



Los Angeles Times | Opinion

You are here: LAT Home > Articles > 2005 > September > 08 > Opinion

Archive for Thursday, September 08, 2005

Noblesse oblige? Not our president

By Margaret Carlson

September 08, 2005 *in print edition B-11*

AS PART OF HIS political damage control over the weekend, President Bush sent his staff to the Sunday talk shows and his parents to visit evacuees bused to Houston from New Orleans.

The administration officials fared poorly. On "Meet the Press," Homeland Security Secretary **Michael Chertoff** tried to spin a headline few saw – "New Orleans Dodges a Bullet" – into an explanation of why his department stood by for days as thousands sent to the city's convention center were trapped in their own filth, without food, water or medicine. He looked silly.

But Chertoff gave a boffo performance compared with the president's mother, who left her comfortable house in the West Oaks section of Houston to tour the emergency facility at the Astrodome.

While I saw a teeming mass of displaced people standing in hourlong lines to wash encrusted grime off their children in a tiny restroom sink, Barbara Bush found a bunch of happy campers experiencing a step up in their living conditions. She saw visitors "overwhelmed with the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working [she chuckles here] very well for them."

Oh really? The Bushes have always made fun of Bill Clinton's lip-biting, hands-on governing, but who wouldn't prefer it to this president's upbeat platitudes. Tanned and rested from a vacation so long it would embarrass the French, Bush initially flew over the devastation in Air Force One, promising his prayers on his way someplace else. When he actually arrived in Louisiana a few days later, he reminisced about going to New Orleans "to enjoy myself, occasionally too much," apparently thinking he was at a fundraiser. He topped that in Mississippi: "Out of the rubble of Trent Lott's house

Even to his detractors, the callous, puerile attitude and sheer ineptitude of Bush this past week is shocking. He got off to a slow start on 9/11 but quickly found his bullhorn and Rudy Giuliani. He's got neither here.

One reason for the dismal federal performance is Bush's disdain for government. To him, it's bloated and for chumps who can't provide for themselves – with some exceptions. Bush signed spending bills filled with pork, finding \$454 million for his Alaskan Republicans to build two bridges to nowhere in Alaska but not for the levees everyone but him knew were cracking. His administration intervenes but only when there are a lot of cameras and potential political gain, such as in the Terri Schiavo case, when Bush rushed back from his ranch in March to do so. And saying "it's your money, not the government's," he cut taxes for the wealthy, which means less money for boring projects like disaster relief.

If Bush cared about governing, he would have never appointed Michael Brown, the failed director of a trade association that ran horse shows, to run FEMA, which the president folded into the Homeland Security Department.

That agency has little to show for itself other than an ineffective color chart and long lines at the airport as arthritic old ladies remove their shoes.

If Bush's first priority were managing the real crisis and not the political one, he'd fire Brown, who ignored the pleas for help from the thousands of people herded like cattle into the Superdome and the convention center. On the contrary, Bush praised his point man for the recovery that hadn't happened: "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job." If he keeps up the good work, he may end up like those other great officials – Paul Bremer and George Tenet – with a Medal of Freedom around his neck instead of a noose.

To paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, we went to New Orleans with the government we have – replete with its Chertoffs, Brownies, Cheneys and assorted other ideologues, cronies and schemers who gorge on patronage, revel in politics and brush off the mundane responsibilities of the offices they hold. They're Big Picture guys who have brought the same management skills to the Gulf states that they brought to that other gulf.

The worrisome question is how much like them are the rest of us? In 2000, even his supporters found **Al Gore** and his 10-point plans long-winded compared with the affable frat boy rescued from a checkered career by family and connections until he was running the Texas Rangers and then Texas itself. For three years, we watched as Bush created and compounded the tragedy in Iraq, and rehired him anyway. Perhaps now we see that you better treat government with respect. You never know when your life – political and otherwise – might depend on it.

*

MARGARET CARLSON is a columnist for Bloomberg News.

More articles by Margaret Carlson

More articles from the Opinion section

California and the world. Get the Times from \$1.35 a week

Copyright 2008 Los Angeles Times