

# Criminal Negligence: Chertoff Talked, While Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld Walked

by Paul Gallagher

Had this been Indonesia after the tsunami crushed its coast, the U.S. press and State Department would have dripped scorn. By the afternoon of Sept. 1, four terrible days had unveiled the growing scope of destruction, despair, and thousands of deaths over a 10,000-square-mile “ground zero” following Hurricane Katrina—and not one Bush Administration Cabinet member, let alone President Bush or Vice President Dick Cheney, had visited any part of it. Nor had any measurable Federal disaster mobilization reached it, although private organizations, led by the Red Cross, had jumped into action, and were sheltering and feeding over 100,000 refugees in an increasingly desperate crisis.

On Aug. 31 and Sept. 1, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff did a lot of talking at press conferences in Washington, with other Cabinet members, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and a general or two standing behind him. But notably absent was Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, while the President was still making his way back from vacation, and the Vice President lurked at an undisclosed location. Cheney’s and Rumsfeld’s priorities remained the war in Iraq, the imminent potential war on Iran. The failure of leadership was palpable; the Congress saw it; the more Chertoff and FEMA Director Michael Brown promised, the less emergency Federal help was visible in the cities and towns of Louisiana and Mississippi where hundreds of thousands were homeless, and thousands dying.

The measures actually carried out by the Administration on Aug. 31 and Sept. 1 were almost symbolic: The Environmental Protection Agency suspended gasoline emissions standards so that more gasoline could be imported; the Pentagon announced a new Northern Command joint task force; the Transportation Department waived rules on how long truck drivers could drive without rest; etc. The Health and Human Services Secretary, Michael Leavitt, announced his department had identified 40,000 available hospital beds in the entire nation—showing the lack of any real surge capacity—but could only identify 2,600 potentially available beds in the five states surrounding the crisis region.

Glaringly missing were the absolutely necessary steps: large-scale airlifts by the military, bringing supplies in and people out; the creation of temporary military bases as logistical focal points for aid of all kinds; the setting up of tent cities by the armed forces to shelter hundreds of thousands;

hundreds of Army Blackhawk and comparable helicopters, rather than the 50 from the Coast Guard and local police that were trying to rescue people trapped in the Louisiana floods. All but 11,000 of the National Guardsmen of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama together were missing, in Iraq, with their equipment. Navy ships whose dispatch from the East Coast were not projected to arrive until Sept. 6-8; and an Army hospital ship coming from Baltimore, another week after that. FEMA’s forces were assessed by New Orleans’ emergency director Terry Ebbert as having “no command and control”; he said that FEMA, by Aug. 31, had not made any supplies of food, medicine, clothing, tarps, boats, etc. available to the city government, despite requests. Ebbert called the response to the catastrophe, “a national disgrace.”

On the afternoon of Sept. 1, after returning from vacation, and a day before finally visiting the stricken Gulf Coast, George W. Bush issued a guidance to the nation by which his incompetence in the face of crisis may be remembered: “I’d say to Americans, don’t buy gas unless you need it.” Then he introduced former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, and praised them as coming to lead a new charitable fundraising effort like that for victims of South Asia’s tsunami. The two former Presidents, each appearing to defer to the other, said nothing, until all three left the White House stage in an embarrassing silence.

## The Human Toll of the Failure

By Sept. 2 when Bush finally travelled to the devastated region, Louisiana’s Republican Senator David Vitter made the chilling assessment that “deaths in Louisiana will start at 10,000,” and rise much higher than that.

Hurricane Katrina devastated not only the region of the country’s largest and busiest ports, but the nation’s “poorest of the poor” counties. After the killer storm—widely forecast by the “strategic warning” from government weather scientists on Aug. 2, and a second, precise “tactical warning” on Aug. 26—thousands, mostly of the growing number of poor in America, are dead, many thousands missing.

