

Tomgram: The Presidency Shines

The Can-do Bush Administration Does...

and the Presidency Shines (for twenty-six minutes)

By Tom Engelhardt

Don't say they can't. They can -- and they did. Despite every calumny, it turns out that the Bush administration *can* put together an effective, well-coordinated rescue team and get crucial supplies to militarily occupied, devastated New Orleans on demand, in time, and just where they are most needed. Last Thursday, in a spectacular rescue operation, the administration team delivered just such supplies without a hitch to one of the city's neediest visitors, who had been trapped in hell-hole surroundings for almost three weeks by Hurricane Katrina. I'm speaking, of course, of George W. Bush.

That night, he gave his 26-minute "FDR" speech in a blue work shirt (meant assumedly to catch something of the White House work ethic) in floodlit Jackson Square, whose brilliantly lit cathedral had the look of Versailles amid a *son-et-lumière* spectacle. It was -- however briefly -- a triumph of the White House rescue team, headed, naturally, by Karl Rove, and seconded by the evangelical Christian, first-term speechwriter, **Michael Gerson** (once upon a pre-steroidal time known in the press as "**the Mark McGwire of speechwriting**"). He was brought back from White House domestic advisor-hood to shove a passel of religious imagery and Iraq-War-style catch phrases into the gaping hole Katrina had punched in the administration's political levees. Add to those two the White House's chief lighting designer, former NBC cameraman Bob DeServi, and the man long in charge of "visuals," former ABC producer Scott Sforza. **The key designer** of the quarter-million dollar stage set that, during the invasion of Iraq, passed for the United States Central Command forward headquarters in Doha, Qatar, Sforza had with DeServi helped produce the infamous Top-Gun-style, color-coordinated Presidential landing on the deck of the *U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln* ("Mission Accomplished!") on May 1, 2003. Both men went to Jackson Square, according to **New York Times White House correspondent**

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Tomdispatch.com is researched, written and edited by Tom Engelhardt (**bio**), a fellow at the Nation Institute, for anyone in despair over post-September 11th US mainstream media coverage of our world and ourselves. The service is intended to introduce you to voices from elsewhere (even when the elsewhere is here) who might offer a clearer sense of how this imperial globe of ours actually works.

An editor in publishing for the last 25 years, Tom is the author of ***The End of Victory Culture***, a history of American triumphalism in the Cold War era. He is at present consulting editor for Metropolitan Books, a fellow of the Nation Institute, and a teaching fellow at the journalism school of the University of California, Berkeley.

Elizabeth Bumiller (in a pre-speech press-pool report from New Orleans) to handle "last minute details of the stagecraft," including the "warm tungsten lighting" that was to give the President his empathetic -- or, depending on how you look at the man, his sci-fi -- glow in that utterly deserted setting.

As for those crucial supplies: Without a single mishap, the rescue team delivered to central New Orleans its own generators, lights (not just the warm-glow ones for the President but [the HMI movie lights](#) to set the cathedral in the background ablaze), the camouflage netting that was needed to hide from viewers any sign of [the surrounding devastation](#), and even its own [communications equipment](#). And then there was the matter of crowd control -- okay, maybe not exactly crowds in depopulated New Orleans, but soldiers from the 82nd Airborne were effectively deployed, just in case, ["to keep regular citizens](#) several blocks back."

Even more impressively, as [NBC news anchor Bryan Williams](#) reported at his blog, they managed to get the lights turned on along the President's route into Jackson Square "no more than 30 minutes before POTUS drove through," so that looted mini-malls and abandoned gas pumps leapt into sight. Of course, an hour after he was done and gone -- rescues of this sort being limited affairs -- the area was "plunged into total darkness again, to audible groans." (As Williams concluded, "It's enough to make some of the folks here who witnessed it... jump to certain conclusions.")

It may be true that, for a week or more, this administration couldn't get a bottle of water to a diabetic grandmother, but when something was actually at stake -- what reporters far and wide referred to as the ["rebuilding"](#) not of New Orleans but of a presidency, or simply of the presidential ["image"](#) -- efficiency, coordination, and togetherness were the by-words of the day.

As for the speech, there were some genuine can-do steps forward in it as well. Though many in the media focused on the major financial commitments the President seemed to make to the New Orleans area and Katrina evacuees, more striking was his progress in accepting "responsibility" for administration error. When he first stunned reporters on September 13th by speaking such words while standing side by side with the Iraqi president at a White House welcoming ceremony ("[...to the extent](#) that the federal government didn't fully do its job right, I take responsibility."), he seemed a good deal less than comfortable. In fact, despite that wonderful little ["to-the-extent"](#) loophole

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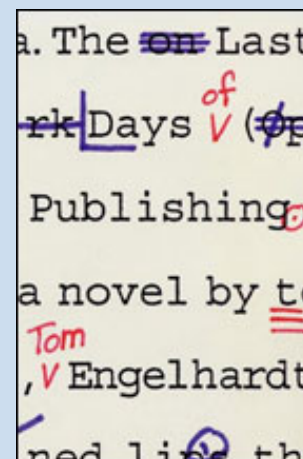
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phrase, he looked, as a Western pal of mine commented, like he had just swallowed a grasshopper and was feeling the legs go down. In New Orleans, similar words slipped down more like a smooth shot of single-malt scotch as did that toll-free number for those needing help (which has evidently hardly worked ever since), not to speak of all sorts of hardly noticed charmers right out of the Bush administration's non-Katrina wish-book. Take, for instance, this reminder that we are ever less a civilian society capable of saving ourselves in a civil fashion: "It is now clear that a challenge on this scale requires greater federal authority and a broader role for the armed forces -- the institution of our government most capable of massive logistical operations on a moment's notice."

