

June 27, 2013

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

HUFFPOST'S **OFF THE BUS**

GROUND LEVEL COVERAGE OF CAMPAIGN '08

## HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson's Resignation -- A Window Into Bush Administration's Corruption, Indifference, and Incompetence

The involuntary resignation of HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson this week provides an opportunity to underscore and distinguish the three major failings of the Bush administration: corruption, indifference, and incompetence.

Corruption occurs when a government official -- elected or appointed -- uses his or her office to engage in illegal activity for partisan or personal advantage. Jackson is facing investigations by the HUD inspector general, a federal grand jury, and the Justice Department's public integrity section for a variety of alleged corrupt practices, including steering HUD funds and contracts to friends and Bush political supporters in violation of HUD's rules.

This kind of crony capitalism, which the news media often refer to as "scandals," has been rampant within the Bush administration. In most cases, the corrupt officials are allowed to resign without facing prosecution. Instead of fines or jail time, they land lucrative jobs as lobbyists and consultants.

The most high-profile example of corruption so far is Lewis "Scooter" Libby, top aide to VP Dick Cheney, who was convicted for perjury and obstruction of justice for lying about the illegal leak of CIA agent Valerie Plame's identity. He was sentenced to 30 months in prison and fined \$250,000, but President Bush commuted his sentence, voiding the prison term.

Former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales is another high-ranking Bush official forced out for corruption -- in his case, for his role in firing eight U.S. Attorneys in order to stop their investigations of high-ranking GOP officials or because they refused to carry out indictments of Democratic office-holders that the Bush administration wanted to give the Republicans a tactical advantage in the November 2006 elections.

Not all cases of corruption lead to resignations, especially if officials have the power to avoid even being thoroughly investigated. Vice President Dick Cheney steered \$7 billion in no-bid government contracts to Kellogg Brown & Root, a subsidiary of his former employer, Halliburton, to restore Iraq's oil field just before Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq. The FBI looked into the matter, but apparently dropped its investigation. The Bush administration also steered hundreds of millions of dollars to politically connected firms like Halliburton, Fluor Corporation, and Bechtel, many through no-bid contracts, for post-Katrina reconstruction.

Lying may be considered a form of corruption, although it doesn't require breaking the law, only evading the truth. Among the myriad examples of this are Bush and Cheney's repeated claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons-of-mass-destruction when there was no evidence of it. Of course, the list of Bush's lies could fill a book. In fact they have already filled several books, including David Corn's *The Lies of George W. Bush*.

Indifference covers a wider range of activities than corruption. Let us not mistake indifference for benign neglect. The Bushes are *actively* indifferent. It is key to their top-down class warfare. They wear their indifference on their tailored sleeves. This indifference is a natural outgrowth of the Bushes' fundamental hostility to government itself. A central tenet of conservative ideology is the belief in small government, highlighted by its insistence that government interferes with individual liberty, is less efficient than the private sector and, in many cases, is simply unnecessary. Conservatives like Bush, his Republican allies in Congress, his intellectual strategists like Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and William Kristol of the *Weekly Standard* and the corporate-sponsored policy wonks at the American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation argue that (with the exception of military spending) we need to further reduce government, in large part, by cutting taxes even more, especially for the very rich. They call this "starving the beast" - reducing taxes so much that government in general, and the federal government in particular, will be virtually paralyzed. If starving the beast isn't sufficient, Bush has a back-up strategy: appoint foxes to guard the chicken coop. Putting corporate executives in charge of government agencies that regulate business guarantees that indifference extends to the vulnerable, but not the powerful.

Since taking office, for example, the Bush administrations shown little interest in addressing the problems of poverty and homelessness. It opposed raising the minimum wage. It cut food stamps. It pushed to slash funding for low-income housing programs, such as Section 8 rent vouchers. Here, too, Alphonso Jackson has been a poster boy for the Bush philosophy. The now-disgraced former HUD Secretary testified to Congress several years ago that "being poor is a state of mind, not a condition." Lest it be thought that Jackson was veering from the Bush playbook, he was simply echoing the sentiments of his predecessor at HUD, Mel Martinez -- now a GOP Senator from Florida -- who told *Washington Post* that "housing issues are predominantly local issues. The solution to meeting the nation's affordable housing needs will not come from Washington." (This is the same guy who spent most of his final year at HUD unofficially campaigning for the Senate seat; he visited Florida 16 times in 21 months, much of it at taxpayers' expense).

