



For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
August 29, 2006

President and Mrs. Bush Visit New Orleans High School, Discuss Gulf Coast Recovery

Warren Easton Senior High School
New Orleans, Louisiana

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11:35 A.M. CDT

MRS. BUSH: Hey, everybody. Please be seated. We're a little late because we've been in the library here at Warren Easton with the award grant winners of the Laura Bush Foundation, the 10 schools in Louisiana and Mississippi that have just won grants to restock their libraries. And it was really fun for us to have the chance to meet with the librarians and the students and the principals of these 10 schools that are across the Gulf Coast.

School people know they have to get to work right away, and really one of the great signs of recovery all along the Gulf Coast are the schools that are up and going again. A lot of them are in temporary buildings or portable buildings, but they have plans to rebuild. And it's really a thrill to get to meet with the people who have worked so hard to make sure students all across the Gulf Coast get to go back to their own schools. We know that families can't move back unless there's schools for the kids. And so education is one of the most important parts of the recovery.

Today, on the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, we look back on a year of recovery, and we look ahead to a stronger and more vibrant New Orleans. This city occupies a unique place in America's cultural landscape, and the recovery won't be complete until New Orleanians return home and the culture is restored.

Recovering from our country's worst natural disaster requires everyone to do his or her part. First responders and volunteers provide compassion and aid. Friends help friends, and strangers help total strangers. Local and federal government are working on the big pieces of the recovery, rebuilding levees, housing, and the economy. Many others have joined the efforts. The National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities have awarded hundreds of thousands of dollars to Gulf Coast cultural institutions. This October, in partnership with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, we'll mark the 40th anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act with a summit here in New Orleans. At the summit, we'll evaluate the progress made during the last four decades of preservation, and will determine our strategy for protecting America's rich national heritage, including the culture and history of New Orleans into the next century.

America's private sector institutions, corporations, private citizens, and philanthropic organizations have a very important role to play. Charities like the



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Mrs. Bush's Remarks

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Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund have supported churches, synagogues, and other houses of faith across the Gulf Coast as they rebuild.

But the best hope for a bright future is new schools. Schools are essential because until there are places for children to learn, families can't come home. We just announced the Laura Bush Foundation's Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Grants; 20 schools in Louisiana and Mississippi have now received more than a million dollars to help restock their libraries. (Applause.)

In the year since Katrina, outsiders have made tremendous contributions to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast rebirth. But the most important recovery work has been done by the local people who are rebuilding New Orleans because it's their home. I've been privileged to meet with many of these people, with school superintendents, teachers and homeowners, and to see their extraordinary work firsthand. Through their determination, this region will be rebuilt.

But everybody has to pitch in, including neighbors all across America. We need more Americans, especially teachers, to move to the Gulf Coast and rebuild their lives here; to invest in new community by building better schools, working for justice and equality, and sharing time, prayers and love with neighbors who are still grieving. And until the Gulf Coast has recovered, love, support and prayers will continue to be with you from families all across America, including mine.

Ladies and gentlemen, my husband, President George Bush. (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. Thank you. Good morning. From our beginnings as a nation, the church steeple and the schoolhouse door have been enduring symbols of the American community. And so it is today in New Orleans. Earlier this morning, we gathered at St. Louis Cathedral in the presence of a just God, who asked us to love our neighbors as ourselves. And now we stand inside Warren Easton Senior High School. Warren Easton is the oldest public school in New Orleans.

In a little more than a week its classrooms will again be filled with young men and women who will write the future of this great American city. And that future draws from a rich past -- the music of Fats Domino, the stories of Tennessee Williams, shotgun houses and iron-lattice balconies, seafood gumbo, red beans and rice on Mondays.

Over the course of nearly three centuries, a city that once was the center of slave trade has been transformed to a unique and great American city. This city is a story of hope and dignity and perseverance. And it's these qualities that have seen you through trials of war and prejudice and natural disaster.

