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Bush Repeats Vow to Help New Orleans

By ANNE KORNBLUT and ADAM NOSSITER

NEW ORLEANS, Aug. 29 — Still at pains a year after Hurricane Katrina to demonstrate his concern over the devastation it caused, President Bush said Tuesday that he took “full responsibility” for the slow federal response to the disaster as he made a carefully choreographed pilgrimage to the city that suffered most.

As bells rang out through the streets, citizens gathered for prayer services and residents hung banners in front of their tattered homes to commemorate the anniversary of the storm, Mr. Bush sought to do what he had not accomplished a year earlier: Demonstrate the depth of his understanding of the emotional and physical toll the hurricane took on New Orleans.

“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,” he told a largely friendly audience at Warren Easton Senior High School, referring to his major nighttime address on the storm last September.

That speech, itself a carefully planned event that came after most of the victims had died, was seen as a turning point by White House advisers who recognized the political damage done by the flawed government reaction.

“I have returned to make it clear to people that I understand we’re marking the first anniversary of the storm,” he said, “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.”

Speaking at a former public school that was rebuilt as a charter school after the storm, Mr. Bush restated his acceptance that ultimately he was responsible for the federal response to the hurricane, which killed more than 1,700 people in the gulf area and left hundreds of thousands of others displaced.

“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,” Mr. Bush said, drawing applause from the crowd.

He also said he would try to get Louisiana a greater share of offshore oil revenues and urged businesses to return to the region.

In repeated nods to the city’s extraordinary cultural past, Mr. Bush visited the home of the music legend Fats Domino in the Lower Ninth Ward and listened to a brass band. He talked about restoring the “soul” of New Orleans, even as he acknowledged that much of the damage had not yet been repaired.

The city, he said, was calling its children home.

“I know you love New Orleans, and New Orleans needs you,” Mr. Bush said. “She needs people coming home. She needs people — she needs those saints to come marching back, is what she needs.”

He did not stray far from his script nor venture out of his motorcade as it sped past some of the worst destruction in the Lower Ninth Ward, where rows of gutted homes stood along deserted streets.

Instead, in a series of upbeat events designed to underscore progress, Mr. Bush struck an optimistic — and at times almost defiant — tone. He portrayed the anniversary as a starting point, deflecting questions about slow results. And although he faced several challenges throughout the day, including a large banner that read “Bush Failure” as his motorcade passed, Mr. Bush kept his focus on future improvements. He met privately with several residents, but the White House did not disclose their conversations.

Away from the presidential tour, there was private weeping at some of the ruins of the Lower Ninth Ward, and at City Hall bereaved family members signed a giant banner with hundreds of fleurs-de-lis, the city’s symbol, one for each victim. At 9:38 a.m., Mayor C. Ray Nagin sounded a large silver bell on the City Hall steps to mark a catastrophic early levee breach.

Huddling with loved ones at home, attending a ceremony in the heat or simply working on their houses, the city’s citizens, it seemed, were reflecting Tuesday on the disaster one year ago that altered a way of life here for a long while, if not forever.

In its warm and breezy quiet, the day was very unlike the one filled with violent winds and somber hints of catastrophe of a year ago. Out in the neighborhoods, work went on, painfully and defiantly, in the 100 degree-plus heat. Plunging on ahead with rebuilding, as more than one demonstrated they were doing Tuesday, was a way of remembering too — of not being conquered by the long-tentacled disaster and its aftermath. Several people said there were far more important things to be done this day than attending one of the downtown events.

“All this stuff on TV and all, nobody in this city has time to fool with that,” said John Parker, a musician, outside his house, which took in over four feet of water, on a ruined block of Upperline Street. “I figured it’s a good day to get the ball rolling on fixing the house. So I got up and made an appointment with our electrician.”

Mr. Parker and his wife gutted their home months ago, but are still months away from moving back.

The memorial parade was just gearing up downtown, but Robert P. Davis, an electrical inspector, was having no part of it.

“I’m working on my home, that’s what I’m doing,” Mr. Davis said brusquely, on a block of Marengo Street where few of the neighbors have returned.

“What happened has happened,” he said, proudly showing off his “totally gutted, reframed” house.

Mr. Davis is living, for now, in a [FEMA](#) trailer in the backyard. “We’ve got to move on,” he said.

Others were not so sure that was possible just yet.

“It’s been a big day for everybody,” said Kirk Reasonover, a lawyer, hurrying across Camp Street downtown.

Exiled from the city and his home for nearly four months, Mr. Reasonover said he was determined to “spend time with my family” on this day. “Everybody who was here on Aug. 27 and Aug. 28, 2005, is thinking about it,” he said. “It was one of those moments you will never forget.”

The city does not need reminders of the storm; they are everywhere. But the date itself, so often referred to since the storm, is its own particular sharp jog to memory. Tuesday was special in that regard, and many here, including Mayor Nagin, were feeling it.

This was a rough patch for the city, the mayor said. “I am personally having a very difficult time with it,” he told several hundred assembled on the steps of City Hall.

Mr. Bush’s day — a whirlwind more of sights and sounds than of substance — began with a memorial Mass at the Cathedral-Basilica of St. Louis on Jackson Square and concluded with Mr. Bush returning to his ranch outside Crawford, Tex.

After giving Mr. Domino — who was feared dead for a time in the early days of the hurricane — a replica of a National Medal of Arts award that had been lost in the storm, he drove past gutted homes to arrive at a group of freshly constructed houses put together by [Habitat for Humanity](#) volunteers in recent months.

After spending the night at his ranch, Mr. Bush will spend the rest of this week shifting his focus away from Hurricane Katrina and back toward another landmark of his presidency, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. He is scheduled to make campaign stops in Arkansas and Tennessee on Wednesday before delivering what is expected to be a major address on terrorism in Salt Lake City on Thursday.

Mr. Bush had at least one exchange with a local resident that made reference to the flawed response last year, and his role in it.

As Mr. Bush squeezed through tables at a pancake house where he ate breakfast, a waitress asked, “Mr. President, are you going to turn your back on me?”

“No, ma’am,” he replied, with a laugh and a pause. “Not again.”

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