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Gov. Blanco's speech to the Louisiana Legislature

Gov. Kathleen Blanco
Special Session of the Legislature
February 6, 2006

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, distinguished members of the legislature, Mayor Nagin, parish presidents, council members, and distinguished guests: it is an honor to be here in New Orleans tonight.

Let me begin by reflecting upon the contributions of Coretta Scott King, a woman who stood for the dignity of all humanity. Her life will be celebrated in Atlanta tomorrow. Her courage reminds us that even in the darkest hours, there is a great hope for the future. My husband, Raymond, and I extend our condolences to the King family.

Louisiana has weathered the largest natural disaster in American history. The tragedies unleashed by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have challenged us. But we are witnessing a resurrection. We are a people of faith and hard work. We are rising together to build a safer, stronger and better future.

I asked you to come to New Orleans in an historic meeting of this legislature, just as I continue to ask every member of Congress to see the devastation. Tonight marks the first time in 125 years that our legislature has met outside of Baton Rouge. These families, these homes, these images that stretch across coastal Louisiana are the reasons we are here.

I appreciate the efforts of the Women of the Storm and others to convince Congress to visit us. To understand the scope of this catastrophe is to see it.

You may have noticed last week that President Bush, in his State of the Union speech setting the nation's priorities for the year, said so little about a tragedy so great. I noticed. I was there. And that signal worries me.

The harsh reality is that for many people in Washington, Katrina is yesterday's problem and Rita never happened. We are asking Congress to understand that Rita did to Southwest Louisiana what Katrina did to Mississippi.

Public opinion polls are telling lawmakers that the nation has moved on and what happened to the Gulf Coast is yesterday's news. I know you will agree with me that the long-term stability of our region is far more important than the instability of public opinion polls.

Did we poll the decision to invest in the Marshall Plan and rebuild Europe after World War II? Of course not. Our leaders just did the right thing.

I am holding their feet to the fire in Washington, and this is not about party politics. It's about our people. To all of our people who are still displaced, I want to assure you that our number one priority is to bring you home.

We must fight so that families in Gentilly, Lakeview, New Orleans East, the Ninth Ward and Chalmette will be able to return.

We must fight so the young couples trying to restore their flooded homes in Metairie, Kenner, LaFitte, Slidell, or Grand Isle whose insurance company left them at the door empty handed will recover.

We must fight so the elderly widows in Bogalusa, LaFourche, Terrebonne, Iberia, Plaquemines, Delcambre, or Erath will be able to repair the homes they loved all their lives. And we must fight so the total devastation of Cameron, Calcasieu, Vermilion and other Southwest parishes will see a new day.

Those who plow and fish to feed the nation, and labor on the offshore oil rigs to power our country may be forced to give up the struggle to stay in business.

They will never recover from the loss of their homes, their farms, their schools, their churches, their hospitals or their businesses if we don't fight for them.

We had all better put Louisiana politics aside and worry about Washington politics or our people and our state will lose. Anyone who wants to sacrifice the good of our people to politics and cronyism needs to rethink their actions. Louisiana can no longer tolerate the perception that you must pay to play if you expect to do business in this state.

We must put the sins of the past behind us and use our recovery as an opportunity to earn the trust and confidence of the nation.

Over the next 11 days, I am asking you to overhaul problems that have begged for reform for generations. If we love our state - and I know we do - the time to act is now. I am asking you to address, head-on, four bold actions:

- Consolidate levee boards to strengthen our security and restore confidence in our levees;
- Create a housing trust to move families back into their homes;
- Reorganize New Orleans government for efficiency and accountability; and
- Establish the Louisiana Recovery Authority by law.

First, let us secure our communities by strengthening our levees. The levees are federal levees.

It is inexcusable that our people - hardworking and patriotic American taxpayers - were asked to entrust their lives and property to a worn and broken system. We must replace false security with a reliable 21st Century hurricane protection system based on today's engineering and technology.

The state has a responsibility, too. As the Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans know, if we expect Washington to make the lasting investment to rebuild the federal levees, then we must do our part.

You approved the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. The CPRA is charged with overseeing levee boards statewide and developing a master plan for coastal and flood protection. Now let's take the next step.

By consolidating the levee boards in Southeast Louisiana, we have an opportunity to improve the oversight and maintenance of hurricane protection levees. Some levee boards work better than others. Some have diverted attention away from flood control to various levels of corruption and cronyism.

The people of Southeast Louisiana want and deserve a single levee board run by professionals devoted exclusively to flood protection.

There is 12 million dollars in federal money we risk losing if we fail to consolidate those levee boards. I'd prefer not to give that federal money to some other state.

Second, we must rebuild our homes. I am asking you to design a Louisiana Housing and Land Trust Authority to help people return. Congress gave us 6.2 billion dollars in Community Development Block Grant funds.