While the administration was pumping up the military and offering up its can-do creds, on channel after channel reporters, anchors, pundits were set back on their heels. FDR comparisons poured out, corners were provisionally turned, hope was expressed, and the President's strange New Orleans bubble world and bubble words were treated as if none of the anchors and reporters had, for the previous weeks, been there, done that. For at least the blink of a media eye, the wrecked Super Dome, the toxic sludge only blocks away, the devastation right beyond TV sightlines, the staggering inability to deliver the goods, the unnecessary deaths, all seemed to evaporate in the glare of those White House lights. For a blinding moment, the media culture of deference we've lived with for the last four years was again upon us at something close to full throttle.

No one should be surprised. This, after all, is where the Bush administration first came into its own on a pile of rubble at Ground Zero in New York City. Overgrown boys who had experienced the childhood thrills and chills of war and adventure American-style in the dark and on-screen, they promptly put those unforgettable Hollywood memories to work. Through their President, they declared a fantasy war on terror and then, with the help of the "embedded" media, proceeded to create fabulously thrilling scenes of triumph, which they insisted were all the reality there was around. Think of that Centcom media set in Doha, or the now almost-forgotten [Jessica Lynch "rescue,"](#) or that [landing](#) on the aircraft carrier, or the [Bush Thanksgiving turkey dinner](#) in "Iraq," or almost any campaign event where the President "conversed" with adoring, well-vetted "people," or all those years of carefully framed photo ops of our "resolute" President in [military-style](#) togs of [every sort](#). It was nothing short of a way of life (as well as a way of politics) while it lasted. Now that reality has reared up and

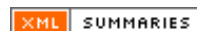
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bit them on the butt for all to see -- it may increasingly look, even to many of those who once supported the President, like a mad way of life (and politics) as well.

After all, imagine -- at whatever the cost was -- moving the President of the United States with his own lights, generators, and camouflaging into the very heart of a distressed city; making a tiny slice of it look almost as good as new; and then leaving without having done a thing for a soul. As they used to say in my childhood -- about drawings in which five-legged cows floated through clouds -- what's wrong with this picture?

Of course, Gerson's speech was only a speech. The lights did go out again fast and the President, visibly tired, **his shirt blotched with sweat**, boarded Air Force One, leaving behind actual life in all its grimness to proceed as usual -- with the administration pushing to allow the EPA to lift environmental regulations in toxic New Orleans and **in other areas** as well; **with FEMA**, having botched its rescue effort, now stumbling in its aid effort; with no-bid, cost-plus rebuilding contracts continuing to flow out to **Halliburton's KBR** and other Bush-allied companies that have **such a lovely record** in the field of Iraqi "reconstruction" while -- here's a surprise -- **small or local firms** are essentially being locked out of the rebuilding effort... ho-hum.

If this is the new, conservative FDR, then -- take my word for it -- Karl Rove has shuffled a very familiar deck and the latest "New Deal" is being dealt from the bottom. If you think otherwise, and you happen to belong to a large media organization, do I have a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you -- or do I mean a city somewhere in the southeastern U.S.?

As it happens, though, Bush's special-effects men are no longer the only ones wheeling up those Hollywood lights. What about when someone flicks on the light switch for the natural gas -- and so, home-heating -- price spike this winter; or for the next set of disasters in ever more chaotic and disheveled Iraq; or just as the American casualty count there passes 2,000, or exactly when the next high-powered hurricane blows in off the Gulf (hardly inconceivable given that, over the last 35 years, **according to Science magazine**, there's been an 80% increase globally in the most powerful tropical storms); or while the first Saudi oil well or Caspian pipeline is going up in flames from a terrorist attack and so sending oil traders' fears sky-high and the

price of crude through the roof; or when post-Katrina unemployment figures start to sink in; or when Congress actually has to figure out where all the money for Iraq and Katrina damage is going to come from; or just when Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald decides to lower the boom on an administration Plame-outer or two; or... well, just add to the list yourself. Because here's the thing: As the polls show, Katrina finally breached the President's base of support, and no bubble speech or day of prayer is likely to reverse that for long.

In low-lying Washington, the Bush White House, to the surprise of most, already seems to be slowly sinking. Water is seeping into the basement. The FEMA teams are squabbling. I wouldn't expect those rescue squads, not even the Navy Seals, to hit the West Wing any time soon.

I only hope the generators work.

Tom Engelhardt, who runs the Nation Institute's Tomdispatch.com ("a regular antidote to the mainstream media"), is the co-founder of [the American Empire Project](#) and the author of [The End of Victory Culture](#), a history of American triumphalism in the Cold War.

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