The Bush administration's attitude toward the health and safety of workers is another example of how indifference shapes public policy. It brought in mining industry insiders to stack the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), which oversees the nation's coal mines, and the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission (FMSHRC). For example, Bush nominated Richard Stickler, a former executive at a West Virginia subsidiary of Massey Energy (which has one of the worst safety records in the industry) to run MSHA. At his Senate confirmation hearing, Stickler said he believed the nation's mine safety laws are adequate. Miners faced increasingly unsafe conditions because of the Bush administration's rollbacks of health and safety regulations, and its slashing of the budget and staff for safety inspection. Not surprisingly, the nation's 2006 coal mine death toll -- 47 -- was the highest since 1995.

Long before Katrina hit the city, New Orleans' residents already knew that the Bush administration had abandoned them. But the federal response to the disaster simply put Bush's indifference to the plight of the poor in dramatic relief. Likewise, Bush demonstrated his indifference to low-income children by demanding that underfunded local school systems leave no child behind, while failing to provide the money to hire the teachers to make it possible. In similar fashion Bush showed his indifference to the plight of millions of families caught in the tsunami of predatory lending, subprime mortgages, and pending foreclosures, in contrast to his eagerness to bail out Bear Stearns and other Wall Street giants.

Incompetence is a close cousin to indifference. As Bush has shown, if you don't care about the poor, or the Lower 9th Ward, or mine workers' safety, it's OK to appoint political hacks to high-level posts. You just hope that don't embarrass you. But, of course, sometimes the incompetence comes to light.

In Alphonso Jackson, Bush had the misfortune of winning the corruption/indifference/ incompetence trifecta. Under his leadership, HUD was probably the most mismanaged Cabinet-level agency. Since reporters prefer writing about corruption more than incompetence or indifference, Jackson's liabilities might have remained invisible, until he made a point of advertising his malfeasance. In 2006, he gave a speech in Dallas bragging that he'd canceled the contract a HUD contractor who admitted to disliking President Bush. Later he said that he was only joking. This got the attention of the FBI and the Justice Department, however, and led to the investigations that resulted in this week's resignation.

But history will no doubt record that the crown prince of incompetence during the Bush years was Michael Brown. Our image of Bush's mishandling of the Katrina disaster is frozen in time, with Bush standing with his FEMA director in New Orleans and congratulating him with the now-famous words, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job."

Clearly Brown was way over his head, having had no previous experience in disaster management - or management of any kind. Before joining FEMA, Brown was employed by the International Arabian Horse Association, but was forced to resign after numerous lawsuits were filed against the organization over disciplinary actions.

We do not yet know the magnitude of the Bush administration's blunders and misjudgments, or their cost in human lives and property damage, but the failures were due much more to Bush's indifference, and Cheney's corruption, than to Brown's incompetence. Long before Katrina struck, the Bush administration systemically stripped FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers of authority, money and key staff; undermined their morale; and ignored warnings by state emergency managers that its actions were sabotaging FEMA's capacity to respond to disasters. It folded FEMA into the Department of Homeland Security, diminishing its role as an emergency planning and relief agency while viewing it as simply another part of the administration's "war on terror."

There were plenty of competent and experienced FEMA employees -- public servants who, given the opportunity and resources, could have prevented the disaster and/or dramatically limited its consequences. The failure to prevent the Katrina disaster and to adequately respond once it occurred was a failure of political will by the highest-ranking government leaders, not incompetence by middle-level managers and front-line staff in the military, FEMA, and other agencies.

The Bush administration failed to invest adequately in the infrastructure needed to prevent severe hurricane damage in New Orleans and Mississippi. The Bushes knew long before the storm hit that 100,000 New Orleans residents had no way to escape a major hurricane on their own and that the city had finished only 10 percent of its evacuation plan. The National Weather Service correctly predicted the force of the storm, but the top officials in the Bush administration failed to heed the message. And when the money finally flowed to the Gulf Coast, the corruption took over, with contracts steered to Bush and Cheney's political and business allies.

Since Katrina hit, Alphonso Jackson and HUD mainly stood on the sidelines, playing almost no role in helping survivors with their myriad housing tragedies. In Mississippi alone, more than 40,000 people remain displaced as a result of Katrina, many of them still living in FEMA trailers. So it is fitting that one of Jackson's last acts as HUD Secretary was to approve, at the request of Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour - the former corporate lobbyist, one-time head of the Republican National Committee, and a Bush crony - the diversion of \$600 million from the state's housing recovery programs to expand the state-owned port of Gulfport, a project that could eventually include casino and resort facilities.

"It's just insanity, true insanity," Sister Martha Milner, a Catholic nun and longtime Mississippi housing advocate, said before Jackson's approval.

Unfortunately, Jackson's maneuver was hardly insane. It was, for the Bush administration - corrupt, indifferent, and incompetent - business as usual.

*Peter Dreier is professor of politics and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy program at Occidental College in Los Angeles.*