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Katrina in Perspective:

The Disaster Raises Key Questions About the Role of Government in American Society

by Peter Dreier

A central tenet of conservative ideology is the belief that government interferes with individual liberty, is less efficient than the private sector, and in many cases is simply unnecessary. Among the world's industrial nations, the US has the lowest overall level of taxation (especially for the wealthy), has the weakest regulations on business for consumer and worker protections, and has the smallest safety net in terms of health insurance, child care, and anti-poverty programs.

Even so, conservatives like President George W. Bush, his Republican allies in Congress, his intellectual strategists like Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and William Kristol of the Weekly Standard, and the corporate-sponsored policy wonks at the American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, and the Heritage Foundation argue that (with the exception of military spending) we need to further reduce government, in large part by cutting taxes even more, especially for the very rich. They call this "starving the beast," reducing taxes so much that government in general, and the federal government in particular, will be virtually paralyzed.

With the Katrina disaster, these conservatives got what they were looking for. When it was needed most, government was paralyzed, and for the past two weeks we've been watching the consequences on television.

The American people appear to understand that the federal government's actions before and after Katrina were due to a combination of indifference and incompetence. According to a national survey conducted September 6-7 by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (<http://people-press.org>), Katrina and the spike in gas prices triggered a major shift in public priorities. For the first time since the 9/11 terror attacks, a majority of Americans (56%) say it is more important for the president to focus on domestic policy than the war on terrorism.

The public is highly critical of President Bush's handling of Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. Two thirds (67%) believe he could have done more to speed up relief efforts. At the same time, Bush's overall job approval rating has slipped to 40% and his disapproval rating has climbed to 52%, among the highest for

his presidency. Moreover, Bush's ratings have slipped the most among his core constituents - Republicans and conservatives.

What's Government Got to Do With It?

In contrast to right-wing ideology, the Katrina disaster reveals how much we need government. It is needed to provide things that individuals and the private sector simply cannot. It is needed to build the public infrastructure necessary for a civilized society, to help deal with risk, to help relieve the immediate suffering, and to help people and communities restore some level of normalcy and decency. This role sometimes means imposing government regulations on people and institutions (such as making buildings earthquake proof, or having basic housing codes, or requiring factories and cars to limit pollution). These regulations add short-term costs, but are necessary to insure public safety and health. Government is also needed to build dams, levees, bridges, roads, and public transit -- as well as schools, parks, and playgrounds. These, too, are long-term investments that make society more livable as well as safer.

The Katrina disaster also underscores the need for a strong federal government, the only level of government with the resources to deal with the prevention, rescue, and rebuilding of areas faced with major disasters. Local and state governments lack the resources for this task, although they should be part of the planning and implementation.

Katrina also highlights the importance of having effective government run by well-trained people who know what they are doing. There were plenty of competent and experienced public servants who, given the opportunity and resources, could have prevented the disaster and/or dramatically limited its consequences. The failure to prevent the Katrina disaster and to adequately respond once it occurred was a failure of political will by the highest-ranking government leaders, not incompetence by middle-level managers and front-line staff in the military, FEMA, and other agencies.

In general, by bashing "big government" as inefficient, unnecessary, and/or in conflict with liberty, conservatives have made it more politically difficult to raise revenues for these much-needed expenditures and to impose regulations that are necessary to insure public safety. This was certainly the case with the failure of Bush and Congress to invest adequately in the infrastructure needed to prevent so much hurricane damage in New Orleans and Mississippi. In 2001, FEMA identified a major hurricane hitting New Orleans as one of the three "likeliest, most catastrophic disasters facing this country." Many experts warned far in advance that we needed to spend more money to upgrade the infrastructure, including the levees in the region, but Bush and the GOP Congress cut the budget for the Army Corps of Engineers and various projects that could have protected New Orleans from a category 4 hurricane. There was absolutely no excuse for this, except that they would rather cut taxes for the rich and spend money on war in Iraq. It simply wasn't a priority.

The Arrogance of Power

When President Bush decided to invade, then occupy, then rebuild Iraq, he asked Congress for funding and they provided it -- about \$400 billion so far. But when it came time to provide relief for the people of New Orleans and Mississippi gulf coast, Bush not only looked to Congress but also immediately

asked Americans to donate money to charities like the Red Cross and Salvation Army, while celebrities held TV telethons to raise money to provide basic necessities for Katrina's victims.

