

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:40 a.m. at Biloxi City Hall. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Haley R. Barbour of Mississippi and

his wife, Marsha; Mayor A.J. Holloway of Biloxi, MS; and Rodrick “Rocky” Pullman, supervisor, Hancock County, MS.

Remarks Prior to a Lunch Meeting With Elected Officials and Community Leaders in New Orleans, Louisiana *March 1, 2007*

It is my pleasure to be back in New Orleans. I want to thank the Lieutenant Governor, the mayor, the head of the City Council, the parish presidents for joining me.

I’ve committed to stay involved in the rebuilding of—and the United States Senator, excuse me, Senator—and the Congressman, I beg your pardon. I committed to the people of this part of the world and the gulf coast that the Federal Government would fund recovery and stay committed to the recovery. And one of the reasons I have come down is to hear from you. I fully understand that there are frustrations, and I want to know the frustrations. And to the extent we can help, we’ll help. I told the people that I would work with the Congress to write a \$110 billion check to help the people of Louisiana and Mississippi, and that check has been written. And now it’s incumbent upon us to get the money into people’s hands.

Sometimes it’s hard to see progress when you’re living close to the scene. I guess the New Orleans Saints football team rep-

resents to me what’s happening in this part of the State. It is a resurgence; there’s a renewal. Even though there’s a lot of work done, the spirit of the people down here is strong.

And so I want to thank these leaders for joining me. It means a lot to me. It’s good to be with you. It’s also good to be in a place where you can buy some pretty good food. [*Laughter*] I’m looking forward to the visit.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:22 p.m. at Lil’ Dizzy’s Cafe. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Gov. Mitchell J. Landrieu of Louisiana; Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans, LA; Oliver M. Thomas, Jr., president, New Orleans City Council; Aaron F. Broussard, president, Jefferson Parish, LA; Kevin Davis, president, St. Tammany Parish, LA; Billy Nungesser, president, Plaquemines Parish, LA; Henry Rodriguez, president, St. Bernard Parish, LA; M.E. Taylor, president, Washington Parish, LA; Sen. David Vitter; and Rep. William J. Jefferson.

Remarks at Samuel J. Green Charter School in New Orleans *March 1, 2007*

Thank you all. Please be seated. Dr. Tony, thank you very much for your kind introduction. God, I love the smile on his face. [*Laughter*]

Think about this: You can play recess outside in a garden. So, like, those are the two things I was good at, at school—[*laughter*—eating and playing. [*Laughter*]

But I really appreciate you inviting me over. Somebody said, “Well, why did you come to Samuel J. Green Charter School in New Orleans, Louisiana, when there’s other places to go?” Well, the answer is, there’s nothing better than being in the middle of a bright spot, a place that just shines with optimism, in a part of the world that has gone through some really difficult times. And so I’m here to herald success: success for today and, equally important, success for the future of this important city.

And I thank you all for giving me a chance to come. I mean, there’s nothing more illustrative of the issues that this community faces than to think that that blue line represented water and destruction. And yet we’re now dry; we’re on dry land, recovering. And so I’ve come back to New Orleans, Louisiana, to remind people that the Federal Government still knows you exist, still knows you have issues, and wants to work with your leadership to address those issues.

I know the Picard family is here. Thank you for coming. Gaylen was the wife of Cecil, who helped guide Louisiana’s schools through the worst of the storms. He has passed away. I’m honored to be in your presence. I know that you miss your good man, as does the people of New Orleans. He was a person that served your community with a lot of class. And I know he would be proud of places like Green that are setting high standards, strong centers of excellence, making sure every single child gets an education. Thanks for being here today. It means a lot.

Sorry Laura is not here. She and I, by the way, spent some of our youth here in New Orleans. I really don’t want to go into all the details of what—[laughter]—but we know something about the town. And it’s a great place. And she loves New Orleans, as do I, and we’ve got a lot of friends here.

I want to thank Robin Jarvis, the superintendent of the Recovery School District, for joining us. I appreciate very much—

[applause]—thank you, Robin. I want to thank some of the elected officials who have joined us here at the school, with whom I had lunch earlier, starting with your mayor. It’s good to see you, Mr. Mayor. Appreciate your time. A pleasure to be here.