One year ago today, your beloved New Orleans and surrounding parishes and counties and the great state of Mississippi were struck by a cruel hurricane. And here in this city, there was flooding on a biblical scale. Less than three weeks later, with many of the homes and churches and schools still under water, I came to Jackson Square. I said, we could not imagine America without the Crescent City, and pledged that our government would do its part. And today, Laura and I have come back to discuss that pledge and your future.

I want to thank Don Powell, the Federal Coordinator of the Gulf Coast rebuilding, who is with us today. I appreciate Admiral Thad Allen, who's now the Commandant of the United States Coast Guard, who is with us today. And I want to thank Lieutenant General Russ Honor.

I appreciate the members of the congressional delegation who have joined us today: Senator Mary Landrieu, as well as Senator David Vitter and his wife Wendy. Thank you both for being here. I want to thank Congressman William Jefferson and Andrea; Congressman Bobby Jindal; and Congressman Charlie Melancon and his wife Peachy. Thank you all for joining us. Proud to be working with you. (Applause.)

I noticed that Mary brought her brother, Mitch, the Lieutenant Governor of the great state of Louisiana. Mitch, thanks for coming.

I want to thank the Attorney General of the state of Louisiana. General, thank you for joining us. He's an alumnus of Warren Easton Senior High School. I appreciate so very much the Superintendent of Schools -- State Superintendent of Schools, Cecil Picard is with us today. I thank all those state and local officials who have come. I appreciate Jean Case, who is the Chair of the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation.

I want to thank one of the fine, fine citizens of your state, a man who brings great dignity in anything he does, and that's Dr. Norman Francis, who is the Chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority. (Applause.) I want to thank Lexi Medley, who is the principal of Warren Easton Senior High School. (Applause.) Happy birthday. Today is her birthday. (Applause.) We're not telling, are we? (Laughter.) No, 25, okay.

I want to thank all those school administrators, teachers, librarians, and students who are here from not only -- they're not only here from New Orleans, but they're from around the area, including Mississippi. Welcome. Thanks for coming. (Applause.)

When the waters broke through the levees a year ago, southern Louisiana was consumed by flood waters, and New Orleans faced the greatest disaster in its history. Eighty percent of your city was under water. Thousands of businesses were hurt. Tens of thousands of homes were damaged and destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of folks fled the region in perhaps the greatest dislocation of American citizens since the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

Your fellow Americans offered you more than sympathy. They responded with action. Those of you who were stranded on rooftops looked to the sky for deliverance, and then you saw the Coast Guard choppers come. Members of Louisiana National Guard, who had just come back from Iraq, stepped forward to bring food and water and ice. On every street, in every parish, there were constant acts of selflessness.

Doctors and nurses stayed with patients; they went without food so that the sick and the infirm might be able to eat. Fishermen used their flat-bottom boats to form the "Cajun Navy," and pulled women and children and the elderly out of flooded homes, and brought them to dry ground. Volunteers embraced frightened boys and girls with warm blankets and loving arms to reassure them somebody cared. In these and countless other acts of courage, we saw the very best of America.

Unfortunately, the hurricane also brought terrible scenes that we never thought we would see in America: Citizens drowned in their attics; desperate mothers crying out on national TV for food and water; a breakdown of law and order; and a government at all levels that fell short of its responsibilities.

When the rain stopped and this wounded city was laid bare, our television screens showed faces worn down by poverty and despair. For most of you, the storms were only the beginning of your difficulties. Katrina exposed the big things that need repairing; yet it's most devastating impact has been on the rhythms of everyday life.

Some of you still don't know whether you have a neighborhood to come back to. Others of you who made the decision to return are living in trailers. Many are separated from their loved ones, and simply long just go to church on a Sunday afternoon with somebody you care about. Many of you find yourself without jobs, and struggling to make do without the convenience of a supermarket nearby. Many fear for your safety because of violent criminals. The challenge is not only to help rebuild, but the challenge is to help restore the soul.

I take full responsibility for the federal government's response, and a year ago I made a pledge that we will learn the lessons of Katrina and that we will do what it takes to help you recover. (Applause.) I've come back to New Orleans to tell you the words that I spoke on Jackson Square are just as true today as they were then.