The Katrina disaster puts in dramatic relief the Bush administration's arrogance and priorities. To the rest of the world, it is utterly amazing that the richest nation on earth has been unable to deal with this disaster -- from prevention, to evacuation, to rebuilding. Some find it ironic that New Orleans has been reduced to "third world" conditions, including the possibility of a public health catastrophe like a cholera epidemic. But in many ways, as some media outlets have noted, New Orleans (and other urban areas in the US) was already a "third world" area in terms of poverty, infant mortality, and other factors.

A United Nations report on global inequality released September 7 pointed out that the United States, with its widening economic divide, has the same infant mortality rate as Malaysia and accused the US of having "an overdeveloped military strategy and an under-developed strategy for human security."

At least 59 countries -- including many who opposed the US invasion of Iraq -- have pledged assistance to the United States to help Katrina's victims. These include wealthy nations like France, Australia, Germany, and France, and poor ones like El Salvador, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. It may seem shocking that some of the world's poorest countries have offered support when the United States lags so far behind other industrial nation (on a per capita basis) in providing humanitarian aid to poor countries. Last July, for example, Bush rejected British Prime Minister Tony Blair's call for the U.S. and other wealthy nations to dramatically increase its aid to Africa.

According to Reuters, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that "no offer that can help alleviate the suffering of the people in the afflicted area will be refused." But when it came to relieving the suffering of Katrina's victims, the Bush administration had a political litmus test. It refused help from Cuba (which offered to send over 1,000 doctors and 36 tons of medicine and equipment to the disaster zone) and Venezuela (which offered soldiers, firefighters and other disaster specialists, as well as fuel and \$1 million in cash) because it objects to those nations' policies.

Newspapers from around the world are flabbergasted at America's impotence in the face of Katrina. Many foreign papers have commented on the paradox of how the US is seemingly able to destroy and rebuild Bagdad but unable to protect New Orleans. And many papers noted the racial and class nature of the Katrina divide -- who got out, and who didn't; who needed food and shelter, and who didn't.

Race and Class Fault Lines

Katrina was not an equal opportunity disaster. There were clear class and race fault lines. In his recent book, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, sociologist Eric Klinenberg reveals how that city's economic and social divisions were reflected in who died and who survived a severe heat wave in July 1995. The poor, people of color, and the elderly - who are most likely to be socially isolated and without resources -- were the most likely to die.

The same is true in New Orleans. The Bush administration apparently assumed that people would evacuate New Orleans on their own, without giving much thought to who these people were, what resources they had, or where they would go. They acted as if everyone had an SUV full of gas and family or friends (or a second home) waiting to take them to somewhere safe.

In a wonderful example of fortuitous bad-timing, the U.S. Census Bureau released two new reports on poverty on August 30. One (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p60-229.pdf>) showed that the nation's poverty rate - now 12.7 percent (accounting for 37 million Americans in poverty) -- has risen steadily since George Bush took office. Another (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/acs-01.pdf>) showed that Mississippi (with 21.6 percent poverty rate) and Louisiana (19.4 percent) are the nation's poorest states, and that New Orleans (with a 23.2 percent poverty rate) is the 12th poorest city in the nation.

New Orleans is not only one of the nation's poorest cities, but its poor people are among the most concentrated in poverty ghettos. Housing discrimination and the location of government subsidized housing have contributed to the city's economic and racial segregation. According to the Brookings Institution (<http://www.brookings.edu/metro/katrina.htm>), the area has seen a faster exodus of jobs, as well as middle-class and wealthy families, to the suburbs than in other metropolitan areas, exacerbating the city's fiscal crisis.

Indeed, much of the human devastation is due to the fact that New Orleans is one of the nation's poorest cities. The New York Times and other papers gradually started to report on this economic divide as a key part of the Katrina story. But the Bush administration didn't (and doesn't) get it. Many reports had warned that tens of thousands of people would have difficulty evacuating New Orleans in the case of a flood. Even so, FEMA Director Michael Brown resorted to typical blame-the-victim conservative rhetoric. He attributed the death toll in New Orleans "to people who did not heed evacuation warnings."

