

**Remarks Following a Tour of
Recovery Efforts in the Areas
Damaged by Hurricanes Katrina and
Rita in New Orleans, Louisiana**

March 8, 2006

I want to thank you all for coming. I want to thank Colonel Setliff for the tour that he just gave the Governor and the mayor and myself, along with Laura and part of our party. I want to thank Colonel Wagenaar for the aerial tour. We just flew over affected parts of Orleans Parish and Jefferson Parish and St. Bernard Parish, and getting a view of the progress that is being made.

I particularly want to thank my friend Don Powell for his hard work in coordinating Federal efforts with the Governor and the mayor. Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin have been by my side when I've come down here, and I really appreciate them being a part of the recovery efforts. I want to thank Walter Isaacson and David Voelker, the members of the Louisiana Recovery Authority. They were on Air Force One today to make sure I fully understood—understand the strategies that the local folks are putting in place to help the good people of this part of the world recover from the devastating storm.

You know, we just came from a neighborhood where people are fixing to—are in the process of cleaning up debris. We went there because the mayor and the Governor thought it was important for me to see firsthand the devastation of the storm in certain neighborhoods and the progress that is being made for cleaning up the debris. There's still a lot of work to be done; no question about it. And obviously, as the plan gets laid out and as the housing plan I'm fixing to discuss comes to fruition, people will feel more comfortable in granting the local authorities the right to remove debris from their homes to be cleaned up.

But I want to share a story about a fellow, Romallice Harris, I met. He was there—was part of the construction crew. I asked him, I said, "Where were you during the storm?" He said he felt like he could ride it out. He heard the evacuation orders but thought it would be all right to ride out the storm. He lived on the third floor of an apartment complex. And he described to me and the Gov-

ernor and the mayor what it was like to see the water start to rise up to the second floor of the building. He and his three children and his wife and another relative were finally rescued by a boat.

I said, "What happened to you?" He said, "Well, I went to Salt Lake City, Utah." In other words, his is an example of what happened to the good folks in this part of the world. He watched the rising waters, and then he just had to abandon the part of the world he loves.

From there, the Federal Government helped fly him to Chicago, where he had some relatives—or a relative. He now has come back to work in the city he loves, New Orleans, with the hopes of rebuilding his life. His wife and children are still in Chicago; they're going to school there. But as he told us, he says he looks forward to bringing them home, bringing them back to Louisiana, to have his children educated right here. And I'm convinced he'll succeed. And our job at all levels of government is to provide the confidence and the help necessary so that people like Romallice Harris come home.

I appreciate the determination by the folks down here to rebuild. I fully understand, and I hope our country understands, the pain and agony that the people of New Orleans and Louisiana and the parishes surrounding New Orleans went through. But I think people would be impressed by the desire of the people in this part of the country to pick up and move on and rebuild. And that's why I'm so pleased that the Governor and the mayor have joined me, so we can discuss the importance of implementing a strategy that will help this part of the world rise again.

The first part of the strategy is to make sure these levees are strong. And we fully understand that if the people don't have confidence in the levee system, they're not going to want to come back. People aren't going to want to spend money or invest. I just got a briefing from the Army Corps of Engineers that said we're on schedule to repair the damage by the June 1st deadline. They're identifying and correcting design and construction deficiencies; so as we go into the start of the hurricane season, the levees will

be equal or better than what they were before Katrina.

The Corps is identifying areas that weren't damaged but that need additional attention. Over here you can see the, or one of the walls that are being built. I mean, there's a lot of concrete and a lot of steel being put in the ground to protect the levee system. By September of next year, additional improvements will be completed, bringing the entire levee system up to the full authorized design height, making it better and stronger than before.

Congress heard our message about improving the levees, but they shortchanged the process by about \$1.5 billion. And so in order to help fulfill our promise on the levees, Congress needs to restore the \$1.5 billion, to make this a real commitment, to inspire the good folks down here that they have a levee system that will encourage development and reconstruction.

As I mentioned, we went by the Ninth Ward to see the debris removal that was taking place. The vast majority of debris on public property has been removed. About 80 percent of the debris not related to demolition has been cleared. Most of the remaining debris is on private property, in yards or inside houses that need to be gutted or demolished. To get the debris, the residents need to give permission, in most cases, to the local authorities. And so they need to get back to their houses so they can decide what to keep and what to remove.

The problem is, obviously, many homeowners are still displaced. And that's why we're working at all levels of government to encourage evacuees to inspect their properties and to salvage what they can and to make decisions about the future.

Of course, the decisionmaking for the individual homeowners is going to be made easier when Congress funds the \$4.2 billion that I asked them to fund for the State of Louisiana for housing purposes. Now, this \$4.2 billion is in conjunction with the \$6.2 billion of CDBG money for housing grants. The \$4.2 billion request was done in a coordinated effort with State and local authorities.

