

Fearing new 9/11 scandal

Bush forced to cover World Trade Center health claims

Clare Hurley
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Already struggling to contain the damage caused by recent revelations concerning its failure to take any action to prevent the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, the Bush administration moved quickly last week to avert another potentially embarrassing 9/11 scandal.

Last month, acting through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the administration attempted to weasel out of its pledge to pay health claims for injuries incurred by workers engaged in the rescue and recovery operations at the World Trade Center site. It was one more example of the hypocrisy of the administration, which invokes September 11 to justify all of its policies while exhibiting contempt for those who have suffered serious health problems as a result of responding to the terrorist attacks

According to the Mount Sinai Medical Health Screening Program for WTC-Site Responders, of the 9,000 people monitored, more than half, or at least 4,000, are sick, primarily with respiratory or mental health symptoms, or both. So far, 2,357 claims have been filed against the New York City government. If FEMA had gotten its way, the city would have been liable for up to \$350 million of these health costs before the federal program took effect. The impact upon the city's already strained budget would have been devastating.

Faced with an unprecedented health crisis of both an immediate and protracted nature, the Bush administration tried to shirk its responsibility—in this case financial—for the 9/11 attacks by resorting to narrow legalistic interpretations. FEMA argued that claims related to work carried out between September 11 and September 29, 2001—the most intensive and

dangerous period in the immediate aftermath of the attacks—were not technically “clean-up” related, but rather were rescue efforts and therefore not covered by a \$1 billion federal fund established to pay such claims.

The fund itself was not created out of concern for the health of the workers on the site. Rather, it was enacted by Congress to protect the New York City government and the four contracting companies engaged in the clean-up—Tully, AMEC, Bovis and Turner—because no commercial insurance companies would agree to provide liability coverage for the dangerous site.

The potential costs in health claims were recognized at the time, quite rightly, as an untenable financial risk, given the scope and scale of the clean-up and the largely unknown health implications of exposure to a variety of contaminants, in addition to physical and psychological injuries. The city and the construction companies faced huge losses if they were uninsured. The fund was therefore carved out of the overall aid package of \$21.5 billion pledged by the Bush administration to New York City immediately after the attacks so that the clean-up work could go forward.

It is not surprising that the Bush administration tried to stiff the workers and the city when the bills came due. The administration was merely treating these workers and New York City the same way it treats all workers, as well as municipal and state governments across the country, many of which have been bankrupted by the loss of federal funds for social services. But in this case, a number of overriding political considerations made this unviable.

Given the Republican Party's choice of New York City as the site of its 2004 nominating convention, an embarrassing squabble with the city government over

who is responsible for paying medical claims for injured WTC-site workers had to be avoided. Thus, when New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and members of the New York congressional delegation vociferously disputed FEMA's interpretation, the administration backed down within a week.

A public confrontation between the city and the federal government over the insurance funds would have proved embarrassing from several standpoints. Firstly, a further exposure of the administration's failure not only to prevent but to adequately respond to the attacks, including taking measures to provide for the health needs of those engaged in rescue and clean-up operations, would quickly become as politically charged as the recent revelations made before the 9/11 Commission.

The \$350 million in health claims presently under dispute represents only a fraction of the full cost of medical screening and treatment that will be required over the long term for those who worked at "ground zero." Cancer resulting from exposure to asbestos, for example, does not develop for 10 to 15 years. And while the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), under the direct orders of the National Security Council headed by Condoleezza Rice, consistently denied the presence of dangerous levels of asbestos in the air around the WTC site, it has since admitted that more than 25 percent of the bulk dust samples collected before September 18, 2001, showed the presence of asbestos above the 1 percent benchmark. The EPA also claims it is unable to predict the effects of exposure to PCBs, particulate matter (e.g., pulverized cement), dioxin and other contaminants released by the WTC collapse.

The EPA has also been forced to admit, in a report released in August 2003, that all its press releases in the aftermath of 9/11 had to go through the White House's Council on Environmental Quality and the National Security Council, and that as a result all information about damaging health effects had been edited out.

So it would come as no surprise if buried somewhere in the EPA's files there was a memo from September 2001 entitled "WTC Air Unsafe to Breathe." If such a document were to emerge, the White House would no doubt claim that it contained only "historical" information.

More importantly, because President Bush has

consistently sought to pitch his bid for re-election based on his purported image as a steady leader through the crisis of 9/11, the mounting evidence of his administration's utter disregard for those people who directly responded to this crisis and are now suffering the consequences has potentially devastating political consequences.

When the Bush-Cheney campaign ran \$41 million worth of ads in March displaying images of the destroyed World Trade Towers and a flag-draped coffin, it outraged New York City firefighters and victims' families who felt their grief and heroism were being crassly co-opted for political purposes.

And now the choice of New York City for the Republican national convention site is being questioned within the party itself. The *New York Times* quoted longtime Republican political operative and Bush supporter Roger Stone as saying, "The premise for coming to New York is no longer valid. Karl Rove's masterstroke idea may turn out to be an unmitigated disaster. It has the potential to highlight an issue that may be negative by the time he [Bush] gets to the convention."

This will certainly be the case, as the Bush Administration proves increasingly unable to suppress the full toll taken by its criminal policies, including upon the workers who sacrificed their health to conduct the rescue and recovery efforts at the World Trade Center site.



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