

Hurricane Katrina and the “war on terrorism”

By Joe Kay
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On Wednesday, a House Select Committee issued a report on its investigations into the government’s preparations and response to Hurricane Katrina. On the same day, Michael Chertoff, the homeland security secretary, testified before the Senate Homeland Security Committee and was questioned about the actions of his department in the disaster.

The 520-page report by the House committee contains a wealth of information on different aspects of the government’s lack of preparations and inadequate response. It would be well worth a serious examination as a partial exposition of the responsibility of Bush administration and other government officials in compounding the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, which destroyed most of the city of New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf Coast.

However, both the report and the Senate investigations are designed ultimately as whitewashes, obscuring the most essential questions raised by the hurricane.

There has, for example, been no examination of the role of social inequality and the consequences of decades of right-wing policies, as a result of which the maintenance of social infrastructure, such as the New Orleans levee system, has been ignored. The House report, written by a committee composed entirely of Republicans, begins with a reference to former House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s statements about the inherent inefficiencies of “bureaucratic” as opposed to “entrepreneurial” government. This is a clear signal that there will be no proposals for increased spending on social programs or planning as a response to the conditions of poverty and infrastructural decay revealed by the hurricane.

There is another question that is nowhere being seriously raised, let alone answered, in the various investigations and accompanying media commentary. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration announced a “war on terrorism.” As part of this war, it was claimed, the government has dedicated itself to the protection of the American people, to the preparation for another massive attack, and to planning for the subsequent disaster management. How is one to explain the fact that, after four years of supposedly single-minded focus on this question, the government demonstrated itself utterly incapable of dealing with precisely such a disaster?

No one can touch this question in the media or political establishment because it reveals clearly the complete fraud of the “war on terrorism”—the central lie upon which the Bush administration’s domestic and foreign policy depends.

The focus in both the House report and the Senate investigations has been on the incompetence of certain administration officials, particularly the former head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Michael Brown, and DHS secretary Chertoff. The central lesson that the House report seeks to draw is that “Katrina was a failure of initiative. It was a failure of leadership.”

The report cites several examples of this failed leadership, including the absence of preparatory measures taken before the hurricane hit, even though the “crisis was not only predictable, it was predicted.” It states that “critical elements of the National Response Plan were executed late, ineffectively, or not at all” and that many of the problems created by the hurricane were not anticipated. Communications were hindered, medical personnel and supplies were not deployed, evacuations were delayed for days, housing plans were “haphazard and inadequate.”

According to the report, the blame for this state of affairs lies largely with certain officials who lacked “initiative.” In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the report states, the US was “again confronted with the vast divide between policy creation and policy implementation ... between theory and practice.” In other words, what is at issue is the failure of the government to carry through on plans that had been drawn up, implementing the policies established as part of the “war on terrorism.”

The Senate investigations have proceeded along the same lines. The Homeland Security Committee has heard testimony from a number of officials, including Brown and Chertoff. Brown’s main line of defense against charges of incompetence has been that he had in fact informed top administration officials early on about the magnitude of the disaster, and that he has been used as the scapegoat for wider governmental failures. On Wednesday, Chertoff responded to criticisms from senators by claiming that he had delegated responsibility to Brown who, he was given to understand, had everything under control. Taken together, the Senate testimony reveals a government in which no one much cared about what was going

on in New Orleans, in which no one felt they had a particular responsibility for dealing with the crisis.

Senator Susan Collins, the Republican chairman of the committee, listed some of the examples of gross negligence in her opening remarks: “The failure to promptly order the buses Michael Brown promised. The failure to deliver essential commodities for victims at the convention center until two days after Mr. Brown apparently became aware of their plight. The failure to quickly process requests for vital commodities throughout Louisiana and Mississippi and to track their delivery. The failure to field more search and rescue and emergency medical teams at the onset of the flooding. The failure to respond rapidly to a devastated telecommunications system.” And so on.

However, the Senators deliberately avoided dealing with any of the more basic issues, focusing their questions on secondary matters and questions of individual “initiative.” Collins’s two questions to Chertoff were: Why did you appoint Michael Brown as the principal federal official in charge of responding to Katrina?—and, Why did you go off on the day after the hurricane to attend a conference on avian flu? Senator Joseph Lieberman, the ranking Democrat, took a slightly different tack, asking why more decisive action was not taken before the hurricane hit the coast.

No one sought to deal with issues of social inequality revealed in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane and in the ensuing months. The chasm between the senators and executive branch officials, on the one hand, and the masses of ordinary Americans on the other, was revealed in an incident near the beginning of the hearing. One man in the audience spoke out and denounced FEMA’s decision to start evicting hurricane survivors from their homes. He was told to stop talking and that he could stay if he agreed not to say anything further. A security guard nevertheless took him away, although he was apparently allowed back in later to hear the remainder of the hearings.

No one thought to ask Chertoff, the head of the department that is nominally charged with responding to natural disasters and terrorist attacks, what precisely the huge agency has been doing since it was established three years ago. According to the DHS web site, the department is tasked in part with “preparing for natural disasters and terrorist attacks through preventative planning, technology, and coordinated efforts” and with utilizing “a full range of state, local, and private partnerships to alleviate the effects of a potential disaster.” What has the war on terrorism been about if not developing mechanisms for preparing for the type of situation created by Hurricane Katrina?

Since the attacks of September 11, Bush has declared on innumerable occasions that his “most sacred duty” is to “protect the American homeland,” that the greatest responsibility of the executive branch is to secure the safety of the American people. And yet when a situation arises in which

the “American homeland” is threatened, when the safety of the American people is in danger, when a disaster response is required, all of these preparations amount to ... zero.

There were no preparations for dealing with an event such as Hurricane Katrina because the entire purpose of the “war on terrorism” has not been to respond to a disaster, natural or otherwise. Rather it has been used as a pretext to carry out a massive expansion of US militarism and an unprecedented attack on democratic rights in the United States.

The Homeland Security Department in particular was established to coordinate US intelligence agencies and beef up the military-police apparatus of the American government. The purpose of the department was reflected in the personnel chosen to run it. Chertoff’s main qualification to replace Tom Ridge, the first DHS secretary, was his role in the Justice Department, where he helped push through the Patriot Act and oversaw the mass round-up of Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants in the weeks following September 11. He received the near-unanimous support of both the Republicans and the Democrats during the confirmation hearings.

Chertoff was chosen only after Bush’s initial choice, Bernard Kerik—who can best be described as a police thug—was compelled to withdraw his nomination to avoid revelations of incessant criminality. FEMA, the disaster response agency, has been burdened with a series of political hacks and cronies of Bush, of whom Michael Brown was only the most incompetent. The agency was treated as a means of granting political favors.

The “war on terrorism” has been used as a catch-all pretext for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Patriot Act, domestic spying, and a host of other right-wing and antidemocratic measures. Both at home and abroad, the American ruling class has used the attacks of September 11—for which there has never been a proper investigation—to pursue a policy designed to further enrich itself, while laying the groundwork for the suppression of any political opposition to its rule.

The entire political and media establishment in the United States accepts the lie of the war on terrorism. This is why the Democrats are never able to seriously challenge the administration on anything. To challenge to the charade of the war on terrorism is to challenge the social interests it has been manufactured to support, but both political parties support these interests. Hurricane Katrina exposed to the world not only the enormous level of social inequality in the United States, but also the massive fraud used to bolster this inequality. Everything will be done to obscure these lessons.

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