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## **HURRICANE SPECTACLES AND THE CRISIS OF THE BUSH PRESIDENCY**

On the weekend of August 27-28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hurtled toward the Louisiana coast. With winds up to 175 miles per hour it was deemed a Hurricane 5, the most dangerous on the Saffir-Simpson scale. The media had been warning that a big hurricane was going to strike the Gulf coast and was heading straight for New Orleans for days prior to its eventual landing on Monday, August 29. Reports had focused on the potentially catastrophic threats to New Orleans, noting how much of the city was perilously below sea-level and how flooding threatened its precarious levee and canal system that protected the city from potential catastrophe. There were copious media speculations that this could be “the big one,” prophesized for years and documented in government and media reports, warning that New Orleans could be devastated by a major hurricane. Accordingly, the mayor of New Orleans and state officials had ordered the city evacuated, while the Governor of Louisiana declared a “state of emergency,” putting the federal government in charge.

Despite all the warnings, there appeared to be utterly inadequate preparation in the days preceding the well-forecast hurricane and for days after it was apparent that this was indeed a major catastrophe. Although the New Orleans mayor ordered evacuation just before the storm was to hit, tens of thousands, mostly poor and black people, remained behind because they had no transportation or funds to leave the city. Tens of thousands of the remaining citizens were herded into the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center to ride out the storm, without proper food and water, sanitary facilities, police protection, or other basic necessities. Although the crowds survived the storm, which did not strike New Orleans directly, and while the storm was weaker than initially predicted, Hurricane Katrina inflicted tremendous damage when on Monday September 29 the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal levee was breached, others cracked, and 80-90% of the city lay under water.<sup>1</sup>

### HURRICANE DISASTER RESPONSE: MIA

Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath unleashed one of the most astonishing media spectacles in U.S. history. Houses and towns along the Gulf coast in Louisiana and Mississippi were destroyed and flood surges wreaked havoc miles inland. New Orleans was buried in water and for several days, the crowds in the Superdome and Convention Center were not given food, water, or evacuation and there were reports of fighting, rape, robbery, and death, some exaggerated as we shall see below. Indeed, no federal or state troops were sent to the city in the early days of the disaster, and thousands were trapped in their homes as the flood waters rose and there were widespread images of looting and crime.

Just as President Bush remained transfixed reading “My Pet Goat” to a Florida audience of schoolchildren after 9/11, a spectacle preserved on the Internet and memorialized by Michael Moore in Fahrenheit 9/11, so too was the president invisible in the aftermath of Katrina (as he had been after the Asian Tsunami). Bush remained on a five-week vacation during the first days of the disaster punctuated by a visit to a private event in Arizona where he bragged about how well things were going in Iraq, comparing the war there that he initiated to World War II, inferring that he was FDR. The next day Bush was shown clowning at a fundraiser in San Diego, smiling and strumming a guitar, and again bragging about Iraq and touting his failed domestic policies, leading commentator David Jenkins to exclaim:

The last few weeks have been irrefutable proof that America is being wrecked and mismanaged by the most incompetent, dangerous and out of touch boobs ever to obtain power. Any American with even a tiny amount of conscience who watched those images from New Orleans shook their heads with disbelief and shame that something like this should happen within our own borders in these modern times. As pictures of floating corpses glared at us through our TV sets, we were treated to photo-ops of our supposed leader golfing, blithering about Social Security, eating cake and strumming a guitar. Meanwhile, our Secretary of State [Rice] shopped for shoes and took in a show while the Vice President [Cheney] shopped for a house in a ritzy Maryland neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

During Bush’s first visit to the disaster area, he made inappropriate jokes about how he knew New Orleans during his party days all too well and bantered that he hoped to visit Republican Senator Trent Lott’s new house upon hearing that his beachfront estate was destroyed. In a fateful comment, Bush told his hapless FEMA director Michael Brown on camera: “You are doing a heck of a job, Brownie.” Bush’s first visit to the area kept him away from New Orleans and isolated from angry people who would confront him. His visit to the heavily damaged city of Biloxi, Mississippi was preceded by a team that cleared rubble and corpses from the route that the president would take, leaving the rest of the city in ruin. The same day, in an interview with Diane Sawyer, Bush remarked “I don’t think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees” at a time when the media had circulated copious reports of previous warnings by scientists, journalists, and government officials concerning dangers of the levees breaching and catastrophic flooding in the city of New Orleans, much of which was dangerously below sea level.

Bush’s response to the catastrophe revealed all the weaknesses of the Bush presidency: immature frat-boy, good-old boy behavior and banter; political cronyism; a bubble of isolation by sycophantic advisors; an arrogant out-of-touchness with the realities of the sufferings his policies had unleashed; a general incompetence; and belief that image-making can compensate for the lack of public policy.

