

## Global Warming Hits New Orleans: The Controversy After the Storm

<i>by Jeremy Rifkin</i>

First the deafening roar of Katrina bearing down at 145 miles per hour on the gulf coast of the United States. Now the eerie silence, as victims wash ashore and out to sea. And in the aftermath, it seems that all of official Washington is holding its breath, less the dirty little secret gets out: that Katrina is the entropy bill for increasing CO2 emissions and global warming. The scientists have been warning us 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. Indeed. Over the course of the past several years, hurricane activity and intensity has picked up in the Caribbean basin. Now the killer storm Katrina has hit with a vengeance, exacting incomprehensible devastation on a wide swath of the southeastern portion of the United States.

The reality is, Katrina will be looked back on as a “tipping point” of the fossil fuel era the moment when the American public began to discard the comfortable myth that the end of the oil era and the cataclysmic effects of global warming lie far in the distant future. The future arrived on the shores of Lake Ponchartrain with a giant wave of water rushing through the streets of New Orleans, wreaking destruction and havoc on the low-lying lands of the Mississippi gulf region on Monday, August 29th and the result is that America and the world have changed forever.

Katrina 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? 52% of all the vehicles owned in America are SUVs, each a death engine, spewing record amounts of CO2 into the earth’s atmosphere.

How do we explain to our children that we Americans represent less than 5% of the population of the world, but devour more than 1/4 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 cent 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 on climate change, what do we tell them?

In the coming days and weeks, millions of Americans will rush to the assistance of the victims of hurricane Katrina with offerings of food, shelter and financial assistance. Natural calamities bring out the best of 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 State of America and the peoples of other countries we're not alone who have put their personal short-term whims and gratifications ahead of the welfare of the planet.

Of course, now even we are paying the price. We're caught up now 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 \$70.00 on world markets. Gasoline and heating oil are rising as fast as the flood waters in the gulf-states, in part because the storm knocked out oil rigs across the Gulf of Mexico and crippled a large portion of our gasoline refining facilities.

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 CO2 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 thousands of memorial services in coming weeks to pay respects to the dead, the missing and the injured. There will be hand-wringing and recrimination. The public will demand to know why the dikes protecting New Orleans and the gulfport region failed. Why necessary precautions weren't taken to lessen the impact of Katrina. 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 sorry!"

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 causeways, patch up the streets, and rebuild the homes and communities lost in the devastation. To what end, if we leave the demon of global warming unchecked. The next time it will be a Category 5 storm or something even far worse and unimaginable.

If I could get the ear of President 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 weaning 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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