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Wanted a Leader for America

Noam Chomsky

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As the survivors of Hurricane Katrina try to piece their lives back together, it is all the clearer that a long-gathering storm of misguided policies and priorities preceded the tragedy.

Government failures at home and the war in Iraq found a confluence in Katrina's wake that graphically illustrates the need for fundamental social change, lest we suffer worse disasters in the future.

In a pre-9/11 report, the Federal Emergency Management Agency had listed a major hurricane in New Orleans as one of the three most likely catastrophes to strike the United States. The others: a terrorist attack in New York and an earthquake in San Francisco.

New Orleans had become an urgent priority at FEMA since January, when the agency's now-departed director Michael Brown returned from touring the tsunami devastation in Asia.

"New Orleans was the No. 1 disaster we were talking about," Eric L. Tolbert, a former FEMA official, told The New York Times. "We were obsessed with New Orleans because of the risk."

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A year before Katrina hit, FEMA conducted a successful simulated-hurricane drill for New Orleans, but FEMA's elaborate plans were not implemented.

The war played a role in the failure. National Guard troops that had been sent to Iraq "took a lot of needed equipment with them, including dozens of high-water vehicles, Humvees, refuelling tankers and generators that would be needed in the event a major natural disaster hit the state," The Wall Street Journal reported. "A senior Army official said the service was reluctant to commit the 4th brigade of the 10th Mountain Division from Fort Polk, because the unit, which numbers several thousand soldiers, is in the midst of preparing for an Afghanistan deployment."

Bureaucratic manoeuvring also trumped the risk of natural disaster. Former FEMA officials told The Chicago Tribune that the agency's capabilities were "effectively marginalised" under President George W. Bush when the agency was folded into the Homeland Security Department, with fewer resources and extra layers of bureaucracy, a "brain drain" as demoralised employees left and a completely unqualified Bush political crony put in charge.

Once a "tier-one federal agency," FEMA now isn't "even in the back seat," Eric Holdeman, director of emergency management in King County, Washington, told The Financial Times. "They are in the trunk of the Department of Homeland Security car."

Bush funding cuts in 2004 compelled the Army Corps of Engineers to reduce flood-control work sharply, including badly needed strengthening of the levees that protected New Orleans. Bush's 2005 budget called for another serious reduction — a speciality of Bush-administration timing, much like the proposed sharp cut in security for public transportation right before the London bombings in July 2005.

A disregard for the environment was another factor in this perfect storm. Wetlands help reduce the power of hurricanes and storm surges, but Sandra Postel, a water-policy expert, wrote in The Christian Science Monitor that wetlands were "largely missing

when Katrina struck," in part because "the Bush administration in 2003 effectively gutted the 'no net loss' of wetlands policy initiated during the administration of the elder Bush."

The human toll of Katrina is incalculable, especially among the region's poorest citizens, but a relevant number is the 28-per cent poverty rate in New Orleans — more than twice the national rate. During the Bush administration the US poverty rate has grown, and welfare's limited safety net has been weakened further.

The effects were so striking that even the right-wing media were appalled by the scale of the class-based and race-based devastation. While the media were showing vivid scenes of human misery, the back pages reported that Republican leaders wasted no time in "using relief measures for the hurricane-ravaged Gulf coast to achieve a broad range of conservative economic and social policies," The Wall Street Journal reported.

Those agenda-promoting measures include suspending rules that require payment of prevailing wages by federal contractors and providing displaced schoolchildren with vouchers — another underhanded blow at the public-school system. They included lifting environmental restrictions, "waiving the estate tax for deaths in the storm-affected states" — a great boon for the population fleeing New Orleans slums — and in general making it clear once again that cynicism knows few bounds.

Lost in the flood is a concern for the needs of cities and for human services. The larger agenda of enhancing global domination and domestic concentrations of wealth and power takes precedence.

The images of suffering in Iraq, and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, could hardly depict the consequences more dramatically.