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THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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President and Mrs. Bush Discuss Gulf Coast Rebuilding in New Orleans

Industrial Levee Canal
New Orleans, Louisiana

 [In Focus: Hurricane Recovery](#)

10:33 A.M. CST

THE PRESIDENT: 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 (phonetic), 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 Governor 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 your 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 one of the -- 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 short-changed 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'll 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 decision-making 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 \$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 hardworking folks here for working around the clock to get this part of the country up and running again. Thank you. (Applause.)

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

MRS. BUSH: Thanks a lot. I want to talk about schools just briefly, and particularly about school libraries. In July 2001, I founded a foundation, the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries. The foundation is a private organization that provides grants to school libraries to expand their book collections. Over the last four years, the foundation has awarded 428 grants totaling more than \$2 million in 49 states.

In September of last year, the leadership group -- the leadership council of the Laura Bush Foundation met for what was going to be our very last meeting. We had raised the money we wanted to raise for the foundation and we were going to disperse our leadership council. And instead, everyone unanimously wanted to continue to work to raise a specific amount of money for Gulf Coast libraries.

We've established a special fund to help the schools in the Gulf Coast region. The Gulf Coast School Library Recovery Initiative is the name of it. The initiative will help Gulf Coast schools that were damaged by the hurricanes rebuild their book and material collections. And the task is very large. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 1,121 public and private schools in the Gulf Coast region were damaged or destroyed.

The basic initial cost of building a book collection for an elementary school library is \$50,000. And the cost for a secondary school library is at least \$100,000. So the Laura Bush Foundation website, which everyone can go to -- laurabushfoundation.org -- has a simple application that schools can use to apply for funds. Again, the website is laurabushfoundation.org.

The foundation already uses a competitive grant process to distribute annual grants, and will use the same process for the Gulf Coast funds. Some schools should receive awards by late April or early May. Additional grants will be distributed throughout the year as more schools are rebuilt and ready to stock their libraries.

The Laura Bush Foundation will continue to provide its annual grants to schools throughout the United States. And you can find the details about those grants on the website. But these special grants for the Gulf Coast rebuilding are for schools that were damaged or destroyed by the hurricanes and want to rebuild their library collections.

We all know that schools are at the center of every child's life, and the routine of going to school gives children a sense of comfort that's more important than ever for boys and girls who've endured trauma. The sooner children are back in their own school, the happier and healthier they'll be.

So I want to thank everyone who is working hard to help the Gulf Coast recover. I urge all the Gulf Coast schools that are rebuilding to go to the laurabushfoundation.org website and apply for a grant for your school library.

Thanks everybody. (Applause.)

END 10:46 A.M. CST