Since I spoke those words, members of the United States Congress from both political parties came together and committed more than \$110 billion to help the Gulf Coast recover. I felt it was important that our government be generous to the people who suffered. I felt that step one of a process of recovery and

renewal is money.

I also put a good man in charge of coordinating the federal response for local rebuilding. I've already introduced him -- his name is Don Powell. He's a good fellow. He's no nonsense; he's a good listener, and when he finds hurdles in the way between intentions and results, he works to remove them. He's on the job now, and he's going to stay on the job until we get the job done. And I appreciate you, Don, for your service. (Applause.)

To make sure that we keep our promises and to make sure this good area recovers, we have got to give assurance to the citizens that if there is another natural disaster, we'll respond in better fashion. Every department of my administration has looked at its response to last year's hurricanes and has recommended practical reforms, things to do to make sure that the response is better.

Chertoff -- Secretary Chertoff has increased manpower and training for FEMA, strengthened partnerships with the Red Cross and the Department of Defense, improved communications among local, state and federal emergency teams, and has expanded supplies so that FEMA can feed up to a million people for about a week. We looked at what went right, and we looked at what went wrong, and we're addressing that which went wrong.

In Louisiana, we have pre-positioned supplies in advance of this year's hurricane season. The people of the Gulf Coast can know that at the federal level, and at the state level, and at the local level, we've all assessed and we're now working together in better fashion. We're better prepared. And step one of rebuilding is to assure people, if another hurricane comes there will be a better, more effective response.

Secondly, in order to make sure that -- (applause) -- in order to make sure that people understand there's hope and renewal in this area, they've got to have confidence in a stronger levee system. It became clear to me in my first of my many visits down here -- the people said, it's fine, you can talk all you want, just get the levees stronger. I think that was your message, Senator. (Laughter.)

The Army of Corps of Engineers has been working nonstop -- and I mean nonstop -- to repair the damage and make 350 miles of the system stronger. I say 350 miles. Most people in America don't understand the nature of your levee system. They're extensive and require a lot of work, including rebuilding I-walls with T-walls. In other words, that strengthens the foundations of levees. We're storm-proofing the pumping stations and the pumping stations capacities are being increased. We're elevating electrical systems so they can work during a flood.

Today, almost the entire flood protection system around New Orleans has been restored to pre-Katrina level. And in many places, the system is now better than it was before Katrina. We're working to make the levees stronger than ever by 2010, and we will study what we need to do to give New Orleans even greater protection.

One thing that the American people have got to understand is that in order to make sure the levee system works, there has to be a barrier system to protect the state of Louisiana. I strongly urge the United States Congress to pass energy legislation that will give the state of Louisiana more revenues from off-shore leases so they can restore the wetlands. (Applause.)

The Army Corps of Engineers has been working with local citizens in difficult circumstances. I've been on the levees, I've seen these good folks working. One such fellow is Kevin Wagner. He's with us today. He's an engineer whose house had 12 feet of water after the storm. I think it's important for people to listen to what Kevin said. He said, "For me, it's personal. My whole family lived down there in St. Bernard Parish. Everyone who's working on this effort has the same motivation and the same sense of urgency."

There is a sense of urgency, and I want to thank those in the Corps and those who are helping the Corps send reassuring messages to the people who live here and the people who want to move back here.

A more hopeful New Orleans means we got to get rid of the broken furniture and old refrigerators, and get rid of the wreckage. You can't rebuild until you remove the rubble. The sheer tonnage of debris in Louisiana is many times greater than any previous disaster. And after many months and more than \$1.8 billion from the federal government, from the taxpayers, more than three-quarters of the debris has now been cleared.

You know, it's amazing when you really think about the effort. Of course, government has a part, but the truth of the matter is a lot of the effort, a lot of the success, and a lot of results were achieved because of faith-based and community groups. Groups like Katrina Krewe have mobilized thousands of volunteers, ranging from students on spring break to moms and retirees. Isn't it interesting to have a country where people are willing to show up to help clean out houses and remove debris for someone they didn't even know? It's a spectacular nation, isn't it, when compassion overflows to overwhelming? (Applause.)