#### THE OTHER AMERICA

But the media spectacle of the hurricane, which dominated the U.S. cable news channels for days and was heavily covered on the U.S. network news, showed images of unbelievable suffering and destruction, depicting thousands of people without food and water, and images of unimaginable loss and death in a city that had

descended into anarchy and looked like a Third World disaster area with no relief in sight.

The spectacle of the poor, sick, and largely black population left behind provided rare media images of what Michael Harrington (1963) described as “the other America,” and the media engaged in rare serious discussions of race and class as they tried to describe and make sense of the disaster. As John Powers put it:

Suddenly, the Others were right in front of our noses, and the major media predominantly white and pretty well-off — were talking about race and class. Newspapers ran front-page articles noting that nearly six million people have fallen into poverty since President Bush took office — a nifty 20 percent increase to accompany the greatest tax cuts in world history. Feisty columnists rightly fulminated that, even as tens of thousands suffered in hellish conditions, the buses first rescued people inside the Hyatt Hotel. Of course, such bigotry was already inscribed in the very layout of New Orleans. One reason the Superdome became a de facto island is that, like the city’s prosperous business district, it was carefully constructed so it would be easy to protect from the disenfranchised (30 percent of New Orleans lives below the poverty line).<sup>3</sup>

Usually the media exaggerate the danger of hurricanes, put their talking heads on the scene, and then exploit human suffering by showing images of destruction and death. While there was an exploitative dimension to the Katrina coverage, it was clear that this was a major event and disaster, and media figures and crews risked their lives to cover the story. Moreover, many reporters and TV commentators were genuinely indignant when federal relief failed to come day after day, and for the first time in recent memory seriously criticized the Bush administration and Bush himself, while sharply questioning officials of the administration when they tried to minimize the damage or deflect blame. As Mick Farren put it:

In the disaster that was New Orleans, TV news and Harry Connick were the first responders. It may well have been a news generation’s finest hour. Reporters who had been spun or embedded for most of their careers faced towering disaster and intimacy with death, and told the tale with a horrified honesty. When anchors like Brian Williams and Anderson Cooper waded in the water, dirty and soaked in sweat, it transcended showboating. It was the story getting out. Okay, so Geraldo Rivera made an asshole of himself, but I will never forget the eloquent shell shock of NBC cameraman Tony Zumbado after he discovered the horror at the Convention Center.

That CNN could function where FEMA feared to tread undercut most federal excuses and potential perjuries. Journalists who could see the bodies refused to accept “factuality” from Michael Brown, Michael Chertoff, or even George Bush. Ted Koppel and Paula Zahn all but screamed “bullshit!” at them on camera.<sup>4</sup>

## BROWNIE AND BUSH CRONYISM

The rightwing Republican attack machine (Brock 2004) first blamed the New Orleans poor for not leaving and then descending into barbarism, but it came out quickly that there were tens of thousands who were so poor they had no transportation, money, or anyplace to go, and many had to care for sick and infirm friends, relatives, or beloved pets. Moreover, the poor were abandoned for days without any food, water, or public assistance. The rightwing attack machine then targeted local officials for the crisis, but intense media focus soon attached major blame for the criminally inadequate public response on Bush administration FEMA Director Michael Brown. It was revealed that Brown, who had no real experience with disaster management, had received his job because he was college roommate of Joe Allbaugh, the first FEMA director and one of the major Texas architects of Bush's election successes, known as the "enforcer" because of his fierce loyalty to Bush and tough Texas behavior and demeanor.<sup>5</sup>

Stories circulated about how Allbaugh gutted FEMA of disaster response professionals and packed it with political appointees, such as previous Bush team PR and media people. Joe Allbaugh was part of Bush's anti-government conservative coalition which cut back funding for FEMA, as the administration would later cut back plans to prepare disaster relief for New Orleans and cut federal funds to boost up its levee system. Allbaugh was FEMA director when 9/11 hit and quickly resigned, going into the public sector to advise corporations on how to deal with terrorism and then set up a business helping corporations get contracts in Iraq and security to protect their employees.

Meanwhile, Internet sources and Time magazine revealed that Brown had fudged his vita, claiming in testimony to Congress that he had been a manager of local emergency services when he had only had a low-level position.<sup>6</sup> He had claimed he was a professor at a college where he was a student and generally had padded his c.v. Stories also circulated that in his previous job he had helped run Arabian horse shows, but had been dismissed for incompetence. After these reports, it was a matter of time until Bush first sent him back to Washington, relieving him of his duties, and allowing him to resign a couple of days later.