The mayor and I have gotten to know each other—[laughter]—in a positive way—[laughter]—in a positive way. It’s interesting, you know, we’re kind of two strong-willed people who got thrown into a deal we didn’t ask for. Tell you an interesting story about the mayor. The first time I ever met him, we came in Air Force One right after the storm hit—a couple of days after, I think it was, and the mayor was a little irritable. [Laughter] He hadn’t had a shower. [Laughter] So I came off the plane—I knew I was dealing with a good man when I looked in his eyes and he was able to maintain a certain sense of humor in the midst of all the trauma. And so I sent him up the stairs for him to take a shower on Air Force One. [Laughter]

Everybody—yes, I was about to say—[laughter]—the president of the New Orleans City Council, Oliver Thomas, thanked me then, and he thanks me now. Good to see you, Big O. I have spent enough time down here, where I call him “Big O.” [Laughter] He calls me “Little G.” [Laughter]

I’m proud to be with your Lieutenant Governor. Mitch, thanks for coming; appreciate you being here. I flew down today from Washington—am I flying back with you all too? Yes. Flew down today with the Senator, David Vitter, and Congressman Bill Jefferson. Andrea, good to see you. Thanks for coming. I think they want a ride back. [Laughter]

We had lunch today with a lot of the parish presidents—and Ray and Oliver and Mitch and David and Jeff—talking about the issues. Oh, by the way, my friend, Don Powell—he’s from Texas; I’m from Texas, and—[applause]. He made the mistake of

answering the phone call when I called him. [*Laughter*] I said, "I need somebody to come down here to help the good folks break through the logjams to make sure that that which we intend to do gets done." And the czar—we call him "Czar Don Powell"—and I can't thank my buddy enough for taking on a tough job. If you were to sit at the table with us, you'd see how tough it is—"so-and-so has the responsibility here, "no, you've got the responsibility"—it's a lot of this. And our job is to make it this: straightforward. That's what we're here to do.

You know, I came down here and spoke, and I said: "The Federal Government will be involved." And I said: "We're going to put money on the table to help follow that through." And I believe we have, with \$110 billion. That's not to say there may be more money needed for the gulf coast, but 110 billion is a lot. And now the question is, are we going to be able to spend it wisely? Can we get it done? Can we get it to the people that need help?

Just so you know, of the 110 billion, 86 billion of that has been obligated; in other words, it's out the door. But only 53 billion has been spent. And so part of the day today, we talked about if the money is out the door in Washington, where is it, and how come it hasn't been out farther? And that's one of the things that we're going to continue to work on, to make sure that obligated money ends up in somebody's pocket, so it helps.

I know housing is a big issue here. The mayor talks about it; Oliver talks about it a lot; the Lieutenant Governor is concerned about it. You know, I made a conscious decision when we began the rebuilding effort to say, "I want the local folks running the programs." I felt you would get a better response and a response more tailored to the needs of the local citizens if the local folks were in charge. That was the case in Mississippi and in Louisiana. And I felt like the housing program that was devised by the folks in both Mississippi and Lou-

isiana was a really interesting solution, a creative way of saying to people, we're going to help you rebuild your homes so that people will actually come back to New Orleans. And those who are here will have money to rebuild their homes, and those who are outside the State will receive incentives to come back.

And one of the issues we have to work on is to make sure that the money that has been sent from Washington to fund the road to recovery program, the home program, actually gets spent. I don't know if you know this or not, but there is \$6.2 billion that has been sent down; 50 million has been spent. And so we have an obligation, all of us involved with this process, to work to make sure that people begin getting that money so they can get back to living their lives.

One of the issues that we talked—spent a lot of time about is infrastructure. And Louisiana has had—now had \$4.6 billion sent from the Federal Government. And actually, it's your money, I mean, so we're sending your money back to you—4.6 billion, and about 2.5 billion has not yet been spent. I guess what I'm telling you is, is that first of all, there is money in the pipeline that I hope will help improve lives. And if it is stuck because of unnecessary bureaucracies, our responsibility at the Federal, State, and local level is to unstick it, is to make sure that it keeps moving.

