

Statement about Hurricane Katrina

We watched with horror as Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on the Gulf Coast. The images and stories are heartbreaking. Our sympathy and prayers go out to the individuals, families, and communities Hurricane Katrina has so tragically affected.

We admire those who have stepped forward to help their neighbors. We are also proud of the federal, state, and local public servants who have sprung into action to protect and serve.

Katrina reminds us of the power of forces greater than the individual. In America today, there is much talk about how those who are affluent have earned their wealth and those who are poor have simply been unproductive. Yet, Katrina was so powerful that it has altered the lives of even the richest, teaching us anew about forces greater than ourselves, and confronting us again with how much more vulnerable are the poor. Seeing the poor of New Orleans, with no resources to escape Katrina or deal with the aftermath, illuminates just how vulnerable. Powerful images of the poor also drive home again that so many are minorities, elderly, or disabled.

Katrina also reminds us of the importance of government, both as it has leaped to respond and as stories have begun to emerge about its failure to prepare. We were disturbed to read that the federal government cut flood control spending for southeastern Louisiana from \$69 million in 2001 to \$36.5 million in 2005, and cut the Army Corps of Engineers' budget for protection from Lake Pontchartrain from \$14.5 million in 2002 to \$5.7 million this year. According to *The Times-Picayune*, the Army Corps of Engineers stopped major work in 2004 on the levee system that protected New Orleans (for the first time in thirty-seven years). These spending cuts for critical government work came during the same period that the federal government cut taxes with troops at war, benefiting primarily the richest Americans. Ironically, Congress has scheduled the vote to permanently repeal the estate tax on the very wealthiest for later this month. (To learn more about federal tax cuts, we urge you to go to <http://www.cbpp.org/pubs/fedtax.htm>.)

As soon as the country has met the immediate needs of the people and communities on the Gulf Coast, Americans should turn their attention to figuring out what happened. We hope that the President will appoint a national commission modeled on the 9/11 Commission to address why the Gulf Coast was inadequately protected from the storm, why the government was unable to respond more effectively to the tragedy, and what we can do in the future to protect America. We must be ready to look honestly at whether our choices about spending and taxes for both federal and state governments played a role in these tragic events. In addition, when we talk about rebuilding New Orleans, we should not talk merely about the structure of levees to hold back the water, but the structure of society to raise up the people.

Like Abraham Lincoln, we believe Americans should have a government of the People, by the People, and for the People. We believe Americans must adequately support their government, which is after all merely the agent of our democracy. Those who oppose all tax increases on "principle" and call for tax cut after tax cut are dis-serving our country.

In America today there are highly influential anti-government, anti-tax groups working to benefit the few at the expense of the many. One leading proponent of tax cuts has remarked that he wants government to be so small that he can drown it in a bathtub. As the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina teaches us, however, when government is so small that we can drown it in a bathtub, it is not government that drowns, it is us.

The Center for Public Policy Priorities
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