George W.'s mother, former First Lady Barbara Bush, similarly and unwittingly reflected the class and racial bigotry underlying the failure of the administration's relief efforts. In the midst of a tour of facilities set up for the evacuees -- in reporter John Nichols' words, "cots crammed side-by-side in a huge stadium where the lights never go out and the sound of sobbing children never completely ceases" -- Mrs. Bush told a radio interviewer: "Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this, this is working very well for them." Only a multimillionaire completely divorced from reality could say something like that.

FEMA and Bush's Crony Capitalism

Many aspects of the Katrina disaster -- from the appointment of FEMA directors to the contracts and plans for reconstruction -- exemplify the worst sort of crony capitalism that has been rampant in the Bush administration.

We understand why presidents appoint political hacks and big donors to ambassadorships in obscure nations. But Bush's two FEMA directors had absolutely no qualifications for the job.

Clinton's FEMA director, James Lee Whitt, rebuilt and professionalized the

agency, only to watch Bush undermine its effectiveness through incompetent appointments and budget cuts. Bush's first FEMA director, Joseph Allbaugh, had no disaster relief experience. He managed Bush's campaign for Texas governor in 1994, served as Gov. Bush's chief of staff, and was Bush's presidential campaign manager in 2000. In 2001, soon after joining FEMA, Allbaugh characterized the agency as an "an oversized entitlement program" and urged states, cities and victims of disaster to rely instead on "faith-based organizations . . . like the Salvation Army and the Mennonite Disaster Service." This statement is typical of George W.'s view (similar to his father's "thousand points of light" rhetoric) that we can solve our problems by relying on private charity rather than government.

When Allbaugh quit as FEMA director, he persuaded Bush to replace him with his college roommate, Michael Brown, who also had no disaster relief experience. Brown was previously employed by the International Arabian Horse Assn., a job from which he was fired.

Under both Allbaugh and Brown, the Bush administration cut the budget for FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers. It also folded FEMA into the Department of Homeland Security, diminishing its role as an emergency planning and relief agency while viewing it as simply another part of the administration's "war on terror."

On the September 1 broadcast of ABC's "Good Morning America," Bush said, "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees." In fact, as the Chicago Tribune noted, "Despite continuous warnings that a catastrophic hurricane could hit New Orleans, the Bush administration and Congress in recent years have repeatedly denied full funding for hurricane preparation and flood control. That has delayed construction of levees around the city and stymied an ambitious project to improve drainage in New Orleans' neighborhoods."

For example, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers requested \$27 million for this fiscal year to pay for hurricane-protection projects around Lake Pontchartrain. The Bush administration countered with \$3.9 million, and Congress eventually provided \$5.7 million.

"Because of the shortfalls, which were caused in part by the rising costs of the war in Iraq," the Tribune reported, "the corps delayed seven contracts that included enlarging the levees, according to corps documents." The Wall Street Journal documented (in a September 6 report) how the Bush administration had systemically stripped FEMA of authority, money, and key staff, undermined its morale, and ignored warnings by state emergency managers that its actions were sabotaging the agency's capacity to respond to disasters.

Brown's leadership of FEMA was, pardon the expression, a disaster. His statement that FEMA officials were unaware as late as Thursday, Sept. 1, that thousands of refugees were trapped in the New Orleans convention center without food or water is one of the most brazen examples of either stupidity or lying in history. (All he needed to do was turn on the television).

There were multiple failures to prepare for the disaster and coordinate rescue operations. For example, while government emergency planners scrambled to get relief to stricken communities, the USS Bataan – a 844-foot ship with

1,200 sailors, helicopters, doctors, hospital beds for 600 patients, six operating rooms, food and water – was cruising in the Gulf of Mexico, awaiting relief orders.

We don't know the magnitude of the Bush administration's blunders and misjudgements, or their cost in human lives and property damage, but this was clearly the low point for President Bush.

Still, on September 2, during his first (and belated) tour of the disaster area, Bush told his FEMA director in front of the cameras, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job," despite all evidence to the contrary. A week later, under enormous pressure from public officials, civic leaders, and the media, Bush relieved Brown of his responsibilities for overseeing the Katrina relief effort.

