

Media and political establishment begin to move on as Houston residents return to devastated city

By Tom Hall
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As the floodwaters begin to recede along the Texas Gulf Coast, hundreds of thousands of displaced residents are returning to scenes of devastation.

Approximately 156,000 dwellings have been flooded. An estimated one million cars have been destroyed in a sprawling city where access to a vehicle is a basic necessity. The city of Beaumont, Texas, east of Houston, still does not have clean drinking water, nearly a week after the city's water treatment facilities went offline.

Conditions have been created for any number of public health crises, from mosquito-borne diseases and bacteria-infested floodwaters, to contamination from chemical plants, oil refineries and Superfund sites. Authorities carried out a controlled burn on Sunday at a chemical plant in Crosby, Texas, where fires have been raging after floodwaters knocked out the facility's generators. The immense psychological toll of the hurricane will also likely produce a mental health crisis in the region, as in New Orleans, when the area experienced a suicide epidemic in the months after Katrina.

The devastation along the Gulf Coast could be repeated within a few days by Hurricane Irma, which has been upgraded to Category 4 as it makes its way through the Atlantic Ocean. Current forecasts predict that Irma will pass near Puerto Rico, Haiti and Cuba, before making landfall in the United States near Miami, the 8th largest metropolitan area.

While the full impact of Hurricane Harvey is only beginning to be felt, the American political establishment and the corporate media are moving to put it behind them as quickly as possible. Over the past two days, their focus has shifted to North Korea,

seizing upon the North Korean government's alleged test of a hydrogen bomb to issue provocative war threats while burying the ongoing catastrophe in Texas.

From the beginning, the media has sought to cover up the social and political causes of the devastation wrought by the hurricane, avoiding any discussion of the neglect of infrastructure that scientists have warned about for years, and of the incompetent and indifferent response of government officials to the catastrophe.

The *New York Times*, which sets the tone for the rest of the American media, has run a series of articles minimizing the impact of the storm and its class implications. On Thursday, the *Times* published an article, "Storm With 'No Boundaries' Took Aim at Rich and Poor Alike," which explicitly rejected any comparisons with Hurricane Katrina in 2005, in which the immense class divide in New Orleans was revealed by "the desperation of the poor stranded at the Superdome and the devastated, largely black, low-income neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward, which were among the ones most likely to suffer catastrophic flooding and the last ones to recover."

It is, however, the poor who will be most devastated by Harvey as with Katrina, without access to insurance and unable to rebuild on the paltry aid from the federal government, mainly in the form of loans.

The insurance industry is expected to pay out only \$10-\$25 billion in claims resulting from the storm, a tiny portion of the \$180 billion in estimated damage. Most homeowners will receive no insurance payments for flooding damage because they do not own flood insurance, which is optional outside of federally designated flood zones. The insurance industry is sitting on between \$150 and \$300 billion of excess

capital, according to Barron's, equivalent to between 80 to 170 percent of the total cost of the storm.

The federal government will make available \$7.8 billion dollars for relief funding, based on the initial proposal from the Trump administration. Even this, however, will not go towards new or expanded programs, but will primarily be used to fund the Federal Emergency Management Administration's existing Disaster Relief Fund, which caps payments to individuals at \$33,000 (with the majority receiving far less).

The other main source of "relief" funding will come in the form of loans from the Small Business Administration, headed by former pro wrestling executive Linda McMahon. Anyone applying for SBA funds must prove that they will be able to pay back their loans before their application is accepted, with the vast majority of applicants rejected, according to Politico.

The *Times* acknowledges that there are "huge differences between the options open to the poor and the well-to-do," before insisting on its basic point: "What is clear is the devastation is connecting people of disparate means in one common experience: loss."

The other major theme in the media coverage is that life is quickly returning to normal in Houston. On Sunday, the *Times* ran an article, "21 Miles of Highway, Snapshots of a Resilient Houston," which enthused that Houston "can often be a place of remarkable heart and grit, a city built on inhospitable ground that fully expects to rebuild from the storm's ravages." Another *Times* article proclaims, "Hurricane to Cost Tens of Billions, but a Quick Recovery is Expected."

The presentation of a quick and full recovery is aimed at obscuring the extent of the destruction, covering up for the paltry character of the government response, and setting the stage for businesses to resume profitable operations, and even seize on the opportunity.

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner, a Democrat, proclaimed on Sunday that "the City of Houston is open for business." He continued, "Look, people are feeling good. Even at this shelter where we are right now... We're not going to engage in a pity party." Here Turner echoes the delusional and callous statement by Trump the previous day at a Houston shelter, when he

declared, "As tough as this was, it's been a wonderful thing," and "They're really happy with what's going on." Neither Trump nor Turner's comments met with any significant backlash in the press.

As reflected in the media response, the ruling class is pulling together in response to Harvey, not to make the people of Houston whole, but to cover their own tracks.

Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer, the top-ranking Democrats in the House of Representatives and the Senate, respectively, issued a joint statement indicating their willingness to work with the Trump administration on its domestic agenda, which includes a massive corporate tax cut. "Providing aid in the wake of Harvey and raising the debt ceiling are both important issues, and Democrats want to work to do both ... Given the interplay between all the issues Congress must tackle in September, Democrats and Republicans must discuss all the issues together and come up with a bipartisan consensus," the statement said.

The response in the media and the political establishment follows what is by now a well-worn pattern repeated after every major disaster, whether a hurricane, flood, tornado or wildfire. During the events themselves, they avoid any serious examination of the social and political conditions that prepared it. Once the waters recede, fires are extinguished, or the winds stop, the media works as rapidly as possible to divert popular attention from the class issues raised by the disaster to topics in line with the basic strategic interests of the American ruling class.

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