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White House report on Katrina: no blame, no accountability for hurricane disaster

By Kate Randall
25 February 2006

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At a press conference on Thursday, Bush domestic security adviser Frances Townsend unveiled a White House report entitled “The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned.” It should come as no surprise to anyone who follows the Bush administration that the document—billed as a comprehensive review of the government’s response and a list of measures to prevent a similar debacle in the future—is a transparent cover-up.

The 228-page report provides a detailed timeline of the botched response to Katrina at the federal as well as state and local levels. But despite its own documentation of a breakdown of virtually all civilian authority in the hurricane crisis, the report holds no government officials accountable and proposes no sanctions of any kind.

Echoing the self-serving and cynical mantras of the Bush administration about avoiding the “blame game” and adopting a “forward looking” approach, the report states that the goal of uncovering the “key failures during the federal response to Hurricane Katrina” is “not to affix blame.”

As with the official cover-ups of the September 11 attacks and the missing Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, this latest catastrophe is to be passed over without any serious probe into the government’s responsibility. In the case of Katrina, government negligence and indifference were critical factors both in the lack of planning or preparation for a major hurricane, and the failure to mount serious rescue and relief operations once the storm struck.

Instead, the Bush administration is attempting once again, as it did with 9/11,

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to use a disaster as the pretext for building up the powers of the military and police. One of the central recommendations of the review is for the Pentagon, rather than elected officials or other civilian authorities, to take the leading role in catastrophes “of extraordinary scope and nature.”

The section of the report titled “Measuring the Immeasurable: The Human Toll” points to the scope of the tragedy in the Gulf Coast. An estimated 1,330 people died, 80 percent of them from the New Orleans metropolitan area. More than 70 percent of the dead were age 60 or older. “Around 770,000 people were displaced—the largest since the Dust Bowl migration from the southern Great Plains region in the 1930s,” the report notes.

As of December 2005, of the 1.1 million people over the age of 16 who were evacuated after August 29, approximately 500,000 had still not returned. These displaced evacuees face an unemployment rate over 20 percent. By January of this year, 85 percent of New Orleans schools had not reopened and half of the city’s major hospitals remained closed.

By the government’s own admission, the potential for such widespread devastation following a hurricane like Katrina had been widely predicted. The report states: “A catastrophic hurricane striking Southeast Louisiana has been considered a worst-case scenario that the region and many experts had known and feared for many years. Much of Southeast Louisiana is at or below sea level, and experience had shown Gulf Coast hurricanes to be deadly.”

What accounts, then, for the failure to adequately prepare by allocating the necessary resources to reinforce New Orleans’ levees to withstand even a slow-moving Category 3 hurricane? Why was there no serious evacuation plan in place? And now, three months before the 2006 hurricane season officially begins, why have the levees still not been rebuilt to withstand a hurricane of even less strength than Katrina?

The report ignores these questions. It lets the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—the agency most criticized for its performance during the hurricane—off the hook. “FEMA is not,” according to the report, “the operational provider of most Federal response support. It is a small organization that primarily manages the operational response, relief, and recovery efforts of the rest of the Federal government.”

On the key issue of identifying when levees in New Orleans had been breached, the White House report claims that confusion over the difference between levee over-toppings and breaches, or breaks, contributed to delays in

responding to the flooding. The report admits, however, that on the evening of August 29, the day Katrina hit, the Homeland Security Operation Center reported that the levees had not been breached, despite a bulletin six hours earlier by the National Weather Service that at least one levee had been breached.

No explanation is given for this discrepancy and no individual or agency is held responsible for this “miscommunication”—a euphemism that recalls the famous “failure to connect the dots” that was passed off as the explanation for the intelligence debacle that allowed the 9/11 hijackers to carry out their plot.

In the chapter titled “Lessons Learned,” the report states that in the emergency response to Katrina, the “DOD [Department of Defense]—both National Guard and active duty forces—demonstrated that along with the Coast Guard it was one of the only Federal departments that possessed real operational capabilities to translate Presidential decisions into prompt, effective action on the ground.”

The obvious should be noted: this military response took place within the context of a collapse of civilian agencies and utter incompetence and indifference on the part of the Bush White House.

In the section titled “Transforming National Preparedness,” the report bluntly puts forward the Bush administration’s outlook: “We must expect more catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina—and possibly even worse.” It then goes on to describe the agenda the Bush administration has advanced over the past four-and-a-half years:

“In the aftermath of another American catastrophe—the terrorist attacks of September 11—we transformed our government architecture, policies, and strategies in a comprehensive effort to defeat terrorism and better protect the homeland.... These actions, combined with an array of defensive measures at home and abroad, *have enhanced the safety and security of the American people*” (emphasis added).

But the response to Hurricane Katrina—and the resulting suffering of hundreds of thousands of people—is the most telling refutation of the claim that Bush administration policy is aimed at protecting the American people, whether from a natural disaster or a terrorist attack.

The opening passage of the White House report states: “Terrorists still plot their evil deeds, and nature’s unyielding power will continue. We know with

certainty that there will be tragedies in our future. Our obligation is to work to prevent the acts of evil men; reduce America's vulnerability to both the acts of terrorists and the wrath of nature; and prepare ourselves to respond to and recover from the man-made and natural catastrophes that do occur."

Such rhetoric is belied by the refusal to hold a single official accountable for his or her negligence and incompetence. A precondition for avoiding similar disasters "going forward" is making it crystal clear that officials will have to answer to the public for their actions.

This grotesque whitewash of the government's role in the worst natural disaster in US history has evoked virtually no criticism from the Democratic Party or the media.

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