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If It Were Only that Simple

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Abstract

Reading "Disaster Capitalism," one would think that the current dire situation in Iraq and the lingering effects of Hurricane Katrina are all because of an emphasis on "small" government, privatization, and partnerships with the business sector. If only it were that simple.

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If It Were Only that Simple

by Katherine Gockel

Reading “Disaster Capitalism,” one would think that the current dire situation in Iraq and the lingering effects of Hurricane Katrina are all because of an emphasis on “small” government, privatization, and partnerships with the business sector. If only it were that simple.

That is the problem with this article and those written by people who argue the “other side”—that big government is wasteful, stifles competition and harms U.S. competitiveness. The fact is that a combination of public, private and civil society efforts are usually employed in most of these situations. To lay most of the blame on privatization and business misrepresents reality. Corruption is also found in government and civil society, especially in the developing world.

Americans need to stop accepting oversimplified arguments. Telling the whole story is impossible. Yet, we should expect those writing for the public to at least offer more than one perspective and even provide examples that might contradict their argument so that better solutions can be developed.

This response article to Ms. Klein’s piece also will not tell the “whole story.” The various situations used as “evidence” for her argument are too complex to cover in 800 words. Rather, it will provide a different perspective on what has happened in Iraq and in the New Orleans’ school system for readers who might want to think more about the validity of the “disaster capitalism” argument.

To begin, the public and private sectors are not mutually exclusive and they never have been. Business people have entered politics and politicians have entered the business world. That is not necessarily a bad thing. Let us not forget that the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) is an organization where many humanitarian professionals would love to work.

Yes, there are businesses with questionable practices. Especially those like Halliburton, which has been censured for overcharging the U.S. Government in Iraq. There are also politicians (from both major U.S. political parties), government officials, and non-governmental organization representatives who have demonstrated questionable and even unethical practices. There are also efforts by members of business, government, and civil society to make the globe a more inhabitable place for all people. More people are coming to accept that it is [a combination of efforts from each of these sectors that leads to better and more sustainable solutions](#).

Let us not forget that questionable *public* policies brought Iraq to its current state of affairs; and not just those policies of the U.S. Government. The Iraqi Government and the various sects in Iraq are also responsible for the ongoing strife and insecurity that make development and reconstruction so difficult. Iran and other countries also have a role in this, as do groups advocating terrorist activities.

The political situation caused by internal Iraqi sectarianism is now deemed by many experts as being more critical than the security situation. In a dinner conversation last spring, a high-

ranking Iraqi shared that every time something was built in Iraq, someone or some group destroyed it. So it is not as if people—from the public, private, and civil sectors—are not trying to help Iraq recover and develop. Rather, power struggles and use of violence by many players are impediments to progress. That situation cannot be blamed solely on the use of private contractors.

Yes, Americans and their allies are afforded greater security in Iraq than most Iraqis. But the picture painted in [Ms. Klein's article would have one think that people inside the Green Zone are not being shelled or attacked, which is not the case.](#) The security situation for Americans is so dangerous that U.S. State Department employees do not want to serve in Iraq. Secretary Rice even had to implement a policy to ensure that [posts in Iraq](#) will be filled before any others.

Switching to the New Orleans school system example, again it was poor homeland security responses by *local*, *state*, and *federal* officials that let this natural disaster become a humanitarian crisis. Who can forget the pictures of rows of public school buses that were never used to transport New Orleans's residents out of the city? Also, the choice to expand the number of charter schools in New Orleans was done in response to what was a [previously failing school system](#). Those of us who have lived in Louisiana know that its educational system has always been poor. That is why so many people in the state send their children to private schools. No one knows how New Orleans's experiment with charter schools will turn out. But is it not worth trying a new approach?

Overall, turning to the private sector to assist with disaster relief is not inherently bad. Many times the private sector can respond faster and more cost-effectively. But it also requires strong government oversight, which did not happen with many contractors in Iraq, and better administration of policies, which did not happen in New Orleans.

Let us also remember that the Bush administration was re-elected by American voters who knew that the Administration promoted tax cuts while financing two significant wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Blaming the private sector and “disaster capitalism” for what is now taking place is just a way to pass the buck, literally and figuratively.

Katherine Gockel is a program officer in the Policy Analysis and Dialogue department. Gockel leads the foundation's Middle East policy programming and also concentrates on the areas of counterterrorism and failing states. She holds an M.A. in global studies from the University of Denver where she focused on human security and economic development. She also holds an M.B.A. in marketing and a B.A. in communications. Gockel began her career in the business sector where she worked for and with organizations such as AT&T, Sun Microsystems, The National Nanotechnology Initiative, the Center for Teaching International Relations, and Ernst & Young Consulting.