Of approximately 2.9 million people of Mississippi—the nation’s poorest state, with an official poverty rate of 17.9% in 2004—about 800,000 live in the southernmost tier of 15 counties now declared to be in the most serious disaster condition. Some 500,000 of these people were in the six counties



EIRNS/Dean Andromidas

*Why not in New Orleans? This Army water purification unit was in Zaire within two days of President Bill Clinton's order in 1994, to send U.S. military forces to Central Africa, to help build tent cities and provide drinking water to more than 1 million refugees, fleeing genocide in Rwanda.*

directly in the path of both Hurricane Katrina's eyewall, and its 20-25-foot storm surge, which flattened or tore up everything from west of Gulfport over to Pascagoula, and 12-15 miles inland. This is one of two limited areas in the state with a population density of 150 persons per square mile; much of the state has much lower population density. In most counties in this area, the official poverty rate ranges from 18-28%. Hurricane Katrina hitting at the end of the month, many thousands did not have money left from their last paychecks, to evacuate to anywhere. If half or more of the population left before the storm, from just this most damaged region, then 200,000 people, including 30-40,000 very poor people, were slammed by the storm surge and 150-mph winds. State and local authorities still do not know what the casualties here have been; there are very large numbers of missing persons.

Aid of any kind first reached survivors in Biloxi—right in the middle of the worst-hit coastal area—on Wednesday afternoon, Aug. 31, the storm having hit at 6:00 a.m. on Aug. 29.

Of 4.5 million Louisiana residents, 3 million were in the southern counties declared to be in the most serious disaster category after Katrina hit; population in most of that 28-county area is 100 persons per square mile or more. The worst hit six counties—Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. Bernard, Orleans, St. Charles, and St. John the Baptist—had the highest population density, 150 or more persons per square mile. This is 900,000 people. Perhaps 500,000 evacuated before the storm.

The poverty rate throughout 23 of the 28 counties of this entire 3 million-person zone of Louisiana is 18-28%, except for the three southernmost counties on the Gulf, and the two westernmost counties on the Texas border; there the official poverty rate is 16-18%.

Mayor Ray Nagin, and many other witnesses, have said there are thousands of fatalities in New Orleans. The total of deaths in Mississippi will clearly also have been in the thousands. And there will be many, perhaps hundreds, of in-hospital deaths caused by failure of in-patient care for those in hospitals in both states when the storm hit.

At least 500,000 citizens of Louisiana and Mississippi are refugees. The Red Cross and other charitable organizations, as of late Sept. 2, were sheltering over 110,000 people in shelters of all kinds, from churches and community centers to university buildings, state park cabins to public auditoriums, in five states (Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida). As many as 40,000 of these are in Baton Rouge, 80 miles northwest of New Orleans, including 5,000 in a large city building; these are among perhaps 100,000 people displaced into Baton Rouge by the hurricane.

But the U.S. Armed Forces, on Sept. 2, had built no tent cities, no mobile-home cities, no water pumping/purification setups, and were sheltering no one.

The Coast Guard was said (by DHS Secretary Chertoff) to have rescued by then about 3,000 people stranded by floods, mostly in New Orleans; and New Orleans police helicopters had rescued another 1,000 or so; this, out of tens of thousands stranded in deep water. Most of them have been taken to the New Orleans Superdome, where terrible conditions had led to numerous deaths in a few days' time. With many, many delays, 10,000 of those sufferers were bussed to Houston and packed into cots in the Astrodome stadium, where they could not possibly stay for long.

## Leadership Shifts

On Sept. 1 the U.S. Senate stepped into the breach, reportedly on the bipartisan initiative of the Senate Democratic leadership, and passed an emergency supplemental disaster budget of \$10.5 billion, demanding all-out action. The next day the House followed suit.

The Congressional debate before the vote featured many emotional statements about the suffering, deaths, and coming economic hardship resulting from the failure of pre-storm preparedness, and failure of response to its destruction. "Today I am ashamed for my country," said Rep. Carolyn Kilpatrick of Michigan (D), one of several Congressmen who demanded major airlifts and large-scale temporary housing construction. But Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D) of California, most notably, argued that the problem was simply a lack of Presidential leadership, and called on the President to act as one. Lofgren cited Article 2, Section 1 of the United States Constitution, which vests Executive powers in the President, and compelled him to act decisively and passionately in such a crisis.

The real subject implied by Representative Lofgren's remarks, and by the Senate's initial action, was the ground for impeachment of the President and Vice President for criminal negligence of their duty to the General Welfare.