

Sorry, Mr President, homilies won't stop the hurricanes

We Americans need to get out of our SUVs and learn the harsh lesson of Katrina and Rita: we are all to blame

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First there was the deafening roar as Katrina bore down at 145 miles an hour on the Gulf coast of the United States. Then the eerie silence as New Orleans was turned into a giant ghost town. Now, a second deadly hurricane, Rita, is hurtling toward the Texas coast with killer winds, forcing a second mass evacuation of population in less than four weeks. And, as more and more people begin to wonder what's happening to the 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 CO₂ emissions and global warming. The scientists have been warning us about this for years. They said 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 week in Science Magazine, a prestigious American journal, gives fresh impetus to the connection between oceans warming as a result of climate change and the increased severity of hurricanes. Scientists report that the number of major - category four and five - hurricanes has nearly doubled in the past 35 years. Tropical storms, say 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 and Rita, then, are not just bad luck, nature's occasional surprises thrust on unsuspecting humanity. Make no mistake about it. We Americans created these monster storms. 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 anyone expect? SUVs make up 52% of all the vehicles owned in America, each a death engine, spewing record amounts of CO₂ into the earth's atmosphere.

How do we explain to our children that Americans represent less than 5% 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 of the hurricane that we were too selfish to allow even a modest five-cent tax increase on a gallon of petrol in order to encourage energy conservation? And when our neighbours in Europe and around the world ask why the American public was so unwilling to make global warming a priority by signing up to the Kyoto treaty on climate change, what do we tell them?

In the coming weeks and months, millions of Americans will reach out to assist the victims of Hurricane Katrina with offerings of food, shelter and financial assistance.

Natural calamities tend to bring out the best in the American character. We pride ourselves on being there for our fellow human beings when they cry out for help. Why can't we muster up the same passionate response when the Earth itself is crying out for help?

Shame on the United States of America and the peoples of other countries - we're not alone - who have put their personal, short-term whims, desires and gratifications ahead of the welfare of the rest of the planet.

Of course, even Americans are now paying the price. We're caught up 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 at \$70 on world markets; gasoline and heating oil are rising as fast as the flood waters in the Gulf states once did, in part because the storm knocked out oil rigs across the Gulf of Mexico and crippled a large portion of the US refining facilities.

We are entering the last few decades of the oil era, with ominous consequences for the future of a global economy that is utterly dependent 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 is clear to all but the few delusional souls in the oil industry that the beginning of the end is now in sight.

Meanwhile, our biosphere is convulsing from the build-up of CO₂, and there is nowhere to hide or escape. Our planet is heating up, and the repercussions are trapping all of us in an unpredictable new period in history.

There will be thousands of memorial services in coming weeks to pay respects to the dead and the missing. There will be hand-wringing and recrimination. The public will demand to know why the dykes protecting New Orleans and the Gulfport region failed; why necessary precautions weren't taken to lessen the impact of Katrina and its aftermath; and why the relief effort was too little, too late. Still, what we are not likely to hear from George 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!".

President Bush has called on the American people in this hour of our grief to rally to the task, to help restore the dykes and the causeways, to patch up the streets and to rebuild the homes and the communities that were lost in the devastation. But to what end, if we leave the demon of global warming unchecked? The danger is that next time it will be a series of category-five storms, or something even far worse and unimaginable.

If I could get the ear of George Bush, for just a moment, 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 the real lesson of Katrina: that we need to mobilise the talent, energy and resolve of the American people, and of 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 determination to "weather the storm and persevere". Tell us the truth about why Katrina and Rita really happened. Ask 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. Provide us with a game plan to move America to a new, sustainable energy future based on renewable sources of energy and hydrogen power. We're waiting.

- Jeremy Rifkin is the author of *The Hydrogen Economy: the Creation of the World Wide Energy Web and the Redistribution of Power on Earth*