

Voice of the Left

Glenn Swift
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Nero Fiddled While Rome Burned: The Meaning of Katrina

Nero fiddled while Rome burned.

President Bush probably wasn't thinking about this when he mugged for the cameras two days after Hurricane Katrina ravished the Gulf Coast. He's not exactly big on the classics. But there he stood playing a guitar presented to him by country singer Mark Willis. As countless thousands of drowning and starving Americans desperately clung to life, Boy Caesar strummed his new guitar. While roving bands of heavily-armed gangs raped, murdered, and stole, the commander of the world's most powerful military refused to act. The mighty legions that he had taken across the Rubicon, had other priorities. In the wake of lawlessness that would have shamed a banana republic, the czar remained in his winter palace. Perhaps this should have come as no surprise. To this emperor, these subjects bore the curse of Ham; they were poor.

Unlike Nero, Bush did not set this fire. His oil junta, however, deserves substantial blame for the scale of the catastrophe. After flooding in 1995 killed six people in New Orleans, the Clinton Administration secured funding for a massive Army Corps of Engineers project designed to strengthen the region's levees and improve the pumping system that regulates water levels. The work got off to a good start. But record deficits in the reign of Bush-Cheney forced an 80% reduction in funding. After all, these were poor people.

Following 9/11, the president promised that the nation would never again be so unprepared in the face of disaster. Like so many of his assurances, it was an empty promise.

Two thousand years after his death, Nero's famous fiddling remains an allegory about feckless and self-centered leadership in times of crisis. Bush's guitar-playing antics in the face of unimaginable human misery will doom him to a similar fate.