The Krewe's founder, Becky Zaheri, is with us. She left, then she came back. And she said, "I went and visited other states and they were beautiful, but they were not home." That's the spirit that we're trying to capture. That's the spirit we want people who are watching from afar to understand, this home is beginning to be.

The debris is getting cleaned. As a matter of fact, in order to make sure that the federal -- that we continue to clean the remaining debris, the federal government has agreed to pay 100 percent of reimbursement costs through the end of the year on the five hardest hit parishes. (Applause.)

We need to get homes available for people. A renewed New Orleans is a New Orleans with new homes. Everybody understands that. The people here, and those who have left, they all tell me one thing -- particularly those who -- "I miss New Orleans," is what they say. But we got to make sure they have a place to move to. Trailers are only temporary. The goal is to make sure that communities are restored because there's new homes. That's the goal. And we will help.

I want to thank the Louisiana Recovery Authority. Dr. Francis and his team have done a really good job of developing a strategy, a plan, to help renew communities through homes. You know, when we first got going in this deal we had choices to make, and a lot of people said, why don't you just take it over, Washington? Why don't you make all the decisions for the local folks? That's not the way I think. I trust the people like Dr. Francis, and the parish presidents and the mayors, and the city councilmen to make the right decisions for the people of this community. And so the federal government is working with the Louisiana Recovery Authority to help people get back in their homes. And we've appropriated more than \$10 billion to help people achieve that dream.

Under this program, eligible homeowners will receive up to \$150,000 for damage not covered by insurance or other federal assistance. All of us agree, at all levels of government, that we got to get the money as quickly as possible in the hands of the people, so they can rebuild their lives and help this city recover.

A more hopeful New Orleans means replacing a school system that didn't work with one that will. And I congratulate the good people of New Orleans and the LRA for coming up with a novel plan to address failure that had caused -- in many cases, was a root cause of poverty. I'm excited for you about the innovative charter school system you have put in place. I applaud you for thinking differently. I can't thank you enough for seizing the moment, to say to the good folks and the families, we will do a better job with the school system here in New Orleans. (Applause.)

I know Margaret Spellings was down here recently -- she's been down here a lot, and she should. We provided about a billion dollars to help the school system to get people back in school. The federal government has helped. It's very important, however, that people understand that the best way to make sure the school system delivers excellence is there be local control of schools, that people be in charge of the future -- local people be in charge of the future of the New Orleans schools.

Warren Easton Senior High School is a new charter school. One year ago, the classrooms and corridors were covered by about 10 feet of water. Like many other schools in New Orleans, Warren Easton is now reopened. When you say charter school, it means the funding actually follows the students, which makes schools more accountable to parents. It means parents will be more involved in the schools.

By reopening as a charter school, Warren Easton is providing a new motto. The motto of this school is, "We believe in success." A revitalized New Orleans needs a reformed public school system where everybody can say, "We not only believe in success, we see success for the good of the future of this state." (Applause.)

Laura mentioned that the First Lady's Foundation established a Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative, and they started granting -- giving grants -- more grants today to help libraries restock. Her view is the view of many in that the center of a school is the library. Without a library, schools can't realize their full potential. And so she and her foundation, and folks in the private sector, have awarded more than a million dollars in grants to 20 schools, including \$70,000 to the library here at this high school. (Applause.)

Nancy Hernandez is the librarian. (Applause.) She is a graduate from this high school. She puts it this way: "I think the library is the heart of the school. For a child, there is nothing that can replace the joy that comes from a book." And she is right. And I want to thank you, Laura, for helping people realize dreams, with new books, in the midst of helping this public school system recover. (Applause.)