The media then had a field day scapegoating the hapless Brown, who admittedly was a poster boy for Bush administration incompetent political appointees. But the top echelons of FEMA were full of Bush appointees who had fumbled and stumbled during the first crucial days of disaster relief and who were unqualified to deal with the tremendous challenges confronting the country. Moreover, Brown was castigated in the media for a statement that he did not know there were tens of thousands of people left behind stranded in the New Orleans Convention Center without food, water, or protection after pictures of their plight had circulated through the media, while Michael Chertoff, head of the cabinet level Department of Homeland Security, also made such statements, and the federal non-response could easily be blamed on his ineptness and failure to coordinate disaster response efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Media images of the thousands left on their own in New Orleans and the surrounding area were largely poor and black, leading to charges that the Bush administration were blind to the suffering of the poor and people of color.<sup>8</sup> Revealingly, these individuals were referred to as "refugees" and indeed they appeared homeless

and devastated, as in familiar images of people escaping devastation in the developing world, although this time it was happening domestically.

While there was a fierce debate as to whether the federal response would or would not have been more vigorous if the victims were largely white or middle class people, readers of Yahoo news recognized that racism was blatantly obvious in captions to two pictures circulating, one of whites wading through water and described as “carrying food,” while another picture showing blacks with armloads of food described as “looters.” During NBC’s Concert for Hurricane Relief, rapper Kanye West declared “George Bush doesn’t care about black people,” and asserted that America is set up “to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off as slow as possible.” West sharply criticized Bush’s domestic priorities and Iraq policy before NBC was able to cut away to a smiling Chris Tucker.<sup>9</sup>

While Laura Bush and conservatives claimed that charges of racism were “ridiculous” and offensive, it was clear to many that there were serious issues of class and race concerning who was left behind without resources to evacuate and which neighborhoods were more vulnerable to devastation. Later, serious questions were raised concerning relative strengths of floodwalls in various regions of town and why poorer neighborhoods tended to be devastated by flood waters.<sup>10</sup>

Bush himself, ever in denial, told Diane Sawyer in a Good Morning America interview that: “I don’t think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees” — an inane response reduced to a blatant lie when later videotape showed a FEMA authority warning Bush that the levees could breach and the city could be flooded. Bush’s mother Barbara also put on display the famous Bush family insensitivity when she said on a visit to evacuees in Houston’s Astrodome: “So many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.”

#### BUSHSPEAK, THE WAVERING MEDIA AND STAGECRAFT

Bush administration operatives deplored critics playing “the blame game,” showing once again how one of the defining features of Bushspeak is to deny reality and refuse to take responsibility for failures of his administration.<sup>11</sup> Bush’s presidential ratings continued to plunge as day after day there were pictures of incredible suffering, devastation, and death, and discussions of the utterly inadequate federal, local, and state response. While the U.S. corporate media had failed to critically discuss the failings of George W. Bush in either the 2000 or 2004 elections and had white-washed his failed presidency, for the first time one saw sustained criticism of the Bush administration on the U.S. cable TV news networks. The network correspondents on the ground were appalled by the magnitude of the devastation and paucity of the federal response and presented images of the horrific spectacle day after day, including voices from the area critical of the Bush administration. Even media correspondents who had been completely supportive of Bush’s policies began to express doubts and intense public interest in the tragedy ensured maximum coverage and continued critical discussion.

The Bush administration went on the offensive, sending Bush, Cheney, Rice, Rumsfeld, and other high officials to the disaster area, but the stark spectacle of suffering undercut whatever rhetoric the Bush team produced. Vice President Dick Cheney was reportedly hunting in Montana and then shopping for a \$2.5 million vacation house on the Maryland shore when the hurricane hit. It was widely reported that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was on a shopping spree in New York buying \$5000 plus pairs of shoes when the spectacle unfolded on TV, and her first press conference during the disaster showed her giddy and bubbly, impervious to the suffering; to improve her image, she was sent to her home-state Alabama where photographers dutifully snapped her helping organize relief packages for flood victims.

Whereas the Bush administration tried to emphasize positive features of the relief effort, the images of continued devastation and the slow initial response undercut efforts to convey an image that the Bushites were in charge and dealing with the problem. Although the Bush team tried to scapegoat the poor, local officials, environmental groups, and even God,<sup>12</sup> it was clear that only the federal government had the resources to deal with the immensity of the tragedy and that the Bush administration had largely failed.

Bush's claim that he would himself lead an investigation into what went wrong with the federal response to Katrina was met by ridicule,<sup>13</sup> and although the Democrats attempted to mandate an independent government commission to investigate the failure, Republicans resisted and formed a committee of their own to investigate that Democrats refused to participate in.