The reason I herald this and the reason I want to come to a school like this: It's important for the taxpayers from around the country who paid the bill to understand where we are in the process and to realize there's some really positive things taking place with the money that I believe the country has been generous about. In other words, when you go to Congress and say, "We need \$110 billion to help the people in the gulf coast," somebody has got to pay. That's the taxpayer. And the taxpayers come from more places than just Louisiana and Mississippi. It is the collective effort of the country as a whole. And I'm proud

of the generosity of our citizens, and I want them to know that while it is still difficult work here, progress has been made. And there's more to be done.

The economic recovery here—I was talking to the mayor about Mardi Gras, a subject I know a little bit about—[laughter]—I remember most of them. [Laughter] He said it was up to about 80-something percent capacity. In other words, it's not 100 percent, it's not as good as people would like it, but things are beginning to happen.

One of the things that you've got to continue to work on, and we want to help you at the local level, is in the criminal justice matters. It's important for the society to say loud and clear: There are consequences for crime. And there's got to be a—[applause]—there can't be any doubt in somebody's mind that this is a consequential society if you want to be able to walk your streets safely.

And so I know the Attorney General was down here the other day. He briefed me personally on working with the local folks on—for the Federal Government helping, what really is a local responsibility. And yet we want to help. We want to make sure your criminal justice system does its job so that citizens feel safe and tourists feel safe to come. It's a big responsibility we have, and to the extent that we can help, we will.

One of the things that the mayor and I have talked about is extending tax relief to businesses doing jobs here in the New Orleans area. Why? Because we want the entrepreneurial spirit to remain strong in this part of the world. And one way to encourage strong entrepreneurship is to say, there's a tax benefit for investing in this part of the country. There's certain things you can look at to determine how well an economy is doing.

Take a look at your port. It's coming back; it's strong. Commerce is beginning, and this is—it doesn't seem like much to you all since you're so close to it, but for a fellow who was here and remembers the

port being completely shut down, it's pretty good progress.

Now, there's more to be done; I fully understand that. The Senator spent a little time up there on Air Force One, right up there in the Presidential cabin, talking about levees, making sure that the case is continually made about strengthening these levees. I hear him. I hear him. We have said, we're going to bring the levees up to—stronger than ever. We're making progress there. I told the Senator I understand there's still more work to be done. And I want to work with Congress to the best we can to get money to continue meeting the obligations we set.

I'm real proud of another thing that's happened as a result of Democrats and Republicans working together—it actually happens sometime in Washington, DC—and that is that bill I signed that will enable more Federal revenues to come down here to restore the wetlands. And the reason I bring that up, I'm a strong proponent of the restoration of the wetlands, for a lot of reasons. There's a practical reason, though, when it comes to hurricanes: The stronger the wetlands, the more likely the damage of the hurricane. And so we've been working together on behalf of the city.

I do want to spend a little time on education. I like a system that is willing to challenge the status quo when the status quo is failing. And one of the reasons I've come to this school is, it represents a group of citizens, including your principal and your parents and the teachers and the citizens, who said, "We're tired of mediocrity in the school system." It is not acceptable to have children trapped in schools that will not teach and will not change. It is not acceptable to the great city of New Orleans, Louisiana, to have a failing school system.

And so the storm came, and it did terrible devastation, but it gave a great chance for renewal. And one of the areas where renewal is most evident is in the school

system of New Orleans, Louisiana, in the charter system, like right here at Green, where people said—[*applause*].

There are now 31 charter schools in this city, as I understand it; that's up from 8. Charter schools, to me, say innovation, individuality. You know, the No Child Left Behind Act—and I am a very strong supporter of it; I look forward to the Congress reauthorizing the bill—believes in setting high standards, local control of schools, and accountability. And the reason accountability is important is, in order to solve problems, you have to measure the problem; you have to know what the problem is. You can't guess, particularly when it comes to the life of a child. You can't guess as to whether or not a child can read or write and add and subtract. You must measure to know.

And so we said, in return for Federal money, we expect local districts and States to measure, to have tests. The principal, the good doc asked me to go into the fourth grade class and say to the kids, "Good luck on the test tomorrow." That was music to my ears, because you don't know whether or not a child is reading unless you test.

And the interesting thing about No Child Left Behind which is vital is that when we find a child falling behind, there is extra Federal money for that child to get up to speed early, before it's too late. It's a good piece of legislation, and it fits in with the philosophy of this charter school.