But the failure of the Bush administration to adequately prepare for Katrina, and then to botch the evacuation and relief effort, was not simply a matter of hiring the wrong people for the job. It must be seen in the context of Bush's overall priorities. Bush and the GOP leadership in Congress, including presidential hopeful and majority leader Sen. Bill Frist, still want to repeal the estate tax -- a huge tax cut for very rich -- in the midst of all this. Just as they refused to ask the rich to sacrifice anything as we went to war in Iraq, they refuse to ask the rich to sacrifice to help rescue the lives and property of the mostly poor and African-American residents of New Orleans and the residents of the Mississippi gulf coast. (In Iraq war, too, it is poor Americans and people of color who disproportionately die and suffer severe injuries). Also, the fact that so many National Guard troops -- who include many cops, firefighters, nurses, and EMTs -- are overseas in Iraq certainly handicapped the effort to evacuate and rescue people from Katrina's damage.

Disaster Profiteers

Katrina is a disaster for the people of the gulf region and for the nation's economy. (About 400,000 Americans will lose their jobs, according to the Congressional Budget Office). But for some companies, especially those with political connections, Katrina, like the war in Iraq, is a bonanza. Congress has already appropriated \$62 billion for post-Katrina relief and repair, and the figure is expected to exceed \$100 billion. The reconstruction of New Orleans and the gulf coast, like the rebuilding of Iraq, has unleashed a feeding frenzy of government contracts to companies. FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers quickly suspended its rules to allow no-bid contracts in order to move quickly, but in doing so, it also allowed companies with close political ties to get to the front of the line. As the New York Times reported on September 10, "From global engineering and construction firms like the Fluor Corporation and Haliburton to local trash removal and road-building concerns, the private sector is poised to reap a windfall of business in the largest domestic rebuilding effort ever undertaken."

Three companies -- the Shaw Group, Kellogg Brown & Root (a subsidiary of Haliburton, whose former CEO is VP Dick Cheney), and Boh Brothers Construction of New Orleans -- have already been awarded no-bid contracts by the Army Corps of Engineers to perform the restoration. Bechtel and Fluor (firms with close ties to the GOP) have also reaped huge contracts. Haliburton is facing questions for allegedly overcharging on work done in Iraq. The Department of Defense has been criticized for awarding Iraq reconstruction

contracts to Haliburton and Bechtel without competition. Since the storm hit, Haliburton's shares have risen by more than 10 per cent to \$65.

Bush's first FEMA director Joseph Allbaugh resigned in 2003 to head New Bridge Strategies, a company whose motto is: "Helping to Rebuild a New Iraq." According to its website (<http://www.newbridgestrategies.com>), the firm is "a unique company that was created specifically with the aim of assisting clients to evaluate and take advantage of business opportunities in the Middle East following the conclusion of the U.S.-led war in Iraq." He was hired by Kellogg, Brown & Root to, according to his lobbying disclosure form, "educate the congressional and executive branch on defense, disaster relief and homeland security issues."

The Houston Chronicle reported on Sept. 1 that the U.S. Navy hired KBR "to restore electric power, repair roofs and remove debris at three naval facilities in Mississippi damaged by Hurricane Katrina" and to "perform damage assessments at other naval installations in New Orleans as soon as it is safe to do so." (Earlier this year, the Navy awarded \$350 million in contracts to KBR and three other companies to repair naval facilities in northwest Florida damaged by Hurricane Ivan, which struck in September 2004).

To sweeten the contracts, Bush administration has suspended the federal Davis-Bacon law requiring contractors working on recovery and reconstruction efforts to pay a fair minimum wage to its employees. The law, passed in 1931, requires contractors on federal projects to pay the prevailing or average pay in the region. (The prevailing wage in New Orleans is just \$9/hour for construction work, according to the Department of Labor). The Bush administration and its corporate allies have long opposed the Davis-Bacon law. Now they are using the Katrina disaster to impose their agenda through the back door.

"Employers are all too eager to exploit workers," AFL-CIO President John Sweeney told the Washington Post. "This is no time to make that easier. What a double tragedy it would be to allow the destruction of Hurricane Katrina to depress living standards even further."

What Kind of Reconstruction?

The rescue and resettlement of Katrina's victims is still underway, but government officials and business leaders are already formulating reconstruction plans. Our federal government is about spend to more than \$100 billion on earthquake relief and repair, the largest urban (and rural) renewal program in memory.