We're eligible for 1.5 billion dollars in FEMA mitigation funds. We need these funds to address infrastructure, housing and economic development priorities. We will get these funds directly into the hands of our homeowners and communities as they become available.

Let me tell you my plan for investing the 7.7 billion dollars Louisiana has been allocated for Block Grant and Hazard Mitigation Funds:

- 4.6 billion dollars will help Louisiana homeowners repair, rebuild, or relocate their homes;

- 1 billion dollars will develop affordable housing;

- 1.75 billion dollars will bring back our hospitals, schools, and utilities, like our sewerage and water systems; and

350 million dollars will grow jobs with bridge loans, workforce training, and other business incentives.

Although we appreciate this funding, it only covers half of our housing needs. It covers less than half of our infrastructure losses. And it doesn't come close to providing the resources we need to recreate the 200,000 jobs the storms destroyed.

Our state suffered well over 75% of the housing damage from Katrina and Rita, as compared to neighboring states. We had ten times more businesses destroyed. We had five times more jobs lost. And we weathered more than 75% of the total property and infrastructure damage caused by the storm. However, we received only 54% of the block grant funding.

Congressman Richard Baker created a solid proposal that would make up the difference. It enjoys the bipartisan support of our entire Congressional delegation. As you know, the White House tried to blow this solution out of the saddle. This is second-class treatment. Our people who lost everything are not second-class citizens. They deserve an equitable solution. We will continue to fight for a fair hearing.

While in Washington last week, I met with White House officials to ask: "If not the Baker plan, then what?" They agree. Our people suffered a disproportionate loss and will be slighted in terms of assistance. But they have yet to show me an equitable solution. This is why I ask you to enact our version of the Baker plan at the state level now.

Our plan is not designed to replace the Baker Bill. We don't have the means to do that. But let's put the infrastructure in place while we continue to work for passage of the Baker bill. Our delegation is also asking the President to include additional block grant funding in his Supplemental Appropriations Bill.

Third, let us right-size New Orleans' government. This is painful for some. But life has changed dramatically. We have an almost insurmountable mountain to climb. New Orleans has always enjoyed being the exception to the rule. The sad truth is that those exceptions have not always served New Orleans well.

Finally, I urge you to statutorily establish the Louisiana Recovery Authority. The LRA works in partnership with this legislature, as do other state agencies. It has worked in Washington to help secure funding for our recovery. The LRA has represented Louisiana well. It's work must continue in order to advance long-term recovery solutions.

I will also be asking you in the Special Session to enact legislation that will:

- Protect the fundamental voting rights of our citizens; and
- Elevate the Director of the Office of Emergency Preparedness to a position that reports directly to me.

Together, we have made great strides. We are:

- Reforming the New Orleans public schools;
- Shrinking the state budget to reflect our new reality;
- Improving our hurricane protection system, and enacting the first-ever statewide building codes.

We must continue to move forward by passing new reforms.

Louisiana is fighting for 50% of the oil and gas royalties from off-shore drilling. We need this money to finance a comprehensive hurricane protection and coastal restoration system. The two storms melted 100 square miles of coastline into the sea. Our fragile environment changes the way we do business.

If no effort is made to guarantee our fair share of royalties, I have warned the federal government that we will be forced to block the August sale of off-shore oil and gas leases. Industry leaders understand our predicament. It's time to play hardball, as I believe that's the only game Washington understands.

Tonight we meet in the world-famous Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. Some question why. I say, "Why not?" This extraordinary building housed many people waiting to be evacuated during the traumatic week of Katrina. To begin the process of normalcy, we cannot shy away from what happened.

We will conquer the memories and tell the stories of survival to our grandchildren. This Convention Center represents the lifeblood of this city. It has received hundreds of millions of international visitors and will do so again. It is central to New Orleans' recovery. And I say that being here is just what the doctor ordered.

Our greatest hope for the future is that our people find their way home. I see a bright future for Louisiana that restores our rightful place in the nation's trade and energy economy. I see a day when we return to the progress made before the storm.

Two years ago, the 2003 elections brought you and I together to carry Louisiana into a new century. In that two-year period, we put a new face and a new image on Louisiana. We reduced taxes on businesses and raised ethical standards. We recruited 3 billion dollars worth of new manufacturing business, and thousands of new jobs.

We are number one in teacher accountability. Children's test scores are rising, and we are improving health care services. I promise you that we will reclaim this progress and build upon it. Standing together, we can lead Louisiana to a future that is safer, stronger and better than before.

God bless Louisiana. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

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The Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation (LDRF), Louisiana's fund for Louisiana's people, has been established by Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco in order to support long-term family restoration and recovery and help provide assistance to our citizens in need through a network of Louisiana charities and non-profit agencies.

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