#### RETURN TO THE CONSERVATIVE MEDIA AGENDA

After praising CNN and cable coverage of Hurricane Katrina, media critic Nikki Finke describes how the U.S. corporate media returned to their conservative agenda some weeks into the tragedy:

For the first 120 hours after Hurricane Katrina, TV journalists were let off their leashes by their mogul owners, the result of a rare conjoining of flawless timing (summer's biggest vacation week) and foulest tragedy (America's worst natural disaster). All of a sudden, broadcasters narrated disturbing images of the poor, the minority, the aged, the sick and the dead, and discussed complex issues like poverty, race, class, infirmity and ecology that never make it on the air in this swift-boat/anti-gay-marriage/Michael Jackson media-sideshow era. So began a perfect storm of controversy.

Contrary to the scripture so often quoted in these areas of Louisiana and Mississippi, the TV newscasters knew the truth, but the truth did not set them free. Because once the crisis point had passed, most TV journalists went back to business-as-usual, their choke chains yanked by no-longer-inattentive parent-company bosses who, fearful of fallout from fingering Dubya for the FEMA fuckups, decided yet again to sacrifice community need for corporate greed. Too quickly, Katrina's wake was spun into a web of deceit by the Bush administration, then disseminated by the Big Media boys' club. (Karl Rove spent the post-hurricane weekend conjuring up ways to shift blame).<sup>14</sup>

Karl Rove was reportedly put in charge of both the White House PR effort and reconstruction efforts and suddenly Bush was sent down to the disaster area every

few days to make an appearance, hugging black people and showing that he cared and was in charge. Of course, these media visits were pseudo-events constructed to make Bush look presidential. NBC anchor Brian Williams's reported on his blog how he and the residents of New Orleans were plunged in darkness during one presidential visit, when suddenly all the electricity came on and everyone cheered and rejoiced. After Bush's motorcade passed through to celebratory applause, electricity was suddenly cut, not to be soon restored, causing groans and dismissals of the president who found the political will to have electricity for his safe passage and stagecraft, but not for those still stuck in the city. Another visit showed Bush in Mississippi with shirt-sleeves rolled up, speaking to a man who seemed dazed and lost, wanting to know where he could find a Red Cross station which he had been searching for days. A decisive Bush pointed down the road, declaring "there's one right down there," appearing to be on top of the situation. However, it was later reported that the man never made it to that station because it was just a theater prop and that false "Red Cross stations" were popping up all over the South during Bush's visits, only to disappear the moment the camera left. His "visits" also diverted military and relief efforts to set creation instead of emergency assistance.

Three weeks after Katrina, Bush imagineers concocted a staged spectacle to attempt to make Bush look like a decisive leader. In an evening prime-time address to the nation, Bush was shown striding across the fabled Jackson Square in New Orleans with blue-background lighting and the famed St. Louis Cathedral in the background. The White House had brought generators to produce electricity for the shoot in the blacked out city, and had put up background patches of military camouflage netting to hide the president from the ghostly deserted streets of the French Quarter. But the long shot of Bush walking up to the podium made him look more like a small figure in an Antonioni movie, dwarfed by the environment, and critics dammed the speech as failed stagecraft. As Maureen Dowd put it:

All Andrew Jackson's horses and all the Boy King's men could not put Humpty Dumpty together again. His gladiatorial walk across the darkened greensward, past a St. Louis Cathedral bathed in moon glow from White House klieg lights, just seemed to intensify the sense of an isolated, out-of-touch president clinging to hollow symbols as his disastrous disaster agency continues to flail.

In a ruined city -- still largely without power, stinking with piles of garbage and still 40 percent submerged; where people are foraging in the miasma and muck for food, corpses and the sentimental detritus of their lives; and where unbearably sad stories continue to spill out about hordes of evacuees who lost their homes and patients who died in hospitals without either electricity or rescuers - isn't it rather tasteless, not to mention a waste of energy, to haul in White House generators just to give the president a burnished skin tone and a prettified background?<sup>15</sup>

This was typical Bush administration image making: stagecraft over substance, and carefully planned spectacle to attempt to produce an image of Bush as a decisive leader. But the previous three weeks had shown that Bush was not a leader at all, but a front man for a regime based on cronyism, providing spoils from the treasury and government patronage jobs to their supporters and loyalists. Michael

Brown of FEMA had been unveiled as totally unqualified for the job and had received it only because he was the roommate of Joe Allbaugh, who himself had dismantled FEMA and filled it with incompetent political appointees. As Douglas J. Amy put it:

Brown is just one example of an ongoing pattern of inappropriate and disturbing appointments by President Bush -- appointments that threaten to undermine the basic functioning of many key government agencies. This administration's guiding political philosophy is that government is a bad thing and should be cut back to a minimum. It has a particular contempt for the federal bureaucracy, which it sees as the embodiment of "liberal big government." So it is hardly surprising that the administration has not made a great effort to ensure that the best-qualified people are running these agencies. But the situation is actually much worse than this. It is not simply that Bush put incompetent political hacks like Brown in place. He has also been appointing officials who are actually hostile to the agencies that they run. Many of them have political values and views diametrically opposed to the very missions of these agencies. For example, many of Bush's appointees to agencies charged with protecting the environment have been opposed to environmental regulations in particular, and government regulation in general. And many have come from businesses or conservative organizations that have fought against efforts at environmental protection.<sup>16</sup>

The Bush administration has combined cronyism with cutting back federal government programs and funding for public works that help people. Bush's tax cuts for the rich, attempts to privatize social security, and cut backs on environmental and government regulation, constitute an attack on a liberal conception of government itself. Allowing unrestricted economic development in the Gulf coast, cutting back on funds to shore up protection against flooding, and trimming government agencies to deal with crisis, exhibit the Bush administration's anti-government bias -- and its dangers. For Katrina showed that in time of major emergencies and facing serious problems, the federal government has the most resources to deal with problems and if it is undermined the country is weakened and its very national security is threatened.

Not only did the FEMA fiasco reveal how Bush had put political hacks and rightwing ideologues throughout government and carry out an assault on government itself, but it revealed his personal failings and those of his administration's policies and ideology as well. As Frank Rich put it:

The worst storm in our history proved perfect for exposing this president because in one big blast it illuminated all his failings: the rampant cronyism, the empty sloganeering of "compassionate conservatism," the lack of concern for the "underprivileged" his mother condescended to at the Astrodome, the reckless lack of planning for all government operations except tax cuts, the use of spin and photo-ops to camouflage failure and to substitute for action.<sup>17</sup>

#### BUSH'S RECONSTRUCTION PLANS: A CORPORATE BOONDOOGLE

Bush's speech revealed one of the most ambitious reconstruction efforts in U.S. history, a two billion plus dollar effort that would provide a bonanza for the corporations and special interests that the Bush administration serve and that provide their financial support. It is an index of the administrations hubris and lack of



shame that they instantly started pushing privatization a la Iraq to deal with the Katrina debacle and put arch-rookie Karl Rove in charge of both the PR and the dividing up the spoils for reconstruction, already going out to the usual suspects.<sup>18</sup> The boondoogle exemplifies what Naomi Klein describes as “disaster capitalism” whereby crises like Katrina or the Iraq invasion create situations where corporations have profit from catastrophe (Klein 2007). Indeed, Joe Allbaugh, Bush’s former campaign enforcer and first FEMA chief who packed the agency with political hacks, was already getting contracts for his clients, while no-bid contracts were handed out to Halliburton’s subsidiary Kellogg, Brown & Root.<sup>19</sup> As Weldon Berger put it:

Rove’s overt involvement... marks the death of any hope that the recovery operation will become something other than a cesspool of cronyism and political pandering. The action manuals will be vote counts, the 2006 electoral map and Republican Party campaign contribution lists. The result will be a hedonistic political and fiscal binge Bremer could only have dreamed of (op. cit.).

Berger recalled that under Paul Bremer’s command in Iraq, at least \$16 billion of Iraqi oil money was misplaced, there were numerous no-bid contracts to Bush cronies and scandalous over-billing and corruption, and little accountability to the privatization binges and contracts to the politically connected. In his Jackson Square speech, Bush stressed that he would emphasize “entrepreneurship” and market-solutions to the Gulf Coast catastrophe, a code for supporting corporate allies and cutting-back on regulation and oversight of reconstruction. Moreover, the Bush administration immediately began pushing tax cuts for wealthy investors in the area, eliminating minimum wage requirements and environmental regulation, opening the way for pushing through yet another rightwing agenda, as they did after 9/11, and providing copious contracts and financial benefits for political supporters and allies.

As Naomi Klein points out, Milton Friedman and other neo-cons exploited the opportunity of the destruction of a vast arena of New Orleans’ public schools to replace them with charter schools (Klein 2007: 5ff), embodying Friedman’s belief that public schools were a form of socialism. The rightwing reconstruction also gutted New Orleans strong teacher’s union and public housing provided the right yet another opportunity to seize cultural power.