Almost everyone assumes that we should simply rebuild New Orleans and the gulf coast the way it was before Katrina. New Orleans and the gulf coast is a major center for refining oil. The Gulf Coast has half of US oil refineries. About 60% of oil imports come through Gulf ports. These facilities need to be rebuilt. People hope that much of the city's cultural life – its music venues, the French Quarter, its charming neighborhoods – can be restored.

But what about the rest of the city and the larger region? The people who return to New Orleans and the gulf coast will need jobs, homes, and public services. The area will need to rebuild hospitals, health clinics, parks, playgrounds, and schools.

But should the federal government simply subsidize the reconstruction of the city's low-wage economy -- its hotels, casinos, and other tourist and service industries? If a major hotel chain or casino is going to get millions in federal aid, shouldn't there be some quid-pro-quo -- like requiring them to pay a living wage or provide other community benefits? (It was the New Orleans business community that three years ago filed suit to overturn the results of a successful ballot initiative -- led by ACORN and the local labor movement -- to adopt a municipal minimum wage one dollar above the current federal level of \$5.15/hour).

Should we provide homebuilders and landlords millions in federal funds to reconstruct apartment buildings without any guarantees that rents will be affordable to the families who need them? In rebuilding New Orleans and its suburbs, shouldn't we avoid isolating the poor in ghetto neighborhoods? In reconstructing the city's infrastructure, shouldn't we link where people live, work, and shop through decent public transit?

And if we're going to spend billions of dollars to rebuild homes, offices, warehouses, and stores, should we subsidize rebuilding them in areas that we know will be the target of future hurricanes? Across the country, we allow people and businesses to build buildings in areas that are very risky -- not just in New Orleans. In southern California, government zoning laws and building codes allow people and businesses to construct homes, offices, and stores in areas -- such as the canyons of wealthy Malibu -- prone to fires, mud slides, earthquakes, and other disasters that come predictably. Yes, we have to live with a certain amount of risk. But we actually pay people to rebuild on the very same spots where they were destroyed by natural disasters. Some of this is unavoidable because so many areas of our country are prone to some kind of disaster. But we exacerbate the problem by encouraging, insuring, and subsidizing development in high-risk areas without asking people and businesses to pay the cost of such risks.

The New Yorker recently reported that, according to Carol Browner, who ran the Environmental Protection Agency during the Clinton Administration, Sen. Trent Lott fought EPA's efforts to limit construction of gambling casinos on Mississippi's environmentally-sensitive wetlands. Perhaps in the wake of Katrina, the developers and their political allies will heed those warnings.

This reconstruction effort should include jobs and training for the gulf coast residents who were unemployed before Katrina as well as those who lost their jobs as a result of the disaster. Doing so will require a public works plan similar to the WPA and the Civilian Conservation Corps.

In other words, if we're spending billions in tax dollars for major reconstruction effort, shouldn't there be some reasonable planning standards -- and concern about fairness and equity -- involved?

The Responsibility of Government

The Katrina disaster has triggered the nation's largest population movement in memory. Hundreds of thousands of people left the New Orleans and Mississippi gulf coast regions and moved to Baton Rouge, Houston, and other cities. Some will return to their previous communities, but many will remain where they've relocated. These cities are now faced with enormous challenges. Where will these people live? Where will their children attend

school? How will they get health care and nursing home care. Where will they work?

Should the burden for addressing these human needs and economic realities fall on the localities, or be left to the private market? Or should Washington play a significant role?

Baton Rouge is already experiencing a huge spike in rents and housing prices as a result of the increased demand. Baton Rouge, Houston and the other cities are now facing overcrowded schools without sufficient buildings, teachers, textbooks and equipment. Shouldn't the federal government come to the aid of these cities with funding to build affordable housing, construct new schools, and hire more teachers? Or will the Bush administration and Congress view this resettlement the way it views immigration from abroad -- forcing those cities and states with the vast majority of new immigrants (especially California, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona) to provide for them?

The Katrina disaster begs the larger question: What responsibility, if any, does the federal government have to provide Americans with decent housing, access to health care, and opportunities for work that pays a living wage? Should government help people cope with the vicissitudes of the business cycle, the inequities of the market economy, and just plain old bad luck?

