

Bush's Katrina Fiasco: Is the U.S.A. Ready for 2006 Hurricane Season?

by Mary Jane Freeman

Hurricane Katrina hit the U.S. Gulf Coast states in the early morning hours of Aug. 29, 2005. Now, investigative documents, tapes, and reports released by U.S. Senate and House committees reveal the extreme negligence of the Bush-Cheney Administration in any effort to mobilize assets to save lives. The President and his key homeland security advisors *knew* the dangers of the unfolding storm *before* it struck. A government videotape leaked to the press on March 1 speaks volumes:

At noon on Aug. 28—hours before Katrina hit the Gulf Coast—National Hurricane Center director Max Mayfield told President Bush and other officials: “This is . . . a very dangerous hurricane. . . . Right now, this is a Category 5 hurricane. . . . The wisest thing to do is plan on a Category 5 hurricane. . . . [It is] so large, it’s going . . . to impact . . . a very, very large area. . . . The greatest potential for large loss of life is in the coastal areas from the storm surge.” Mayfield spoke of his “very grave concern” for the New Orleans levees, and concluded, it is “absolutely clear” if it hits the Gulf Coast, “there will be large loss of life.”

Moments later, Bush from his Crawford ranch, where he was vacationing, is seen on the video saying, “I appreciate . . . the warnings that Max and his team have given to the good folks in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.” Bush adds, “We are fully prepared,” and says that he will “move in whatever resources and assets” are needed.

Incredibly, four days later, on Sept. 1, Bush, on his first trip to the Gulf after the storm, said, “I don’t think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees,” as thousands of people stranded in the New Orleans Superdome lacked power, water, food, and medical supplies. Not only were Bush, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, and others briefed on Aug. 28 on the danger to the levees, but the reality was all levels of government—local, state, and Federal—had known for years that a severe hurricane in New Orleans was considered one of the nation’s top potential disaster threats.

Over the next critical hours and days, the inertia of a ten-ton bureaucratic octopus, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), took over. Life-saving requisitions of military aid, communications links, ice, water, medical personnel and supplies, and transport vehicles got bogged down in

“business as usual” procedures. Likewise, the White House Homeland Security Council (HSC), designated by Vice President Dick Cheney’s office to coordinate Katrina response policy, was “plagued” by “a failure of initiative,” the House Select Committee on Katrina’s Feb. 15 report charges. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the core agency mandated by law to respond to natural disasters, had become dysfunctional and downsized, as it was folded into DHS. Cheney, earlier, had redirected FEMA’s mission to terrorism, cutting funding for disaster training and mitigation programs.

Bush and Cheney were on vacation and their attention was on the Abu Ghraib scandal and powerful Republicans who were moving to curb their torture policy with amendments to the Defense funding bill. So as events unfolded, their attention elsewhere, no command decision by the President or Chertoff to “move whatever” was needed, was issued. The result, as Lyndon LaRouche charged on Sept. 3, 2005, was that a “controllable, but severe, natural catastrophe” had become “a man-made catastrophe,” a “*human* catastrophe.”

More than 1,300 people died, 2,300 people remain missing, 1.5 million people were displaced, over half a million homes destroyed, the economies of Mississippi and Louisiana decimated, and one of America’s oldest cities, New Orleans, was inundated with storm waters for months, in the nation’s worst natural disaster.

Deadly Levee Breach

Any breach of the New Orleans levees would be deadly, and this was known. Yet both Bush and Chertoff, post-storm, put up an “I had no idea” defense. A review of other Senate and House investigative records reveals a flurry of situational reports flowed into the White House’s HSC, to Cheney’s top aides, and DHS’s and FEMA’s emergency command centers before, during, and after the storm. An Aug. 28 DHS National Infrastructure Center memo warned that Katrina would lead to “severe flooding and/or levee breaching,” causing New Orleans to be “submerged for weeks or months.”

