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Hurricane Katrina Address to Louisiana Joint Legislature



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Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, members of the House and Senate, clergy members, commanding officers, honored guests.

Tonight I speak to the brave and resilient people of Louisiana: those of us thankful to be here at home, those in Louisiana shelters, and those temporarily dispersed across the nation in shelters from Texas to Tennessee and in homes and hotels in faraway states.

I also speak for a grateful state to thank people across our nation and around the globe -- people who have uplifted Louisiana in our time of need, people whose generosity and support renews our faith in God and the human spirit.

Nearly two weeks ago, Katrina tore across Southeast Louisiana leaving a path of physical destruction and human tragedy unprecedented in our nation's history.

Tonight, foremost in our thoughts are the families who were literally ripped apart by the storm. Over the past few days, I have met brothers separated from sisters, mothers and fathers searching for children, and children who have seen things no child should have to witness.



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As a mother, a sister, and a daughter, my heart goes out to every family. And we all know that family stretches beyond blood to embrace the neighborhoods and communities that form the fabric of our lives.

To the displaced people of St. Tammany, Washington, Tangipahoa, St. Charles, Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines Parishes, your loss is our loss. As your Governor, I pledge that I will not rest until every Louisiana family and community is reunited.

The destruction is almost beyond comprehension: We've lost hundreds of our loved ones. Entire communities have been destroyed. Businesses, wiped off the map. Families separated. More than a million people displaced from their homes. But even as we continue to recover from the worst natural disaster in our nation's history, the people of Louisiana stand tall, and I am proud to stand with you.

We all know that there were failures at every level of government: state, federal and local. At the state level, we must take a careful look at what went wrong and make sure it never happens again. The buck stops here and, as your Governor, I take full responsibility.

Now, before I talk about the work ahead, I must offer thanks on behalf of a grateful state. When I called on the people of Louisiana to respond, they rallied in overwhelming numbers. First responders and ordinary citizens put aside concerns for their own safety and demonstrated a heroic courage. It is impossible to name every group involved, but tonight we have a few representatives with us and I'd like them to stand: police officers, firefighters, doctors and nurses, member of the National Guard, Coast Guardsmen, helicopter pilots and wildlife agents. These are our heroes. We thank you.

They were joined by an unprecedented brigade of ordinary citizens who drove a fleet of school buses we commandeered, and they steered hundreds of private boats down flooded streets and toiled without pause to rescue at least 70,000 people. We have those people standing with us also. Would some of you please stand.

I want the world know what we know:

We are brave.

We are resilient.

And we will prevail.

And there are thousands more who have come from across the nation: guardsmen and active-duty soldiers, rescue workers and police officers, doctors and nurses, Red Cross volunteers, and just plain folks who drove to Louisiana in trucks laden with food, laden with water, and especially laden with love.



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And finally, I offer our profound thanks to all the people and communities all around this world who have opened your homes, your hospitals, your classrooms, your wallets and your hearts to our people. So long as the Mississippi River flows to the sea, we will never forget your generosity.

We all know that there are lessons to be learned from this tragedy. One thing I know, in order to rebuild this state, all levels of government must work together, as never before, with one purpose -- the well-being of our people. To the legislators here tonight -- and some of you have lost your homes -- I ask you to join me in this endeavor. We need your courage and your energy to rebuild, restore, and reinvigorate our damaged communities and economies.

Many of you, as I said, have lost your homes, and we will worry with you. Please know that together we will all transform despair into hope and show the world the true meaning of determination. Bluntly put, New Orleans and the surrounding parishes may be ravaged but our spirit remains intact. To anyone who even suggests that this great city should not be rebuilt, hear this and hear it well: We will rebuild.

Americans rebuilt Washington after the British burned it to the ground. We rebuilt Chicago after the great fire. We rebuilt San Francisco after the earthquake. And we are rebuilding New York City after 9/11. We will rebuild New Orleans and the surrounding parishes, because that is what Americans do.

We will drain the water from our neighborhoods. We will clean up the debris and contamination. We will rebuild our levees, roads and bridges and we will recreate our communities. To do this, I've asked the federal government to cover 100 percent of what Louisiana will spend on this disaster -- just as was done after 9/11.

I want the people of Louisiana to know that we have a friend and a partner in President George W. Bush. I thank you, Mr. President, and I thank the Congress for your initial investment in our immediate recovery and relief. We can not rebuild without you. I assure the Congress and every American taxpayer that every nickel will be properly spent. I will appoint an outside financial accountability advisor, someone of unquestioned character and reputation, to work with our Inspector General, Legislative Auditor, and Commissioner of Administration to safeguard this investment.

