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**lookout** by Naomi Klein

## Rapture Rescue 911: Disaster Response for the Chosen

[from the November 19, 2007 issue]

I used to worry that the United States was in the grip of extremists who sincerely believed that the Apocalypse was coming and that they and their friends would be airlifted to heavenly safety. I have since reconsidered. The country is indeed in the grip of extremists who are determined to act out the biblical climax--the saving of the chosen and the burning of the masses--but without any divine intervention. Heaven can wait. Thanks to the booming business of privatized disaster services, we're getting the Rapture right here on earth.

Just look at what is happening in Southern California. Even as wildfires devoured whole swaths of the region, some homes in the heart of the inferno were left intact, as if saved by a higher power. But it wasn't the hand of God; in several cases it was the handiwork of Firebreak Spray Systems. Firebreak is a special service offered to customers of insurance giant American International Group (AIG)--but only if they happen to live in the wealthiest ZIP codes in the country. Members of the company's Private Client Group pay an average of \$19,000 to have their homes sprayed with fire retardant. During the wildfires, the "mobile units"--racing around in red firetrucks--even extinguished fires for their clients.

One customer described a scene of modern-day Revelation. "Just picture it. Here you are in that raging wildfire. Smoke everywhere. Flames everywhere. Plumes of smoke coming up over the hills," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Here's a couple guys showing up in what looks like a firetruck who are experts trained in fighting wildfire and they're there specifically to protect your home."

And your home alone. "There were a few instances," one of the private firefighters told Bloomberg News, "where we were spraying and the neighbor's house went up like a candle." With public fire departments cut to the bone, gone are the days of Rapid Response, when everyone was entitled to equal protection. Now, increasingly intense natural disasters will be met with the new model: Rapture Response.

During last year's hurricane season, Florida homeowners were offered similarly high-priced salvation by HelpJet, a travel agency launched with promises to turn "a hurricane evacuation into a jet-setter vacation." For an annual fee, a company concierge takes care of everything: transport to the air

terminal, luxurious travel, bookings at five-star resorts. Most of all, HelpJet is an escape hatch from the kind of government failure on display during Katrina. "No standing in lines, no hassle with crowds, just a first class experience."

HelpJet is about to get some serious competition from some much larger players. In northern Michigan, during the same week that the California fires raged, the rural community of Pellston was in the grip of an intense public debate. The village is about to become the headquarters for the first fully privatized national disaster response center. The plan is the brainchild of Sovereign Deed, a little-known start-up with links to the mercenary firm Triple Canopy. Like HelpJet, Sovereign Deed works on a "country-club type membership fee," according to the company's vice president, retired Brig. Gen. Richard Mills. In exchange for a one-time fee of \$50,000 followed by annual dues of \$15,000, members receive "comprehensive catastrophe response services" should their city be hit by a manmade disaster that can "cause severe threats to public health and/or well-being" (read: a terrorist attack), a disease outbreak or a natural disaster. Basic membership includes access to medicine, water and food, while those who pay for "premium tiered services" will be eligible for VIP rescue missions.

Like so many private disaster companies, Sovereign Deed is selling escape from climate change and the failed state--by touting the security clearance and connections its executives amassed while working for that same state. So Mills, speaking recently in Pellston, explained, "The reality of FEMA is that it has no infrastructure, and a lot of our National Guard is elsewhere." Sovereign Deed, on the other hand, claims to have "direct access and special arrangements with several national and international information centers. These proprietary arrangements allow our Emergency Operations Center to...give our Members that critical head start in times of crisis." In this secular version of the Rapture, God's hand is unnecessary. Not when you have retired ex-CIA agents and ex-Special Forces lifting the chosen to safety--no need to pray, just pay. And who needs a celestial New Jerusalem when you can have Pellston, with its flexible local politicians and its surprisingly modern regional airport?

Sovereign Deed could soon find itself competing with Blackwater USA, whose CEO, Erik Prince, wrote recently of his plans to offer "full spectrum" services, including humanitarian aid in disasters. When fires broke out in San Diego County, near the proposed site of the controversial Blackwater West base, the company immediately seized the opportunity to make its case. Blackwater could have been the "tactical operation center for East County fires," said company vice president Brian Bonfiglio. "Can you imagine how much of a benefit it would be if we were operational now?" To show off its capacity, Blackwater has been distributing badly needed food and blankets to people of Potrero, California. "This is something we've always done," Bonfiglio said. "This is what we do." Actually, what Blackwater does, as Iraqis have painfully learned, is not protect entire communities or countries but "protect the principal"--the principal being whoever has paid Blackwater for its guns and gear.

The same pay-to-be-saved logic governs this entire new sector of country club disaster management. There is, of course, another principle that could guide our collective responses in a disaster-prone world: the simple conviction that every life is of equal value.

For anyone out there who still believes in that wild idea, the time has urgently arrived to protect the principle.