Yet the spectacle of the devastation and the inadequate response of the Bush administration may block or undercut Bush’s attempts to exploit the tragedy for his own political ends. The media continued to focus intensely on the destruction and hoped-for recovery, more and more people and journalists on the front-line were becoming increasingly sceptical of Bush, and his ratings continued to go south after his Jackson Plaza speech and sketched ambitious plan for reconstruction, and would continue to plunge until the end of his administration when he had the lowest ratings in the history of presidential polling.<sup>20</sup>

Bush continued to insist that taxes would not be raised to pay for the reconstruction and weeks after the event he still would not concede his planned next round of tax cuts for the superrich, his expensive plans to privatize Social Security, or his deceptive Medicare plans that would provide a bonanza to drug companies. Hurri-

cane Katrina, however, would focus attention on his policies and the outrageous level of federal debt they would incur, while benefiting largely special corporate interests and the rich.

Some speculated that the Katrina catastrophe and the failed Bush administration response signaled the death knell of the pro-market laissez-faire politics that had dominated the U.S. for the past years. It was clear that global warming had contributed to the intensity of the hurricanes and other extreme weather that had been plaguing the world for the past several years. While there was a fierce debate whether global warming or cyclical hurricane patterns were the major cause of the extreme weather, it is likely that both are to blame.<sup>21</sup> The Bush administration's dismissal of the science of global warming and blocking efforts to deal with the problem now appear criminally negligent. In addition, the deregulation that characterized neoliberal politics had been responsible for destruction of the wetlands, which traditionally helped buffer hurricanes and extreme weather, as well as uncontrolled coastal development along the Gulf Coast which contributed to the immensity of the destruction (Brinkley 2006, pp. 9ff).

The Bush administration response, led by Karl Rove, trumpeted out the same old neoliberal policies and made it highly likely that there would be major corruption and political cronyism in Gulf redevelopment. But the intensity of Hurricane Katrina, followed by the potentially devastating Hurricane Rita and future possible destruction of the Gulf by deadly Hurricanes, has led many to speculate that something like a new Marshall Plan, focusing on rebuilding the Gulf Coast guided by environmental restoration and a flood control system like Holland's, as well as providing housing and jobs for the poor, would be needed to deal with the immensity of the tragedy.

As Hurricane Rita gathered intensity in the Gulf, speculation emerged that George W. Bush was the worse president in modern history, or perhaps the worst ever, and that there needed to be a serious discussion about impeachment.<sup>22</sup> There were also reports that Bush had started drinking again,<sup>23</sup> and during September 22 when Rita was scheduled for landfall David Gregory of NBC queried Bush whether his planned trip to San Antonio to observe disaster response efforts in Texas would be "disruptive for first responders." Bush turned away in anger, revealing what appeared to be a wired telecommunication device on the back of his jacket,<sup>24</sup> and then suddenly turned around and told reporters that "there is no risk of me getting in the way, I promise you." But then suddenly Bush's trip to San Antonio was cancelled and he went instead to Colorado to monitor reports, and when it appeared that the effects of Hurricane Rita were not as dire for Texas as feared, he flew to Austin and San Antonio for photo events.

Reporting on Bush's day, the September 24, 2005, NBC News noted that political commentators believed that going to so many places and making so many pronouncements could lead to Bush being seen as a "political opportunist," and indeed there was an air of desperation to the president's frenetic activity in response to Hurricane Rita after his much criticized feeble response to Katrina. For those who cared to see, Bush's behavior indeed revealed him to be concerned with image rather than substance and unable to provide effective leadership and communication.

Although Hurricane Rita wreaked havoc on the North Texas and Southwestern Louisiana Gulf Coast, it did not, as feared, destroy any major cities and was less intense and destructive than predicted. Nonetheless, the cumulative damage of hur-

ricanes Katrina and Rita were severe and a major battle loomed over differing proposals for reconstruction. In the aftermaths of the hurricanes, the media focused on personal stories of suffering and destruction, moments of heroism, and recovery putting on a back burner again questions of who was responsible and the differing positions on reconstruction. It came out that reports of robbery, rape, mayhem, and death in early days after Katrina were exaggerated and the death toll was less than predicted, although the destruction was evident and overwhelming.<sup>25</sup>

#### AFTERMATH

On the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina there were many media retrospectives and analyses and a large majority of articles, TV reports, and commentaries documented how little reconstruction had taken place, with the hardest hit poor areas still rubble. Less than half of New Orleans's residents had returned, more than one-third of the garbage had not been picked up, and federal agencies had only spent \$444 billion of the \$1110 billion in congressionally approved funds.

Bush's political popularity began a steady decline with what was perceived as his inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina and continued to spiral downwards into the 30% range never to recover. As Frank Rich summed it up:

The storm... was destined to join the tornado that uprooted Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz in the pantheon of American culture.... The Wizard could never be the Wizard again once Toto parted the curtain and exposed him as Professor Marvel; Bush, too, stood revealed as a blowhard and a snake oil salesman (see Rich 2006, p. 199).