The reason I thought this number made sense is because the number fits into a well-thought-out plan that has been put together

by the local folks. The housing plan has been coordinated by State authorities with local authorities as well as with HUD authorities. In other words, we've all been working together to figure out how to come up with a housing plan that will restore the confidence of the people of this important part of our country. And in order to make sure that housing plan meets its goals, Congress should make sure that the \$4.2 billion I requested goes to the State of Louisiana.

I'm also confident that this plan is solid right now. It's well-thought-out, and when it's submitted to HUD, because there's been close coordination, it should be approved on a timely basis.

And so again, I want to thank you all for inviting me to come back. I've always had a soft spot in my heart for Louisiana. Some of you might recall, I grew up across the line, over there in Texas, and really enjoyed my stay here when I came. I was pleased to see that the Mardi Gras parades went well, Mr. Mayor. As the mayor and the Governor described to me, it was as much of a homecoming as anything else. A lot of folks came back, came home. And that's what we want. We want people coming home. And the Federal Government will do our part, in conjunction with our State and local partners.

I ask for God's blessings on the people of this part of the world, and thank the hard-working folks here for working around the clock to get this part of the country up and running again. Thank you.

Now, Laura is traveling with me. She's got a very important announcement she'd like to make as well.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:33 a.m. at the Industrial Levee Canal. In his remarks, he referred to Col. Lewis F. Setliff III, USA, St. Louis district engineer, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco of Louisiana; Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans, LA; Col. Richard P. Wagenaar, USA, New Orleans district engineer, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; and Walter Isaacson, vice-chairman of the board, and David Voelker, board member, Louisiana Recovery Authority. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Remarks on Recovery Efforts in the Areas Damaged by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in Gautier, Mississippi

March 8, 2006

Thank you all for coming. Laura and I are really honored to be back in Mississippi with the Governor and the first lady. And most of all, we're pleased to be with those who are helping to educate the young here on the gulf coast.

We, of course, want to thank those who are helping this important part of the country rebuild. Part of rebuilding the community is to make sure that the schools are able to function well and teach children how to read and write and add and subtract. Laura and I are committed to making sure no child is left behind anywhere in the United States of America.

Particularly want to thank the superintendent, the principal, and the teachers for helping this important part of the country recover from devastating storm.

And now it's my honor to introduce the First Lady, who is going to make an announcement.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:22 p.m. at College Park Elementary School. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Haley Barbour of Mississippi and his wife, Marsha; Wayne V. Rodolfich, superintendent, Pascagoula School District; and Suzanne Ros, principal, College Park Elementary School. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady.

Remarks on New Home Construction in Gautier, Mississippi

March 8, 2006

The President. It's good to hear people hammering, isn't it?

Governor Haley Barbour. It really is. It's great for us in Mississippi.

The President. It is. People are building their lives back. And one of the reasons I've come down here is to remind people that there's still a lot of people hurting. And I talk to the Governor all the time about what

we can do to make sure this part of the world rebuilds. It's great to see rebuilding.

Haley has been real good about talking to us about a variety of issues. I want to thank you for your leadership.

Gov. Barbour. Mr. President, thank you. Let me just say publicly, thank you. In the last day, President Bush and the Bush administration has made the fifth extension of the deadline for the Government to cover 100 percent of debris removal and other emergency measures. And this extension is to June 30th, when we ought to be through.

And first, I want to say thank you for that. You know, it's been a huge issue for these little communities, that they don't have any tax base—so thank you for that. That was made public yesterday. I'm glad to announce today that last night HUD approved our plan for our homeowner grant program. We intend to make \$4 billion of community development block grant money from the Federal Government available to Mississippians, like Jerry and Elaine, so that they can rebuild their homes or build new homes, to get themselves out of the flood plain.

Tomorrow, we have been allowed by HUD to post our plan. You can see it on our web site, mshomehelp-m-s-h-o-m-e-h-e-l-p-gov, and we'll have to have a 2-week comment period, at the end of which we'll start taking applications. But somebody can go onto the web site now, Mr. President, or at noon tomorrow, and find out all the information they need to get, what all the rules are. And I'm pleased to say that the Akins qualify.

The President. That's good.

Gov. Barbour. They built this house up above the new flood plain, 25 feet above sea level, which is one of the requirements so that we reduce risks. And thank you for doing that.

The President. I always felt that it was really important to say to the Governor and to local folks, "Come to Washington with a plan to help people rebuild." I really didn't want the plan to be designed by Washington people; I wanted it to be designed by local folks. And Haley has put together a Mississippi plan. He not only put the plan together; he also came to Washington, DC, and helped get the plan funded—with the help of two fine United States Senators—