

Hurricane Katrina and the War in Iraq

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As it is beginning to appear that the death toll in southeastern Louisiana and southern Mississippi from Hurricane Katrina may surpass that of 9/11, once again questions are being raised regarding the Bush administration's distorted views as to what constitutes national security.

Much of the criticism thus far has focused on the failure of authorities to evacuate the tens of thousands of low-income residents in New Orleans who lacked the means to leave for higher ground inland and the slowness and inefficiency of the federal response following the rupture of the levees protecting the city, much of which lies below sea level. (Some have compared the U.S. government's reaction unfavorably to its response to the devastating tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean region in December, though the U.S. response to that disaster was actually even slower and far less generous financially.)

Still others have noted the growing evidence that the increase in recent years in the frequency of such mega-hurricanes as Katrina is a result of global warming. The Bush administration has aggressively undermined international efforts to forcefully address such potentially catastrophic changes in the world's climate as a result of carbon dioxide emissions in the United States and other industrialized nations. It also appears that the Bush administration's decision to undercut the authority of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a once-independent unit of government, by subsuming it into the Department of Homeland Security — with its over-emphasis on the threat from international terrorism — limited FEMA's ability to better prepare for the long-predicted scenario of disastrous flooding resulting from a major hurricane striking New Orleans.

Perhaps the decision by the Bush administration that most directly contributed to the high numbers of unnecessary deaths, however, was the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The Iraq war has cost the federal government more than \$200 billion thus far, resulting in cutbacks in a number of emergency preparedness projects which appear to have lessened the ability of Louisiana authorities to cope with the hurricane, including providing charter busses to complete the evacuation of the city before the storm struck. Furthermore, Walter Maestri, the emergency management chief for Jefferson Parish, which includes New Orleans' western suburbs, noted in June of last year that anticipated funding to strengthen the levees had been diverted to pay for the war.

Indeed, federal assistance to the Southeast Louisiana Flood Control Project dropped precipitously following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Also contributing to the carnage is the fact that at least 35% of the Louisiana National Guard, long serving as the front line in hurricane relief efforts, have been unable to respond to the crisis because they are far away in Iraq. The numbers that could have been on the ground participating in relief operations have been reduced further as a result of the dramatic drop in recruitment over the past two years: Hundreds of men and women who would have otherwise enlisted or re-enlisted in the National Guard have failed to do so due to the prospect of being sent to fight in that bloody counter-insurgency war.

Perhaps even more significant has been the absence of equipment critical for emergency responses. WGNO-TV, the ABC affiliate in New Orleans, reported on August 1 that, "Dozens of high water vehicles, humvees, refuelers and generators are now abroad," warning that "in the event of a major natural disaster, that could be a problem." They interviewed Lieutenant Colonel Pete Schneider of the Louisiana National Guard, who observed that "The National Guard needs that equipment back home."

As a result of the absence of these high-water vehicles and other equipment that could have been used in the aftermath of the flooding, it appears that many hundreds of people died while waiting to be rescued. Even Thomas Donnelly of the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute observed that, “This is what happens when you take Guardsmen and put them on the conveyor belt into Iraq.”

In neighboring Mississippi, which took the brunt of the hurricane’s 145-mile per hour winds and 20-foot storm surge, 4,000 members of the state’s National Guard — a full 40% of its total troop strength — are currently in Iraq. The Washington Post quoted Lt. Andy Thaggard, a Mississippi National Guard spokesman, as saying, “Missing personnel is the big thing in this particular event — we need our people.” Louisiana’s 256th Infantry Brigade and Mississippi’s 155th Armored Brigade, both of which are currently in Iraq, include engineering and support battalions specializing in disaster relief.

President George W. Bush’s priorities were apparent the day after the hurricane struck the Gulf Coast: Rather than immediately returning to Washington to coordinate the federal response, he flew out to San Diego to give a major speech where — except for a few lines at the outset — he avoided mentioning the unfolding tragedy and instead focused upon rationalizing for his war in Iraq, comparing it to the struggle against the Axis powers in World War II.

Don’t count on the Democrats to take advantage of this opportunity to challenge the Bush administration’s misplaced priorities, however. Democratic leaders, including Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and other leading contenders for the 2008 presidential nomination, have largely supported President Bush’s Iraq agenda and therefore share in the blame. Louisiana’s hawkish Democratic senator Mary Landrieu, along with the majority of her Democratic Senate colleagues, voted in support of the October 2002 joint resolution authorizing the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Even as the drain on the federal budget resulting from the ongoing war and the heavy reliance on their states’ National Guard to suppress the resulting insurgency became apparent, they have largely supported the Bush administration’s request to continue funding the war.

Similarly, Democratic U.S. Representative William Jefferson, whose Second Congressional District in New Orleans is now mostly underwater, also voted to authorize the invasion of Iraq. He defended his vote on the absurd grounds that Iraq somehow posed a threat to America’s national security, a particularly twisted perspective for the representative of a constituency so vulnerable to natural disaster, a full 30% of whom lived below the poverty line even prior to Hurricane Katrina.

The public is doing it what it can to try to make up for the failure of its elected leadership. By providing shelter for those fleeing the devastated areas, making financial contributions to relief efforts and other measures, the American people have once again demonstrated enormous caring and generosity. Such efforts will and should continue. However, this laudable energy must also be focused on holding accountable the politicians of both parties who — out of their eagerness to invade an oil-rich country on the other side of the globe — allowed so many of their fellow Americans to suffer and die needlessly.