George W. Bush's entire life has been grounded in monumental failures and perhaps the Katrina spectacles will be seen in retrospect as his Waterloo.<sup>26</sup> The spectacles of Iraq, inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina and the specter of crony capitalism in its aftermath, on-going Republican party scandals involving leaders of the House and Senate and key figures in Bush's and Cheney's staff, and the systematic breaking of US and international law through the illegal rendition and torture of suspects, violation of civil liberties, illegal wire-taping, and other crimes of the administration raised the specter of impeachment—but the Bush/Cheney regime survived the ever-erupting and escalating media spectacles of scandal and corruption that have characterized the regime.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, the financial meltdown of Fall 2008 and evident failure of Bush/Cheney administration and neoliberal policies ensure Bush's reputation as one of the most disasterously failed presidents in U.S. history. Yet whatever the judgment over the Bush/Cheney administration, it is clear that the Hurricane Katrina media spectacle put on display the glaring inequities of race and class that define the U.S. in the new millennium during the rightwing Republican regime. The inability of the federal government to respond to the catastrophe called attention not only to the failures and incompetence of the Bush/Cheney administration, but also the crisis of neoliberalism whereby the market alone cannot provide for the needs of citizens and deal with acute social problems and natural disasters. As Henry Giroux argues (2006), Katrina also called attention to a "politics of disposa-

bility” whereby certain people are deemed disposable and not worthy of care and help. Market capitalism in the era of neoliberalism has been increasingly predatory with groups of poor people ready to be disposed and pushed aside. The biopolitics of inequality and disposability was put on full display in the Katrina spectacle and may be one of the most important after-effects of the tragic episode.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For an excellent initial overview of the storm and the government failed response, see Walter M. Brasch, “SPECIAL REPORT: ‘Unacceptable’: The federal response to Katrina,” September 12, 2005 at [www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22719](http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22719). For an engaging documentary on Hurricane Katrina, that takes on the question of the breaching of the levees, see Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, HBO films, 2006. For a historical overview of problems of storms and flooding in the New Orleans area and day to day account of the Katrina tragedy from August 27 to September 3, 2006, see Brinkley 2006.
- <sup>2</sup> W. David Jenkins III: “Georgie, you’re doing a heck of a job,” September 17, 2005 at <http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22787>.
- <sup>3</sup> John Powers, “Week of the Living Death,” *LA Weekly*, September 9-15, 2005 at <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/05/42/on-powers.php>.
- <sup>4</sup> Mick Farren, “Post-Storm Watch,” *Citybeat*, September 22-28, 2005 at <http://www.lacitybeat.com/article.php?id=2645&IssueNum=120>.
- <sup>5</sup> Mark Benjamin, “The crony who prospered. Joe Allbaugh was George W. Bush’s good ol’ boy in Texas. He hired his good friend Mike Brown to run FEMA. Now Brownie’s gone and Allbaugh is living large.” *Salon*, September 16, 2005 at <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/09/16/allbaugh/index.html>. Allbaugh was known as Bush’s enforcer during his stint as Texas governor, allegedly being in charge of sanitizing the records of Bush’s National Guard service that suggested he had gone AWOL and not completed his military service; see Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*. Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Press, 2005.
- <sup>6</sup> Mark Benjamin, “Brownout!” *Salon*, September 11, 2005 at <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/09/10/brown/index.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> See Jonathan S. Landay, Alison Young and Shannon McCaffrey, “Chertoff delayed federal response, memo shows,” Knight-Ridder News Service, September 13, 2005. The report indicates that Cher-

toff, not FEMA Director Michael Brown, was in charge of disaster response and delayed federal action. Chertoff was a lawyer and Republican partisan who participated in the Whitewater crusade against Bill Clinton and had no experience in either national security or disaster response when Bush made him head of the Department of Homeland Security.

<sup>8</sup> On the issue of race and the history of New Orleans, see Mike Davis, "The Struggle Over the Future of New Orleans," *Socialist Worker*, September 21, 2005 collected online at <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=72&ItemID=8784>.

<sup>9</sup> NBC circulated a disclaimer after the show saying that West did not speak for the network and departed from his prepared speech, and also cut the clip from a West coast broadcast three hours later, but the initial video circulated over the Internet and was immediately incorporated into rap songs and anti-Bush websites; see the video clip at <http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/hurricanekatrina/v/kanvewestbush.htm> (accessed September 23, 2005) and see Chris Lee, "Playback Time. Two rappers use Kanye West's anti-Bush quote to launch a mashed-up Web smash," *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2005: E1.