Conservatives are willing to spend billions of dollars to rescue people and businesses from a "natural" disaster, like a hurricane or earthquake, but not a human-made disaster, like chronic poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. We have FEMA for natural disaster relief but no modern-day equivalent of the Depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA) for human disaster relief to address the widespread human needs associated with poverty in New Orleans and elsewhere.

As Richard Rothstein and I wrote in the American Prospect after the 1993 Los Angeles earthquake. (<http://www.prospect.org/print/V5/18/dreier-p.html>), the same Republican Congresspeople who voted against President Clinton's public works jobs plan for being a "budget-buster" full of "pork" projects, voted for billions of dollars in earthquake relief and repair. Ironically, the federal government wound up spending more money in Southern California on earthquake repair and relief than it would have under the original Clinton public works plan.

During the Depression of the 1930s, the New Deal expanded the role of government dramatically: it initiated a minimum wage, Social Security, public housing, rural electrification (ie the TVA and Bonneville), the right to unionize, and massive public works to put people back to work rebuilding the cities. When the Depression ended, these programs and policies did not end. Only the large-scale public works program was killed, but it was replaced, after World War 2, with two even larger public works and industrial policies that reshaped America -- military spending and the federal highway program.

Wherever they move, the evacuees from New Orleans and Mississippi are mostly poor. They will need jobs, housing, and health care, among other things. But so do millions of other Americans, including the 37 million who are poor, the 45.8 million without health insurance, the even larger number who pay more than they can afford to put a roof over their heads. Why help the victims of Katrina but not help the victims of George Bush, Alan Greenspan,

Enron, Wal-Mart, and American drug companies?

Katrina also underscores the need to reorder national priorities. And it underscores the human disaster at hand as a result of several decades of the ascendancy of right-wing ideas and corporate domination of the federal government, which extols market forces, individualism, and private charity over public responsibility and the common good.

America at its Worst and Best

The Katrina disaster brought out both the worst and the best in the American people and society. It revealed the wide gap between the decency of the American people and the indecency of the Bush Administration and its corporate allies.

The worst starts with George W. His was not only a failure of leadership, but a failure of basic human decency. Surrounded by poor people who had lost their homes (and in some cases friends and relatives), Bush promised to help rebuild devastated areas better than they were before, but the first example that came to his mind was the racist Republican Senator from Mississippi, Trent Lott. "Out of the rubbles of Trent Lott's house — he's lost his entire house — there's going to be a fantastic house," Bush said. "And I'm looking forward to sitting on the porch."

Bush set a high standard for insensitivity, but others have risen to the occasion. They include the immoral greed of some oil companies and gas stations, as well as other retail stores, and landlords, jacking up prices and rents to take advantage of people's desperation amid the shortage of gas, food, clothing, apartments, and other basic necessities.

The outrages also include the horrid criminal behavior of some New Orleans residents. Looting stores to obtain food, water, and clothing is understandable and hardly counts as "criminal" acts under the circumstances. But people who shot guns and rifles at helicopters and other rescue operations, or people who raped and brutalized other victims of the disaster (as allegedly occurred in the Superdome and elsewhere) are in a different category and should be condemned as predators and thugs. It is likely that these people were criminals before Katrina.

On the other hand, the Katrina disaster has also brought out the best in many Americans. It revealed, like the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the generosity of the American people. The outpouring of private money and volunteers to help the victims of Katrina has been impressive. Churches and synagogues, labor unions, volunteers for the Red Cross, and hundreds of thousands of small groups of citizens and individuals acting on their own out of sense of moral responsibility did their part. Victims of the disaster helped each other, showing enormous courage and fortitude. People who live worlds apart from the disaster -- in terms of both physical and social distance -- showed enormous solidarity and compassion.

Can progressives rescue some lessons from the Katrina disaster? Can we take the failures of the Bush administration's prevention and relief efforts and remind Americans about the need for activist and efficient government -- not just for natural disasters but also for addressing the day-to-day suffering of the American people? Can we promote a common sense view that our tax

dollars are best used to meet human needs at home and human rights abroad instead of risking American lives fighting an immoral war in Iraq or elsewhere? And, finally, will the Republicans (and some Democrats) in Congress who opposed funds for disaster prevention and relief -- but who continue to endorse tax relief for the rich -- be held accountable at the polls in November 2006?

***Peter Dreier** is the E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics, and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy Program, at Occidental College.*

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