

Stripping away the veneer

Global warming hits the Gulf Coast: The controversy after Katrina and Rita

By Jeremy Rifkin

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First the deafening roar of Hurricane Katrina bearing down at 145 m.p.h. on the Gulf Coast. Then, the eerie silence, as New Orleans was suddenly turned into a ghost town. Then Hurricane Rita pummeled Texas with killer winds, forcing a second mass evacuation in less than four weeks. And, as more and more people begin to ask, "What's happening to our weather?" it seems that all of official Washington is holding its breath, lest the dirty little secret gets out: that Katrina and Rita are the entropy bill for increasing carbon dioxide emissions and global warming. The scientists have been warning us for years. They told us to keep our eyes on the Caribbean where the dramatic effects of climate change are first likely to show up in the form of more severe and even catastrophic hurricanes.

A new scientific report out this past month in the prestigious American journal, Science magazine, gives new evidence of the connection between warming oceans resulting from climate change and the increased severity of tropical hurricanes. Scientists report that the number of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes has nearly doubled in the past 35 years. Tropical storms, according to the scientists, draw their energy from warm ocean water. As the global rise in temperature heats the world's oceans, the intensity of hurricanes increases.

Katrina, then, is not just bad luck, nature's occasional surprise thrust on an unsuspecting humanity. Make no mistake about it. We created this monster storm. We've known about the potentially devastating impact of global warming for nearly a generation. Yet we turned up the throttle, as if to say we just don't give a damn. What did we expect? Fifty-two percent of all the vehicles owned in America are sport-utility vehicles, each a death engine spewing record amounts of carbon dioxide into the Earth's atmosphere.

How do we explain to our children that we Americans represent less than 5 percent of the population of the world, but devour more than a quarter of the fossil fuel energy produced each year? How do we say to the grieving relatives of the victims whose lives were lost in the hurricane that we were too selfish to even allow a modest 5 percent additional tax on a gallon of gasoline to encourage energy conservation? And when our neighbors in Europe and around the world ask why the American public was so unwilling to make global warming a priority by signing on to the Kyoto treaty

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on climate change, what do we tell them?

Of course, now even we are paying the price. We're caught between two storm fronts. On the one hand, global oil demand is, for the first time in history, eclipsing global oil supply. The price of a barrel of oil is hovering above \$60 on world markets.

We are entering the last few decades of the oil era, with ominous consequences for the future of a global economy run virtually entirely on fossil fuels. While our petro-geologists are not sure when global oil production will peak--the point when half the world's recoverable oil is used up--it's clear to all but the few delusional souls in the oil industry that the beginning of the end is in sight.

On the other hand, our biosphere is convulsing from the buildup of carbon dioxide gases, and there is nowhere to hide or escape. Our planet is heating up, trapping all of us in an unpredictable new period in history.

There will be memorial services in coming weeks to pay respects to the dead. There will be hand-wringing and recrimination. The public will demand to know why levees protecting New Orleans failed. Why the relief effort was too little, too late. Still, what we are not likely to hear from President Bush and the White House or from business leaders, or for that matter from all of us still driving our SUVs, is a collective "We're all to blame!"

Bush has called on Americans to rally to the task, to help restore the levees and causeways, patch the streets, and rebuild the homes and communities lost in the devastation. To what end, if we leave the demon of global warming unchecked? If I could get the ear of Bush, for just a moment, here's what I would say: Mr. President, if you had looked deeply into the eye of the storm, what you would have seen was the future demise of the planet we live on. It's time to tell the American people and the world that the real lesson of Katrina is that we need to mobilize the talent, energy and resolve of the American people, and people everywhere, to wean ourselves off the oil spigot that's threatening the future of every creature on Earth.

President Bush, spare us your homilies about American grit and determination to "weather the storm and persevere." Instead, tell us the truth about why Katrina really happened. Ask all of us to consider a change of heart about our profligate energy-consuming lifestyles. Call on us to conserve our existing fossil fuel reserves and make sacrifices in our future use of energy. Provide us with a game plan to move America beyond fossil fuels to a new sustainable energy future based on renewable sources of energy and hydrogen power. We're waiting.

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