The New Orleans school system is enriched by the religious schools here. And the Cathedral Academy has been educating in New Orleans for nearly three decades. There's an interesting story I'm about to tell you. Last October, Cathedral Academy became the first school to re-open. That was last October. Sister Mary Rose is the principal, and she believes this: No child would be turned away from her school's front door.

For 10-year-old Aaliyah Carr, who is with us today here, the return to school was a day she will never forget. I love what she said -- she said, "I was so happy I could hear the choir singing in my head. It was a long time before I thought I'd see a school again, and I'm so glad to be walking these halls." Aaliyah says it better than I can. Education is the gateway to a brighter future. Education provides the light of hope for a young generation of children.

It's really important -- I look forward to working with the federal government to provide opportunity scholarships for the poorest of our families so they have a choice as to whether they go to a religious school or a public school. It's good for New Orleans to have competing school systems. It's good for our country to have a vibrant parochial school system. And I applaud those who are very much involved with the Catholic school system here in the great city of New Orleans. (Applause.)

I predict, a year from now people are going to be wondering where they can find workers, and wondering what they're going to do about the equipment shortages and supply shortages. I see an incredibly bright future for the entrepreneur. A lot of the revitalization of New Orleans and the area -- surrounding area is going to come because there's more businesses opening and more shops reopening.

I believe that government has a role to play in encouraging entrepreneurship, and so I worked with members of the United States Congress, both political parties, to pass Go Zone legislation. Go Zone legislation gives entrepreneurs and small businesses tax incentives to invest in this area, to help jump-start this economy and provide jobs. The Go Zone legislation is set to expire. The United States Congress needs to extend this good piece of legislation. (Applause.)

There's a guy named Joe Peters -- he's here with us. Where are you, Joe? Somewhere. Got a lousy seat. (Laughter.) I want to tell you what he said. He's a Vietnam vet. He runs a tire store on St. Claude Avenue. Right after the flood, the waters went up to his desktop. He and his workers, though, reopened the shop. They had a job to do. They were fixing tires for police cruisers and family cars that were trying to get to safety. They were providing an important

service. Here's what Joe says about this city's future. See, he's an entrepreneur. He's a can-do person. He believes in the future. He said, "This ain't nothing. This is New Orleans. We were here before there was a United States. You cannot kill a city like this." (Applause.)

I have returned to make it clear to people that I understand we're marking the first anniversary of the storm, but this anniversary is not an end. And so I come back to say that we will stand with the people of southern Louisiana and southern Mississippi until the job is done. (Applause.)

A lot of work has been accomplished, and I congratulate the people here. But there's more work to be done. The work ahead includes making sure that your streets are safe. And to make sure the people understand -- we at the federal level understand we still have a continuing commitment, Attorney General Al Gonzales came down here, and he announced a new Justice Department initiative to send more federal agents and prosecutors to New Orleans to help local law enforcement crack down on violent crime. If you want there to be renewal and recovery, like we all do, you got to crack down on violent crime. You got to send a message that the streets of New Orleans are safe. And we'll help you do so. The work ahead includes -- (applause.)

Last night I had dinner with your parish presidents, and Mayor Nagin, and Oliver Thomas, and the good doctor, and a lot of other good folks, and one message was clear to me -- that for this city to recover, there needs to be help on infrastructure. There needs to be better sewers and better infrastructure, around which a new New Orleans can emerge. I listened carefully, and to the extent there's bureaucracy standing in the way, me and Don Powell will -- or Don Powell and I -- excuse me, darlin' -- Don Powell and I -- (laughter and applause) -- Don Powell and I will work to get rid of them.

We can also -- we'll work with your leaders to achieve a larger goal, and that is this: to rebuild a New Orleans where every child who grows up here feels a great part of the American promise. That's the challenge. And we've got a role to play, and we'll play it. That's what I'm here to say -- we'll play it.

But I also want to remind you that the federal government cannot do this job alone, nor should it be expected to do the job alone. This is your home; you know what needs to be done. And a reborn Louisiana must reflect the views of the people down here and their vision, and your priorities. State and parish authorities have a responsibility to set priorities, and they're doing so. We all have a responsibility to clear obstacles that stand in the way of meeting goals. And we've got to make sure the money that has started to flow continues to flow.

