

The unprecedented disaster which befell our nation's Gulf Coast was, in no small part, the result of a failure of government. Set in motion by a natural disaster, it was made far worse by a political system which has permitted millions of its own citizens to languish in despair and destitution with barely a whisper being uttered in their defense. The politics of patronage, in which the public safety of our populace was seen as being less important than the personal security of the friends and political allies of our leaders, revealed its consequences for all to see. After the storm, it was a failure of honesty, of openness, and of accountability which struck the men, women, and children of the Gulf. And the assault upon them hasn't stopped.

As if the lack of planning, the late response, and the spin haven't done enough to the already disadvantaged of the region, they are now being asked to accept a flawed Republican recovery agenda which in some strange way seems to have been emboldened by failure. Paying for the damage caused by Katrina will cost our nation at least \$100 billion, half of what we have spent so far on the Iraq war. And Republicans are looking to support it in the same way they have supported that endeavor: on the backs of those who can least afford it, and in ways which will hurt them the most.

On September 21st, two leading Republican members of the House, Representatives Mike Pence and Jeb Hensarling, issued a report published by the Republican Study Committee. "Operation Offset," as it is known, presents the Majority Party's ideas for how our nation should pay for Katrina. In truth, there is actually only one idea in the document, and it's very familiar: cut government spending.

Our country must make "tough choices in tough times," we are told by the Congressmen, and as a result, we have no option but to immediately reform or eliminate no fewer than 122 government programs. The savings from this course of action will supposedly total \$930 billion over the next 10 years, enough to pay for Katrina several times over.

Eliminating government waste is a laudable goal, and it should be aggressively pursued. Operation Offset is not entirely devoid of merit, as it highlights many programs which are a drain on our country's resources and energy. But taken in its entirety, the plan becomes wildly irresponsible, and forms a clear attempt to promote an ideological Republican approach to governing which sacrifices the public good for its own narrow aims.

Impending Medicare drug benefits are to be suspended. Subsidized loans for graduate students are to be eliminated. AMTRAK is to be de-funded. Federal support for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities is to be eradicated. Government-funded programs to research renewable energy, clean coal, and hydrogen fuel vehicles are to be funded no longer. (The report tells us that “private industry is better equipped to develop future fuel technologies within the free market,” our nation’s SUV-obsession notwithstanding.) Even the Centers for Disease Control are to have their budgets cut, despite their critical work around the country, especially in decimated areas within Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

But the true nature of Operation Offset, the true priorities and concerns of the individuals responsible for it, are revealed not by what is included in the plan, but by what is left out of it. President Bush’s tax cuts over the last five years, cuts which have yet to be demonstrably linked to positive economic growth, are not mentioned once. Over the next decade, they will cost our nation from 2.2 to 2.6 trillion dollars, depending on whether certain sunset provisions within them are eliminated or maintained. Between 40 and 50 percent of this money will be going to the richest 1 percent of our population, people who commonly make at least a million dollars a year. All told, their portion of the cut will cost the United States between 880 billion and 1.3 trillion dollars.

Those figures represent just as much, if not more, than the savings produced by Operation Offset. They would pay for Katrina. They would pay for the Iraq war. They would help us pay down our debt. But none of these goals are valued as much by the “conservatives” running our government as is the defense of an unprecedented give-away to our country’s fabulously wealthy. Indeed, the Republican Party would like, it seems, to unabashedly remind us that while funding the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and increasing our national fuel efficiency averages are simply not important enough to throw our weight behind, getting a trillion dollars to those who need it least must be maintained as an impregnable national priority.

Hurricane Katrina revealed what happens when a society forgets about the common good and focuses too closely on the good of the few. The Republican Party’s approach to paying for its mistakes reveals that it hasn’t learned from them, and that to the detriment of our nation, its interests lie not with the people, but with the privileged.