By 8:14 a.m. Aug. 29, a “levee breach” at “the Industrial Canal,” was reported by the New Orleans National Weather Service office. Scores more alerts came in that day, of massive



U.S. Coast Guard/Kyle Niemi

New Orleans on Aug. 29, 2005, after the levees broke. Bush and Chertoff claimed not to have been warned of the impending disaster—but they were, abundantly.

flooding, floating bodies, lost electricity, patients on life support at flooded hospitals being kept alive by hand, and more. Yet Bush made his Sept. 1 quip, and Chertoff testified that he didn't learn of the levee breaches until 7:00 a.m. Aug. 30, and even when he did, he flew to Atlanta to attend a meeting on avian flu!

The failures of leadership from the White House, to DHS, to FEMA were "colossal," Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) asserted in mid-February, as release of committee investigations began. The Katrina failures, Clinton noted, show "that our response capabilities are no better now than they were on 9/11." DHS's utter failure to protect American lives in the face of "advance warning" made the Republican-dominated House Select committee comment, "If this is what happens when we have advance warning, we shudder to imagine the consequences when we do not," referring to a potential terror attack.

Rebuilding Stymied by the 'Free Market'

The Bush Administration's response negligence is cruelly compounded by Bush's unfulfilled promise to launch the greatest rebuilding ever seen. Bipartisan initiatives to aid rebuilding were rejected by Bush, budget-cutting Republicans, and the President's Gulf Coast coordinator, Donald Powell, a Texas banker and deep-pocket supporter of Bush. A "free market" fanatic, Powell was explicit in a recent op-ed: "the heavy hand of government impedes the private sector's proven ability to speed recovery. . . ."

The private sector, contracted by FEMA to provide trailers as temporary housing, has failed miserably; and Cheney's office was alerted on Sept. 9, 2005 that it would. Cheney's

now-indicted former top aide I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, was e-mailed: "Scooter: . . . The trailer idea is worse than originally thought. [Data shows] trailers [being bought now won't] come off the production line" for "3.5 years," the House Feb. 15 report shows. Tens of thousands of people still await trailers, even as 10,000 trailers sit rotting and unused in Hope, Ark. Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) blasted this situation: "It would be ludicrous after the Second World War" to say "the answer to rebuild Europe is to deliver trailers to bombed-out home sites. . . . We're looking at a war zone."

Rep. Richard Baker (R-La.), a 10-term conservative lawmaker and chair of the House Finance Committee, put forth a Katrina housing bill which passed in committee, 50-9, in December 2005. Powell rejected it. Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) had a bill to set up a Gulf Coast Regional Reconstruction Authority—similar to President Franklin Roosevelt's Tennessee Valley Authority. It was sidelined. Even on the urgent task of rebuilding the levees, Powell asserts that no system can be designed to "compete with Mother Nature," so he opposes spending to upgrade the levees to Category 5 hurricane strength.

To date, Congress has approved about \$68 billion in disaster aid. Representative Baker and many others point out that none of it has gone to housing. Roughly \$36.6 billion of those funds went to FEMA's disaster relief fund to pay for costs associated with the response phase of operations. Bush, now on the hot seat for his failures, has asked Congress for \$19 billion in emergency supplemental funds for housing and the levees, among other items.

But Bush's true intention is seen in his 2007 budget (see previous article). Sen. David Vitter (R-La.) criticized the 34% cut to the Army Corps' construction budget, saying, "These sorts of cuts in the past are what led to cutting corners. And that led to catastrophic flooding in New Orleans." Cuts to food and health insurance programs that benefit hurricane victims, and a 30% cut to the Community Development Block Grants, crucial to housing rebuilding, were blasted by Rep. William Jefferson (D-La.). Senators Susan Collins (R-Me.) and Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) scored the Bush cuts to the Coast Guard and first responders as "incomprehensible" and "risky."

The 2006 hurricane season begins officially on June 1. These Katrina revelations of Bush's failed response before and after the nation's worst natural disaster, pose the question: Will the needed personnel, organizational, and funding changes be made soon enough to protect citizens this time? Mayfield has already said that this hurricane season could be as bad as or worse than 2005.

Incremental spending for this or that crisis leaves hundreds of thousands of citizens without the means to return, to rebuild, and to re-establish their livelihoods. LaRouche's "How To Capitalize a Recovery," approach to create a Federal capital fund for long term investment (*EIR*, Jan. 27, 2006), is required if we are to launch a great rebuilding effort.