

Hurricane Katrina and War—what Is the Connection?

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On the face of it, there is no connection between Katrina's tragic devastation of New Orleans and the recent U.S. wars of choice. It can be shown, however, that the death and destruction wrought by Katrina have been (at least in part) a submerged or invisible part of the enormous costs of the escalating war and military spending.

The huge costs of Katrina, in terms of both blood and treasure, can be called opportunity costs of war and military spending: When a disproportionately large share of public or national resources are diverted to war and militarism, the opportunity of maintaining or upgrading public infrastructure is lost and the citizens, especially the poor and working people, are made more vulnerable in the face of natural disasters.

It is true that some disasters cannot be prevented from occurring. But, with proper defenses, they can be contained and their destructive effects minimized. Katrina was not; it was not "because of a laissez-faire government that failed to bother to take warnings seriously," and because of a skewed government fiscal policy "that is stingy when it comes to spending on public goods but lavish on armaments and war." [1] More fundamentally, because, driven by powerful special interests, the government has since the advent of Reaganomics in the 1980 been steadily diverting non-military public spending to military spending and tax cuts for the wealthy, thereby bringing about a steady erosion of the infrastructural defense systems against natural disasters.

In light of the steady cuts of the infrastructural funding for the city of New Orleans, especially of the funds that would maintain and/or reinforce the city's levee system, catastrophic consequences of a hurricane of the magnitude of Katrina were both predictable and, indeed, predicted.

Engineering and meteorological experts had frequently warned of impending disasters such as Katrina. Government policy makers in charge of maintaining public infrastructure, however, remained indifferent to (at times, even indignant of) those warnings. They seem to have had other priorities and/or responsibilities: cutting funds from public infrastructure and social spending and giving them away (in the form of tax cuts) to the wealthy supporters who had paid for their elections. It is not surprising, then, that many observers and experts have argued that Katrina was as much a policy disaster as it was a natural disaster.

It is important to point out that not of all the policy or government failures in the face of the Katrina disaster can be painted as the exclusive product of the Bush administration. Undoubtedly, the administration played a major role in compounding the destructive effects of the disaster. But the roots of government irresponsibility and the origins of the policies of neglecting public infrastructure descend far back into the past, into President Reagan's supply-side economics, also known as Reaganomics.

The core of Reaganomics has been to undermine social safety net programs, to reverse the New Deal and other anti-poverty programs, and to redistribute national resources in favor of the wealthy. Simultaneous escalation of the Pentagon budget and drastic tax cuts for the wealthy have been used as a cynical strategy in pursuit of this objective: as this combination creates big gaps in the federal budget, social spending is then slashed to close such gaps.

Soon after the disaster hit New Orleans, George Lakoff of *AlterNet* wrote, “The cause was political through and through—a matter of values and principles. . . . Eliminating as much as possible of the role of government accounts for the demotion of FEMA from cabinet rank, . . . for the budget cuts in levee repair, for placing more responsibility on state and local government than they could handle. . . . This is a failure of moral and political philosophy—a deadly failure.”[2]

The primary cause of the Katrina destruction must be sought in the political and philosophical outlook of supply-side economics—a philosophy that views government spending on public work projects not as investment in the future of the nation but as an overhead that needs to be cut as much as possible, thereby making public infrastructure susceptible to collapse and disintegration.

In light of the steady curtailment of the non-military public spending since the advent of the Reagan administration, and the resulting erosion of public infrastructure, engineering and meteorological experts had over the years issued a number of warnings regarding the vulnerability and the likely collapse of the New Orleans levee system. But expert advices to head off the calamity by proactive or preventive measures were ignored.

For example, in 1998, after a close call with Hurricane Georges, a sophisticated computer study by Louisiana State University warned of the “virtual destruction” of the city by a category four storm approaching from the southwest. Indeed, ever since the nasty experience of Hurricane Betsy in September 1965 (a category three storm that inundated many eastern parts of the Orleans Parish that were drowned by Katrina), the vulnerability of the city to hurricanes has been intensively studied and widely publicized.

The New Orleans project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers, Alfred Naomi, had warned for years of the need to shore up the levees, but corporate representatives in the White House and the Congress kept cutting back on the funding. The most recent cutback was a \$71.2 million reduction for the New Orleans district in fiscal year 2006. “I’ve never seen this level of reduction,” Naomi told the New Orleans City Business paper on June 6, 2006. His district had “identified \$35 million in projects to build and improve levees, floodwalls, and pumping stations,” the paper said. But with the cuts, “Naomi said it’s enough to pay salaries but little else.”

Naomi wasn’t the only one who warned of this disaster. In 2001, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) “ranked the potential damage to New Orleans as among the three likeliest, most catastrophic disasters facing the country,” wrote Eric Berger in a prescient article in the *Houston Chronicle* on December 1, 2001, entitled “Keeping Its Head Above Water: New Orleans Faces Doomsday Scenario.” In that piece, Berger warned: “The city’s less-than-adequate evacuation routes would strand 250,000 people or more, and probably kill one of ten left behind as the city drowned under twenty feet of water. Thousands of refugees could land in Houston.”[1]

Around the same time period, the magazine *Scientific American* published an account of the flood danger (“Drowning New Orleans”, October 2001), which like the award-winning 2002 series (“The Big One”) in the local newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*, was chillingly accurate in its warnings.