<sup>10</sup> Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot, "Katrina's 25 Biggest Questions," October 4, 2005 at [www.alternet.org/story/26349/](http://www.alternet.org/story/26349/).

<sup>11</sup> On Bushspeak, see Kellner 2005.

<sup>12</sup> At a National Prayer Service in the Washington Cathedral, aimed to replicate a spectacle held right after the September 11 terror attacks, Bush presented the Katrina tragedy as an act of God. See Amy Sullivan, "Bush scapegoats God; After weeks of blaming others for the disastrous response to Katrina, Bush used the pulpit at the National Prayer Service to blame the biggest scapegoat of all: God." *Salon*, September 17, 2005 at [www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2005/09/17/god/print](http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2005/09/17/god/print).

<sup>13</sup> Bush appointed Francis Fargos Townsend to head a federal investigation who it turned out was the wife of his Andover and Yale roommate and a rightwing ideologue; see the discussion in "Fact Check" at [www.cjrdaily.org](http://www.cjrdaily.org) on September 20, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Nikki Finke, "They Shoot News Anchors, Don't They?," *LA Weekly*, September 16-22, 2005 at <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/05/43/deadline-finke.php>. See also Finke's earlier version of this column at <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/05/42/deadline-finke.php>.

<sup>15</sup> Maureen Dowd, "Disney on Parade," *New York Times*, September 17, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas J. Amy: "Bush's strategy to hobble government," September 18, 2005 at <http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22798&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Rich, "Message: I Care About the Black Folks," *New York Times*, September 18, 2005 at [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/opinion/18rich.html?incamp=article\\_popular&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/opinion/18rich.html?incamp=article_popular&pagewanted=print).

<sup>18</sup> Weldon Berger: "Bush: 'We'll do for the Gulf Coast what we did for Iraq,'" September 18, 2005 at [www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22797](http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22797).

<sup>19</sup> Media reports on who got early contracts for Gulf coast reconstruction and who didn't indicate that Allbaugh connected-firms and Halliburton got lucrative no-bid contracts, while local Gulf Coast firms tended to lose out, see Eric Lipton and Ron Nixon, "Many Contracts for Storm Work Raise Questions," *New York Times*, September 26, 2005 and Griff Witte, Renae Merle and Derek Willis, "Gulf Firms Losing Cleanup Contracts," *Washington Post*, October 4, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> In one of the last polls taken on the Bush/Cheney presidency, Bush's favorably ratings kicked in at an all-time low 22%, while Cheney's favorability ratings came in at another record low of 13 percent. See the discussion of the *New York Times*/CBS News poll in Michael Duffy, "As Dick Cheney Prepares to Depart, His Mystery Lingers," *Time*, January 19, 2009 at <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0.8816.1872531.00.html>.

(accessed on January 21, 2009).

- <sup>21</sup> Michael McCarthy, "This is Global Warming," Independent, September 24, 2005.
- <sup>22</sup> Beth Quinn: "George is worst natural disaster to hit country," September 19 at <http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22810>; Donald Kaul, "Bush faring well in Incompetence Derby," September 19 at <http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22808>; and Robert Parry: "What to do about the Bush problem," September 23 at <http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22869&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>.
- <sup>23</sup> Jennifer Luce and Don Gentile, "Bush's Booze Crisis," National Enquirer, September 24, 2005 at <http://www.nationalenquirer.com/celebrity/63426>.
- <sup>24</sup> On reports and images that showed Bush wearing what appeared to be a communication wire during the 2004 presidential debates and on other occasions, see Douglas Kellner, "Media Spectacle and the Wired Bush Controversy," Flow, Vol. 1, Nr. 3, at <http://jot.communication.utexas.edu/flow/?jot=view&id=473>.
- <sup>25</sup> On how the media exaggerated the anarchy and chaos in the days following Katrina and the critiques of media rumor and failures, see the Columbia Journalism review Daily, "Setting the Record Straight," September 27, 2005 at <http://www.cjrdaily.org/archives/001861.asp> and "The Backlash Begins," at <http://www.cjrdaily.org/archives/001863.asp>.
- <sup>26</sup> On Bush's life-as-failure, see Mike Whitney, "No exit: Descending into hell with George W. Bush," September 22, 2005 at <http://www.smirkingchimp.com/article.php?sid=22857&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>.
- <sup>27</sup> On the specter of impeachment, see Bernard Weiner, "Suppose...: Arguments for an impeachment resolution," September 28, 2005 at <http://www.smirkingchimp.com/print.php?sid=22933> and Robert Parry, "Can Bush Be Ousted?," October 1, 2005 at <http://consortiumnews.com/2005/093005.html>.