.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Georges there were a series of initiatives to investigate the upgrading of the levee system. On

November 18, 1998, *The Times-Picayune* reported that the Orleans city council of St. Bernard Parish, just east of New Orleans proper and one of the areas hardest hit by Katrina, "asked Congress...for money to study the New Orleans hurricane levee system in order to improve the community's protection from hurricanes as strong as Georges or Mitch [also in 1998]...The move comes after a request last week from the Army Corps of Engineers asking local governments to lobby federal officials to upgrade the levee system to withstand a Category 4 or 5 hurricane."

In an article from March 17, 2001, the paper quoted Al Naomi, senior project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers as noting, "Had [Georges] hit us directly, our levees would not have protected us," since the surge accompanying such a powerful storm would extend above the heights of the levees. The Army Corps of Engineers headed a project that would evaluate the threat and propose possible solutions.

A December 1, 2001 article in the *Houston Chronicle* examined the extreme vulnerability of New Orleans to a hurricane from the Gulf. Earlier that year, the Federal Emergency Management Agency ranked the damage to New Orleans from a hurricane as one of the three likeliest and most catastrophic disasters in the US. The *Chronicle* wrote: "In the face of an approaching storm, scientists say, the city's less-than-adequate evacuation routes would strand 250,000 people or more, and probably kill one of 10 left behind as the city drowned under 20 feet of water."

The article pointed to the fact that over a period of decades, no serious steps had been taken to upgrade the city's protection. "It's been 36 years since Hurricane Betsy buried New Orleans 8 feet deep. Since then a deteriorating ecosystem and increased development have left the city in an ever more precarious position. Yet the problem went unaddressed for decades by laissez-faire government, experts said."

One solution that scientists and officials were looking at was an extensive project to rebuild protective wetlands, which slow down approaching hurricanes. This natural barrier had been eroded over a sustained period, in part due to the levee system itself, which prevents silt from the Mississippi from rejuvenating the wetlands. A Congressional act in 1990 created a task force funded with \$40 million a year, but this was thoroughly inadequate, only slowing the destruction of the wetlands by a very small amount.

The *Chronicle* noted, "Other possible projects include restoration of barrier reefs and perhaps a large gate to prevent Lake Pontchartrain from overflowing and drowning the city. All are multibillion-dollar projects." None of these projects have received adequate funding,

even though computer models predicted the deaths of tens of thousands and a loss of tens of billions of dollars in the event that a Category 4 or 5 hurricane hit the city.

Heightening the system of levees to provide greater protection would have cost about \$1 or \$2 billion. Another proposal that would address some of the long-term geographical problems in New Orleans, such as wetland degradation, had a price tag of \$470 million annually over 30 years, for a total of \$14 billion.

All of these projects have fallen by the wayside. Funding for social infrastructure has been neglected over a period of decades by both Republican and Democratic administrations, in favor of policies designed to enrich a tiny layer of the population. Most recently, the costs of the war in Iraq and Bush's tax cuts for the rich have played a direct role. Federal funds for the city aimed at protecting it against hurricanes and floods, authorized by Congress in 1995 and limited to begin with, have largely dried up over the past five years.

According to an August 30 article by Will Brunch of *Editor & Publisher*, the Army Corps of Engineers, which administers the federal funds, "never tried to hide the fact that the spending pressures of the war in Iraq, as well as homeland security—coming at the same time as federal tax cuts—was the reason for the strain." The article continues, "At least nine articles in the *Times-Picayune* from 2004 and 2005 specifically cite the cost of Iraq as a reason for the lack of hurricane- and flood-control dollars."

The cuts in funding have continued up to the time of the hurricane itself. A June 2005 article in *New Orleans CitiBusiness* noted that in fiscal year 2006, "the New Orleans district of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is bracing for a record \$71.2 million reduction in federal funding. It would be the largest single-year funding loss ever for the New Orleans district, Corps officials said...One of the hardest-hit areas of the New Orleans district's budget is the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project [SELA], which was created after the May 1995 flood to improve drainage in Jefferson, Orleans and St. Tammany parishes. SELA's budget is being drained from \$36.5 million awarded in 2005 to \$10.4 million suggested for 2006 by the House of Representatives and the president."

In the wake of Katrina, local officials have also been quick to blame those trapped in the city during the hurricane for not getting out on time. Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco said on Wednesday, "We begged all those people to get out. Even those with limited circumstances were given the opportunity." Terry Ebbert, chief of homeland security for New Orleans, suggested on Monday that all of those still in the city were there of their own volition. He demonstrated the indifference and callousness with which the government views those most devastated by the hurricane when he said, "Some of them, it was their last night on Earth. That's a hard way to learn a lesson."

The same line has been parroted by the media. A *Washington Post* article on Thursday ("In New Orleans, a Desperate Exodus") referred to those still in New Orleans as "people who had *resisted previous evacuation orders*, including many elderly and infirm residents" (emphasis added).

In fact, the government has long known that in the event of a major hurricane requiring an evacuation of the city, more than 100,000 people would be unable to get out, mainly for lack of transportation. In an article entitled "Left Behind" published in the *Times-Picayune* in 2002, the paper warned, "Once it's certain a major storm is about to hit, evacuation offers the best chance for survival...And 100,000 people without transportation will be especially threatened...A large

population of low-income residents do not own cars and would have to depend on an untested emergency public transportation system."

The response of city officials to the problem of evacuating the poor has been to leave them to fend for themselves. A little over a month before Hurricane Katrina hit, a July 24 article in the *Times-Picayune* reported, "City, state and federal emergency officials are preparing to give the poorest of New Orleans' poor a historically blunt message: in the event of a major hurricane, you're on your own."

The paper continued, "In scripted appearances being recorded now, officials such as Mayor Ray Nagin, local Red Cross Executive Director Kay Wilkins and City Council President Oliver Thomas drive home the word that the city does not have the resources to move out of harm's way an estimated 134,000 people without transportation...Officials are recording the evacuation message even as recent research by the University of New Orleans indicated that as many as 60 percent of the residents of most southeast Louisiana parishes would remain in their homes in the event of a Category 3 hurricane."

As the storm approached, city officials were cognizant of the fact that their hastily ordered evacuation order could not be heeded by large sections of the population. An Associated Press report on the evening of August 27, about 36 hours before the storm hit, noted that "at least 100,000 people in the city lack the transportation to get out of town." The service quoted 74-year-old Hattie Johns: "I know they're saying 'Get out of town,' but I don't have any way to get out...If you don't have no money, you can't go."

In addition to lacking transportation, many of the city's poor had no way of paying for hotel rooms. Since no government agency—city, state or federal—would provide funds to those turned into refugees, these people had no choice but to remain in their houses and hope that the storm passed. Perhaps thousands of these people have drowned in the floods brought on by Katrina.

While some damage from the massive hurricane was inevitable under any conditions, the enormous and unprecedented devastation of New Orleans was a product of definite policies, for which the US ruling elite and its political representatives bear definite responsibility.

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