If you're interested in changing a school system that hasn't worked, please insist upon a couple of things: high standards, for starters. If you demand low standards, you're going to get bad results. I call it the soft bigotry of low expectations. If you want to have a school system that works, insist upon measuring so that a parent will know whether or not the curriculum is meeting their child's needs. These parents, by the way, are satisfied parents. I don't expect the principal to have brought

unsatisfied parents, but nevertheless—[*applause*].

If you're interested in a school system that works, when you find excellence, herald it. That's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to lend my voice to herald this school. By the way, a good school is one that generally has an educational entrepreneur as its head, somebody who is flexible—rigid enough on the standards, but flexible enough to meet the standards—somebody willing to say: "Well, we tried this curriculum, and it hasn't worked. Let's make sure that we focus on the children, not on the process, and get a curriculum that does work."

One of the things that—and by the way, New Orleans is blessed not only with a strong public school system, now that you've got charters in it, but you've got some great parochial schools too. And these schools, like this school, were quick to start up after the storm. They knew their mission, and they knew their charge.

I am very conscious that this community is going to require more schools. And the Government has a role to play. We're spending quite a bit of money, Federal money, to help you rebuild the schools. And Margaret Spellings—who's the Secretary of Education—I know has been down here, and I know she understands the responsibility we share. As a matter of fact, there's been about \$450 million allocated for the New Orleans school system. I would strongly—and by the way, some of that money is flexible in use. And what I would strongly urge you to do is to use some of the unspent money to recruit and attract teachers, because in order to make sure that the school system is full—you've got 40 teachers. Do you need more? Yes. He needs more.

The housing issue obviously is important. But it's also important to be able to use some of this money available to find educational pioneers that want to come down and lend their expertise to help rebuild a school system. There's no doubt in my

mind that the school system that you're going to rebuild is going to be a great school system, because you've given it such a great start. Charter schools work. It makes a lot of sense.

And so I've come to Green to say, thanks to the citizens of New Orleans who pay attention to the quality of education; thanks to the parents of this school who set an example by being involved; and thanks to the leadership. Doc, you're running a good show here. I'm proud of your job.

Thanks for letting me come by. I'm honored to be back down here. I'm reminded of the New Orleans Saints football team that—[*applause*—]—here's a team that a lot of people didn't give much hope for—did they?—when the season started. And it rose; it became a national story. It was a

factor in the championship. The same thing is going to happen to the city. You got work to do. You got work to do. I'm going to keep coming down so long as I'm the President. And then after I'm the President, I'm going to slide in incognito. [*Laughter*]

God bless you all. Thanks for coming.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:44 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Anthony Recasner, principal, Samuel J. Green Charter School; Gaylen David Picard, wife of former Louisiana State Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard; Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans, LA; Lt. Gov. Mitchell J. Landrieu of Louisiana; and Andrea Green-Jefferson, wife of Rep. William J. Jefferson.

Statement on the Death of Mario Chanes de Armas *March 1, 2007*

Cuban patriot Mario Chanes de Armas was a political prisoner of the Castro regime for 30 years, one of the longest sentences of any political prisoner in the world. Like so many Cubans, he sought a democratic Cuban society only to see his quest betrayed by a Castro dictatorship. Mario Chanes was one of the original *plantados*, Cuban political prisoners who

were unyielding in their fervent desire for a free Cuba. His patriotism and strong sense of purpose are examples to all freedom-loving people. Laura joins me in sending our thoughts and prayers to his family and friends.

NOTE: The statement referred to President Fidel Castro Ruz of Cuba.

Remarks on Departure for New Albany, Indiana *March 2, 2007*

March 1 Tornadoes in Alabama and Georgia

Yesterday afternoon I spoke to Governor Riley of Alabama. This morning I spoke to Governor Perdue of Georgia, expressing my personal condolences as well as the condolences of the Nation for those who

lost their lives in the recent tragedies in those two States.

Tomorrow I'm going down to Georgia and Alabama. I go down with a heavy heart. I go down knowing full well that I'll be seeing people whose lives were turned upside down by the tornadoes. I'll do my very best to comfort them. I ask