

# The real looting of New Orleans begins

Anarcho

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Like all politicians, Bush blames his problems over Hurricane Katrina on a lack of power rather than having too much. Thus he sees the solution to his government's lack of response in terms of providing him with "*greater federal authority and a broader role for the armed forces.*"

Why this lack of authority explains why Bush ate cake and played guitar on holiday while people died is hard to understand. Will giving more power to, say, Condi Rice stop her shopping for shoes and taking in a Broadway in the face of a natural disaster? Will it get Bush or Dick Cheney to cut short their holidays or get them to appoint people with experience to key posts? Hardly.

Nor should we forget that the old head of FEMA, Michael Brown, had no expertise or experience for the post. He got the job because he was friends with a Bush crony. And so who has Bush picked to oversee the rebuilding of the region? Karl Rove, his political advisor. Now, what qualifications or relevant expertise does Bush's chief political operative have which qualify him to head America's largest domestic reconstruction effort since its Civil War?

Little wonder Bush announced that he would investigate himself and ignored calls for an independent enquiry over the debacle.

Yet this response is not without precedent. Just before 9/11 Bush was on holiday and ignored a CIA memo entitled "Bin Laden determined to attack inside the U.S." He refused, until pressurised by 9/11 survivors and their relatives, to hold an enquiry. History repeats itself. For the second time he wants to use the tragic deaths of thousands to demand more power for himself. If giving him so much power first time failed so dramatically, why should it work now?

The problem is clear. Since 9/11, Bush has played the card that he is a competent and decisive leader who can protect America. Given his actual performance on 9/11 and the months leading up to it, it is amazing that the charade was accepted by so many Americans. Katrina exposed the reality behind the image. This means that next years election a referendum on Republican governance and, after the Katrina debacle, the right has lost its aura of competence – if they cannot get a coherent response to an approaching hurricane, how can they keep America safe from a terrorist attack?

In reality, of course, was that the state already had too much authority and it was concentrated in the hands of incompetent morons who care little about working class people. And you do not make incompetent government better by granting it more power. People are dead because of this, because the Bush Junta had more important things to spend money on – like cutting taxes

for the rich, no-bid contracts to corporate donors, invading Iraq, seeking to end social security. Only a fool would pretend otherwise — or give these muppets any more power.

Bush opined in his post-Katrina attempted poll-saving speech that *“there is also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well. And that poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action.”* His track record hardly supports these words. His tax cuts have only enriched the rich. The poor have become poorer. Wages for working people have, at best, stagnated and, at worse, fell. The poverty rate has risen from 11.3% to 12.7%. For the first time on record, household incomes failed to rise for five consecutive years. Even Phillip Swagel, a scholar at the conservative **American Enterprise Institute**, admitted that the *“gains have gone to owners of capital and not to workers.”*

But do not say that Bush does not act swiftly to help the greedy. He was already suspended the Davis-Bacon law which requires prevailing wages for public construction contracts. He did so under the provision allowing him to waive the law during a national emergency. And so the Bush Junta is using the devastation of Hurricane Katrina to cut the wages of people desperately trying to rebuild their lives and their communities. And who is getting the no-bid, cost-plus contracts for reconstructing New Orleans? The same corporations that the Bush Junta gave contracts to for “reconstructing” Iraq — at the forefront, the Vice-President’s old corporation Halliburton. While it is doubtful that they will do a better job of it, it is definite they will make as much money out of it.

This is crony capitalism at its worse. It is simply insulting. Instead of refugees coming back to decent-paying jobs while they reconstruct their communities, they are to get low-wages while Bush-supporting companies get profits subsidised on the public dole. Clearly, though, Bush thinks that corporations know how best to spend the public’s money rather than the public themselves.

Needless to say, the Bush Junta will not utilise this disaster purely to enrich its corporate backers. It will exploit it for its own ideological purposes. The disaster area will be, like Iraq, used to create a Republican utopia. This is Bush’s **“Gulf Opportunity Zone”** — a blank sheet upon which the far-right will unleash their plans for social engineering. Children will go to school with vouchers. Wages will be lowered and regulations waived to accommodate the bosses. The entire area will become a free-enterprise zone. A flat tax will be imposed. All under the guise of economic revival premised on the belief that corporations freed from trades unions, workers rights, environmental restrictions and taxes will reap huge profits and those profits will grow the pie for everybody — and at least create some crumbs for the masses. As Americans have had thirty years of this kind of bollocks, we know that “trickle down” is better named “flood up.”

All of which means that as well as the poor being harmed most by the hurricane, they will suffer the same fate in the “reconstruction” process. So, for American capitalists, there is an upside to Bush’s incompetence and his feeble attempts to improve his tarnished image as a great leader. His attempts to repackage himself as a visionary rebuild of New Orleans will not only make Halliburton even richer but it will also allow the right the chance to reshape major parts of a state without having to go through the motions of winning an election or even the argument.

Not that the plans outlined Bush’s speech from New Orleans helped his opinion poll ratings. After it, 35% of Americans said he has done a good or excellent job responding to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. That’s down from 39%. Another poll says that 41% give him poor

marks for handling the crisis. This is up from 37% before the speech. The difference seems to rest with his base, the core of conservative voters that seems impervious to his trail of incompetence. Simply put, Bush's spending plan is not going down well with them. Just 43% favour the huge federal commitment while 37% are opposed. Following the speech, Bush's rating for handling the Katrina crisis fell eight points among Republicans (from 71% good or excellent to 63%).

So it appears that while you can allow 9/11 to happen, start two wars, precede over torture and abuse, cause the deaths of over 100,000 civilians and cause economic misery for millions of working people once you imply doling out money to the poor, then the "compassionate" right will finally turn against you. The same can be said for Republican politicians, who are newly concerned over the chronic lack of spending discipline and accountability by the Bush Junta. While Republicans are now bothered about unbridled spending here at home in response to the destruction of an American city and region, they were happy to shovel money into the quagmire which is Iraq.

Needless to say, the usual double standards apply, with the right outraged about \$2000 given to people who have lost everything but curiously silent about the rebuilding contracts doled out to companies with track records of defrauding the government. Perhaps they will come around to Bush's spending spree once it dawns on them that this \$200 billion federal line of credit is aimed by corporate, not human, welfare? And to **put that in perspective, the US state has** already spent \$200 billion on a war of choice on Iraq (an amount that increases by \$8 billion every month).

The latter spending is, of course, not an issue as it obviously flows into the hands of big business and does not have any chance of helping those who pay for it — working class Americans.

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