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OPINION

Can't blame global warming, at least not this time

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It was slightly ghoulish how quickly some environmentalists reacted to Hurricane Katrina with fulminations about global warming, like an old phonograph with only one record, cranking out the same song no matter the occasion.

Ross Gelbspan, in a widely circulated Op-Ed piece for The Boston Globe, said flatly that global warming was "the cause," "the explanation" and "the culprit" for various severe weather events of the past year, including Katrina. Robert Kennedy Jr. even linked the hurricane to President Bush's failure to regulate carbon dioxide emissions and his disdain for the Kyoto Protocol, saying, "We are all learning what it's like to reap the whirlwind of fossil fuel dependence."

These statements are, to put it charitably, misleading. Let's be clear about two things:

The assertion that climate change "caused" Katrina, or even that Katrina was made worse by global warming, is simply not supported by the currently available scientific evidence.

No conceivable Bush (or Clinton, or G.H.W. Bush) administration energy strategy aimed at slowing or reversing global warming -- least of all ratifying the Kyoto treaty -- would have protected lives or averted property destruction on the Gulf Coast. Think of smart energy policies as you might of tobacco taxes: good idea, but they probably wouldn't have saved your Uncle Ned from lung cancer.

If we could travel back in time 10 years, even 20, and work to prevent last week's misery and loss, reducing greenhouse-gas emissions would be far down the list of pragmatic preventative strategies. We'd start instead with reinforcement of New Orleans' levees, restoration of coastal wetlands, upgrades to regional emergency-response programs, maintenance of FEMA's independence and integrity, meaningful anti-poverty programs and the election of a commander in chief who wasn't so obviously in over his head.

The wind and rain may have been natural, but Katrina was very much a human disaster, rotten with racism, willful

neglect and criminal incompetence.

The breaching of the levees and subsequent flooding was not only foreseeable but foreseen: by the Army Corps of Engineers, by FEMA, by myriad media outlets. Yet funding for the New Orleans district of the Corps was cut by a record \$71 million just this past June. Despite widespread knowledge that barrier islands and wetlands serve to protect coastal cities from ocean-borne destruction -- a fact brutally underscored by December's tsunami in Southeast Asia -- development along the Gulf Coast has been heedless and poorly regulated.

And this is to say nothing of the response to Katrina, which has been almost incomprehensibly desultory, ill-coordinated and ineffective. One could only gape as Bush, at long last roused from vacation, smirked his way through Mississippi and Louisiana, joking about Trent Lott's seaside mansion and telling Michael Brown, the embattled and woefully underqualified FEMA director, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job." Nearly two weeks have passed since the hurricane hit and U.S. residents remain stranded in the Crescent City, their lives in danger from thirst, hunger and unmedicated illness.

In the face of those insults to decency, it seems oddly impersonal, oddly knee-jerk, to fixate so intently on energy policy and climate-change mitigation.

And yet: Once the storm's victims are safe, the toxic lake in New Orleans has been drained, public officials have been held accountable for their failures and our immediate concern and fury have run their course, climate change will still be there. It looms over all our decisions now.

While scientists can't connect global warming to Katrina, or any individual weather-related disaster, they say the larger trend is crystal clear: We are entering an age of climate instability. In coming years, we can expect rising sea levels, more-intense hurricanes and monsoons and longer, drier droughts. Katrina is expected to drain the federal government of more than \$150 billion.

How many more \$150 billion hits can we take? How many climate evacuees can we house in sports stadiums? How much grief can we bear?

We urgently need to prepare on the ground for weather-driven upheaval, to restore our natural coastal buffer zones, push development inland and revitalize the agencies tasked with emergency response.

But along with that preparation -- no, as part of that preparation -- we need to get serious about doing what we can to stabilize the climate.

We must overhaul our power production systems, build smarter cities, drive less, conserve energy and re-engage international efforts to reduce emissions.

We need a second industrial revolution, built on clean energy and ecosystem sensitivity.

If we keep tackling one catastrophe at a time, as though it were a bolt from the blue or an "act of God," we have set ourselves the task of Sisyphus.

The water is rising. It's time to batten down the hatches. In an age of climate disruption, we are all New Orleanians.

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