In June 2003, Civil Engineering Magazine ran a long story by Greg Brouwer entitled “The Creeping Storm.” It noted that the levees “were designed to withstand only forces associated with a fast-moving” Category 3 hurricane. “If a lingering Category 3 storm—or a stronger storm, say, Category 4 or 5—were to hit the city, much of New Orleans could find itself under more than twenty feet of water.”

One oceanographer at Louisiana State University, Joseph Suhayda, modeled such storms and shared his findings with “emergency preparedness officials throughout Louisiana,” the article noted. “The American Red Cross estimates that between 25,000 and 100,000 people would die” if the hurricane floods breached the levees and overwhelmed the city’s power plants and took out its drainage system.[1]

On October 11, 2004, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a story by Paul Nussbaum entitled “Direct Hurricane Hit Could Drown City of New Orleans, Experts Say.” It warned that “more than 25,000 people could die, emergency officials predict. That would make it the deadliest disaster in U.S. history.” The story quoted Terry C. Tuller, city director of emergency preparedness: “It’s only a matter of time. The thing that keeps me awake at night is the 100,000 people who couldn’t leave.”

But policy makers in the White House and the Congress were not moved by these ominous predictions; the warnings did not deter them from further cutting non-military public spending in order to pay for the escalating military spending and for the additional tax cuts for the wealthy. “The Bush administration’s response to these frightening forecasts was to rebuff Louisiana’s urgent requests for more flood protection: the crucial Coast 2050 Project to revive protective wetlands, the culmination of a decade of research and negotiation, was shelved and levee appropriations, including the completion of defenses around Lake Pontchartrain, were repeatedly slashed.”[3]

More than precious dollars were diverted to Iraq. In addition, much of the Louisiana and Mississippi National Guard personnel were also tied to the war: “Some 6,000 National Guard personnel in Louisiana and Mississippi who would be available to help deal with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina are in Iraq,” Pete Yost of AP reported on August 29. “The war has forced the Guard into becoming an operational force, far from its historic role as a strategic reserve primarily available to governors for disasters and other duties in their home states.”[3]

Not only did the Bush administration and its corporate allies in the Congress not finance urgent requests for the repair of the deteriorating public infrastructure, but at times the administration even punished dedicated civil servants who insisted on the necessity of such repairs. For example, Mike Parker, the former head of the Army Corps of Engineers, “was forced to resign in 2002 over budget disagreements with the White House.” Parker drew media attention (and the White House’s ire) in 2002 by telling the Senate Budget Committee that a White House proposal to cut just over \$2 billion from the Corps’ \$6 billion budget request would have a “negative impact” on the national interest. After Parker’s Capitol Hill appearance, Mitch Daniels (former director of the Office of Management and Budget, which sets the administration’s annual budget goals), wrote an angry memo to President Bush,

writing that Parker’s testimony “reads badly . . . on the printed page,” and that “Parker. . . [was] distancing [himself] actively from the administration.” Parker “was forced to resign shortly thereafter.”[4]

The amount of investment that could reinforce the New Orleans levee system and save the city from death and destruction pales by the magnitude of the loss in terms of lives and property. For example, Alfred Naomi, The New Orleans project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers, who had drawn up plans for protecting New Orleans from a Category 5 storm, pointed out soon after Katrina hit: “It would take \$2.5 billion to build a Category 5 protection system, and [now] we’re talking about tens of billions in losses, all that lost productivity, and so many lost lives and injuries and personal trauma you’ll never get over.”[4]

Champions of war and militarism tend to justify their capricious escalation of wars of choice on the grounds of “national security.” Yet, by hollowing out national treasury in favor of military spending at the expense of non-military public spending, they have created enormous economic insecurity and social vulnerability in the face of natural disasters, as painfully experienced by the victims of Hurricane Katrina. They have also created more political insecurity, both at home (by creating an atmosphere of fear and anxiety akin to an emergency or national security state) and abroad (by creating more opposition to the imperial policies of the United States and, therefore, adding to the ranks of Al-Qaeda, for example).

The fundamental moral of Katrina disaster is unmistakable: contrary to the dogma of neoliberalism and/or supply-side economics, governments bear vital responsibilities. These include provision of essential services and critical public goods that individuals and the private sector would not provide. They also include the building of a robust public infrastructure that is necessary for a vibrant economy and a civilized society.

These responsibilities sometimes mean setting standards and instituting regulations in order to protect citizens against both natural disasters and failures of a market economy (such as making buildings earthquake proof, or having basic housing codes, or requiring factories and cars to limit pollution). Perhaps most importantly, government responsibilities include investment in vital public capital formation, both physical capital (such as roads, bridges, dams, levees, and public transit) and soft, social, or human capital such as health and education).

Myopic supply-side calculations, prompted by powerful special interests, tend to view these expenditures as redundant overheads that need to be curtailed as much as possible. Sensible, judicious or responsible governments, however, would view such expenditures as vital investments in the long-term economic vitality and social prosperity that would more than offset the short-term costs of those investments.

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