I'm also issuing an executive order directing state agencies to limit spending and allowing them to put state employees to the best possible use in this recovery. I'm confident in our unified Congressional delegation led by Senators Landrieu and Vitter. I know they will champion a significant economic package, a long-term investment to create jobs, to rebuild housing and restore communities. I am requesting that Congress finally give Louisiana our fair share of federal energy revenues so that we can properly protect ourselves with stronger levees and a restored coastline.



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I'm also working with our delegation to bring immediate help for our citizens, including significant financial help to rebuild homes and return our families, tax relief and loans to keep our businesses afloat, and an extension of unemployment benefits. This package will help us reach our top goal -- bringing our people home.

Katrina scattered more than one million Louisianans across our state and the nation. I am telling each and every one of you: We want you back home. To come home, our people must have jobs. We can't rebuild communities without jobs for the people in them. We want to reunite Louisiana people with their Louisiana jobs. This is why we're putting temporary housing in refinery parking lots to bring our workers back to their jobs. A breadwinner earning a paycheck can afford to bring his family home.

As families return, communities will grow and the businesses that serve them will thrive once more. Until then, we must keep those businesses part of our recovery effort. These businesses have an urgent need for cash to stay afloat, pay their workers and begin down the path towards long-term stability. We must first put Louisiana people and Louisiana firms to work rebuilding Louisiana.

I've told FEMA to give priority to Louisiana companies and Louisiana workers. I want to see Louisiana's engineers designing reconstruction projects, Louisiana's bankers financing them, Louisiana's contractors building them, and Louisiana's workers on the job.

I have called upon FEMA to not only look first at Louisiana's businesses, but to pay them in a timely fashion and not force them to wait the usual six months. They will not survive without this consideration. State government will train Louisiana workers for the recovery and reconstruction. I have called on the federal government to do the same.

The resurrection of Southeast Louisiana is progressing: Lights are coming on in the Central Business District of New Orleans. Banks are opening in Jefferson Parish. Yesterday, Louis Armstrong International Airport reopened to passengers. This week, the Port of New Orleans received its first ship. Each of these successes is about jobs. It takes workers to load the ships, to service the planes, and to staff the banks. These workers need places to stay. New Orleans hotels are filling up with the men and women cleaning up the city and rebuilding its infrastructure. Cruise ships are here to house them. This is temporary and only a start.

America has never confronted a housing crisis of this magnitude. The task may look daunting but we're finding innovative solutions. We are creating communities in shelters, making them more than just places to sleep and eat. I look forward to visiting our first community shelter located in Monroe, a facility that includes a library, a post office, a bank, child care, and more. I asked the Red Cross and FEMA to embrace this concept for other shelters that will be opening in Louisiana and they have agreed. Further, I have directed the state Department of Labor to invest millions to employ residents to run the shelters where they live.



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We will create similar communities and similar opportunities for our people as they move from shelters to the temporary housing that we are building. The final step is to return our people to their rebuilt homes, to their restored communities.

We must rebuild our communities. We have to build them stronger than ever before. Any good architect will tell you that you don't restore a structure without correcting its flaws, but you restore it in a way that improves the original design while preserving it's unique character and its spirit.

We're not going to simply recreate the schools of New Orleans the way they were. Tonight, I'm calling on all Louisianans and all Americans to join an historic effort to build a world-class, quality system of public education in New Orleans. Our children who have weathered this storm deserve no less.

We're not simply going to recreate our health care system. We're going to give people access to primary care in their neighborhoods. Mental health services will be critical because of the trauma our children and families have lived through. I'm committed to seeing that our people receive the health services they need to fully recover.

We're not simply going to rebuild the same infrastructure. We will re-engineer and rebuild better and stronger levees, highways, and bridges.

I hired former FEMA Director James Lee Witt to cut through the red tape and help our mayors and parish presidents get access to what their people need to recover and rebuild. I've asked James Lee to work closely with Admiral Thad Allen who is managing the federal recovery effort. I'm glad both are here tonight.

Let me ask them to stand. Would you please stand, Admiral Allen and James Lee.

Let me pause here to thank local and parish leaders for their tireless work to help their own citizens and to thank those who have pitched in, from opening shelters to sending aid.

It is not often that a state is faced with so many challenges -- such difficult challenges that lie before us, but we will rise to meet them. In this time of challenge, we draw strength from the wellspring of our faith, and the power of those who lift us in prayer from all corners of the earth. And the loved ones we lost will always be in our prayers, as we honor their lives by creating a better state.

A passage from the Book of Job reminds us that we can and will prevail:

You will be secure, and will not fear. You will forget your misery. You will remember it as waters that have passed away. And your life will be brighter than the noonday; its



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darkness will be like the morning. And you will have confidence, because there is hope. You will be protected and take your rest in safety.¹

Dear God, please bless the people of the state of Louisiana, and bring all of our sons and daughters safely home.

Thank you.

¹ Job 11: 15-18