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A deaf man spouting

A videotape of Bush's briefing before Hurricane Katrina exposes him as out of touch with reality

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On the eve of George Bush's presidential campaign in 2000, the neoconservative Kenneth Adelman cast him as Prince Hal, who "puts the indiscretions of his youth behind him" and "redeems his father's reign". After September 11, Bush was wreathed with regal laurels as Henry V by a clerisy of pundits. From Ground Zero to the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln ("Mission Accomplished") the president struck bold poses, but his choreographed gestures have especially illuminated his hollow crown in the darkened breach of New Orleans.

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For the first time, last week, the public has seen the spontaneous Bush behind closed doors, in a leaked videotape that recorded his briefing the day before Hurricane Katrina struck. Teleconferenced in from his Crawford ranch, Texas, Bush listens to disaster officials inform him that the storm will be unprecedented in its severity and consequences. "This is, to put it mildly, the big one," says Michael Brown, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Centre, warns: "This hurricane is much larger than Hurricane Andrew ever was." Bush asks not a single question, says, "We are fully prepared", and departs.

The Katrina videotape is defining for Bush's presidency. It exposes a deaf man spouting talking points. After the hurricane hit, he stayed on vacation, went to a birthday party, strummed a guitar with a country and western singer, and on September 1 said: "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees." On his flight back to Washington, four days after landfall, his aides gave him a DVD of television news reports of the hurricane's impact about which he had done nothing to learn on his own.

As the catastrophe of the foreshadowed aftermath unfolded, he clapped Brown on the back: "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job." But soon the administration settled on Brownie as the scapegoat, prevented him from defending himself and forced him to resign. He was expected to fall on his sword.

Suddenly, last week, the sacrificial Brown stormed back, the

betrayed turning on his betrayers. He proclaimed on every media outlet that he would no longer play the fall guy, detailed the warnings he had given, and named malefactors running up the chain of command.

In New Orleans, a sad Mardi Gras has come and gone, while crews from the morgue continue searching for bodies - still finding them. The city has lost more than half its population, most of the refugees are African-Americans, and their neighbourhoods remain scenes of devastation. Having rejected a plan for rebuilding, Bush travelled to New Orleans for another photo-opportunity this week to announce a programme that would supposedly give money to the homeless but absurdly will not permit destroyed housing to be replaced by new. Not one penny so far has been spent on new homes. Six months after the tempest, New Orleans, one of the glories of American life and culture, lies in ruins, and Bush visits to pose as visionary.

In a recently published hagiography on the theme of Bush-as-Prince-Hal, Rebel-in-Chief, written by the rightwing pundit Fred Barnes, Bush explained to him that his job is to "stay out of minutiae, keep the big picture in mind". To illustrate his self-conception, he "called my attention to the rug" in the Oval Office. Bush said that he wanted the rug to express that an "optimistic person comes here". He delegated the task to his wife, Laura, who designed a rug featuring bright yellow rays of the sun. In his Oval Office, Prince Hal imagines himself grown into a Sun King.

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