At this critical moment there are a lot of people making big decisions about where their future lies. I understand that, and so does the LRA and Governor Blanco and local authorities. We all understand that. We know there are people weighing a big decision. We want to make sure that when they do make the decision to rebuild that the rules are clear, and that the zoning decisions by local authorities make sense. That's a local decision to make. But we are going to make sure that we work closely together to clear up any ambiguity. See, we want people coming home. We want the rules clear, so when people come home they know that they'll be coming to a safer, better place.

I appreciate the fact that state and local authorities are working together and making tough decisions. It hadn't been easy, but the storm was a big storm that created a lot of damage. And the good folks down here are working together, they're thinking smart. They've got a plan, a strategy to help rebuild. And the federal government will stand with you.

The private sector has a responsibility to help down here. You know, during the storm, American companies showed a lot of resourcefulness to get supplies and relief to the affected areas, and I know everybody down here thanks private -- corporate America for doing that. But now that the immediate crisis has passed, the people of this region are looking to corporate America to see if they're here for the long haul. So I ask America's business leaders to show the people here the same commitment you showed during the flood. New Orleans is going to rise again, and by planting your corporate flag here now and contributing to this city's rebirth, you'll gain some loyal customers when times get better. (Applause.)

The people of this city have a responsibility, as well. I know you love New Orleans, and New Orleans needs you. She needs people coming home. She

needs people -- she needs those saints to come marching back, is what she needs. (Applause.) New Orleans is calling her children home. I hear it from all of the local officials. They say they got a plan in place and money coming to make New Orleans a hospitable place.

One woman who's come back is a woman named Samantha George. She is with us today. A year ago, the future looked bleak for Samantha and her four young daughters. Their home in Mid-City had five feet of water in it. Everything they owned was gone. And so they left, and they went to Mississippi and Georgia, as this good mother searched for work. At one point, Samantha and her daughters were living in cars. She felt alone and abandoned. And that's when she walked into the office of Catholic Charities and met a lady named Peggy Matthews, who's also here.

Peggy wiped the tears off Samantha's face. She gave her love and encouragement. Samantha agreed to enroll in Peggy's job-training class and give it one more try. And within two weeks, she found work. And at the same time, Catholic Charities helped her with food and clothes and diapers, and a gift card to Wal-Mart that allowed her to buy the uniform she would need for her new job. She found help and love.

Catholic Charities also helped Samantha find a house in the Carrollton neighborhood near Lafayette Academy. It's a new charter school that her daughters will be attending very soon. Recently she found a new job she loves -- she's now a nurse. For the first time in her life, Samantha says she feels a sense of ownership and control over her future. Here's what she says: "I was just hoping for some motivation so I could keep going. I think God sent me to Catholic Charities, and I think of myself as blessed because now I'm able to help other people who cannot help themselves."

Samantha's story is a story of renewal. And it may sound like a familiar story to people who know the history of New Orleans; it's always been a city of second chance. When your first settlement was leveled by a storm, you rebuilt again. When fire struck, you replaced the wood buildings with brick. When you were ravaged by war, and epidemics of malaria and smallpox and yellow fever, you picked yourself up and you prospered. And when the hurricanes hit, in the past, you cleaned up, you salvaged what you could, and you rebuilt. Every time, New Orleans came back -- louder, brasher, and better. (Applause.)

We see the same resolve today. In keeping with the tradition of this city, New Orleans again looks to music to express her feelings. And these feelings were captured on a benefit album called, "Higher Ground." One of those songs is called, "Come Sunday," written by Duke Ellington. In her rendition of this classic, Cassandra Williams implores a loving God to "please look down and see my people through."

Sunday has not yet come to New Orleans, but you can see it ahead. And as you approach that joyful day, you can move forward with confidence in your abilities, trust in the compassion of your fellow Americans, and faith in a loving God who makes the path through mighty waters. God bless. (Applause.)

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