My Fellow Jamaicans:

Every year at this time we pause to reflect on the progress we have made as a people in this great country we call home. In our National Independence Day Message from the Most Hon. P.J. Patterson, ON, PC, QC, MP, Prime Minister August 6, 2005, we celebrated the blessings and guidance of the Eternal Father on this land.

We know so well that God helps those who help themselves, but that none but ourselves can forge our own destiny. We realize that it is by our own efforts we can rid ourselves not only from the obstacles of the past, but also disincapate the inertia that would prevent us from overcoming our present difficulties. We have to create our own path to the future of which we dream—the future which we would want our children and their children to inherit.

More and more we have come to appreciate that Independence is not simply a single event that took place in August 1962 but a process which allows us to build a nation for ourselves.

Our Founding Fathers based the pursuit of Independence on the firm conviction that we can be the creators of our own destiny. In this place of travail, and still rapidly changing world of this twenty-first century, it becomes even more urgent that we hold on to that conviction.

We are, after all, a people of proven grit and resilience whether we reside at home or abroad. We must use these attributes to creatively find potential and the opportunities that exist for economic, social and spiritual growth and development. To do otherwise, is a defiance of commonsense and a devaluation of the gift of life we have been given.

Fellow Jamaicans:

You have a right to expect from your leaders accountability at large: proper healthcare; affordable housing; a sound education that can facilitate and ease the journey from childhood to adulthood.

You are right to expect opportunities for gainful employment which is sustained and adequate to meet the vicissitudes of life.

And it is right that you should want to have the assurance of individual safety and collective security since all such rights herald the great freedoms from hunger, from ignorance and from fear.

But none of these can be achieved without the strategic alliances we must make between each other with all the caring, trust and compassion that a civilized society demands of all who inhabit it.

Forty three years in the life of a nation is short compared to the four and more centuries of degradation and deprivation. But none of these can be achieved without the strategic alliances we must make between each other with all the caring, trust and compassion that a civilized society demands of all who inhabit it.

In closing Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out that by now, every region of this country, every metropolitan area in the city, would have a comprehensive disaster response and evacuation plan. It should not require a disaster or a cataclysm, or worse, a terrorist attack, or should it be a mystery, or an improvisational effort to figure out how to preserve hospital and medical services, to know which facilities will be needed to provide emergency shelters, or to determine how food, water, medicine, blankets and cots and other essentials are going to be sent to designated distribution sites in the fastest, most efficient way.

It should be obvious, even to those who have habitually failed or refused to see the obvious, that once again, there is no plan. By dilidence and incompetence the Bush administration has lost the battle for New Orleans. We in this House need to ensure that we do not lose the battle for the survival of America.

Mr. Speaker, I never take joy in publicly criticizing my President, but questions about the failure of his leadership in the planning and implementation of rescue efforts—whether it was in advance of the storm, or when the disaster itself was underway. If a country knows they’re going to be attacked, whether by Mother Nature or by terrorists, they must be prepared. It is all too apparent that the federal government was not prepared for Hurricane Katrina. Sufficient troops and ample disaster relief supplies should have been on the ground in advance of the storm, and there should have been clear plans for additional resources to be brought in within a reasonable amount of time.

Moreover, in light of the vast scale of the devastation, and the immediate and continuing need, where was the humanitarian spirit and can-do attitude we Americans are so rightly famous for? Why not contract with Greyhound and America’s other bus companies and use them to fight
make short runs to nearby safe railroad terminals so hurricane survivors could have been more quickly relocated to safer out-lying areas on trains? Couldn't a system like this have transported more people to safe ground quicker? Wasn't there some way to free up the too few school buses which were forced to drive to cities far away and make return trips with nobody on board? Couldn't those same vehicles have been used to bring in bottled water, food, emergency supplies and medicine?

Mr. Speaker, what on earth has the Federal Government been doing since 9/11 to prepare for a disaster striking a major American city? With all the Federal agencies, the massive homeland security bureaucracy, and all the many czars, bosses and chiefs, there is still no national or regional master plan to evacuate people, to rapidly bring in relief and to adequately deal with a large scale emergency of this nature. Where has all the money and effort gone? What have the taxpayers got for their hard earned money? All the money for Homeland Security, what has it bought us? Where is the coordination? Where is the Federal-State-local partnership? Have we learned nothing about disaster response from 9/11?

Is there a plan in place for how to deal with the profiteers when the resettling and rebuilding begins? Is there a plan to address the spike in oil prices? Do we even have a system to help our fellow Americans in finding friends and loved ones? Is our government even capable of putting together a list of the lost, missing, found and deceased?

Of course, right now, the Government must devote its energy to rescue efforts and to beginning the recovery of the affected region. And, once again, we cannot adequately thank all those first responders and rescue workers who have once again shown the kind of steadfast bravery that makes us proud to be Americans. We will never be able to repay their heroism adequately or thank them for all the lives they've already saved.

But as the crisis passes, Mr. Speaker, we cannot and we must not ignore how the Federal Government failed to protect the health and safety of its citizens. If the measure of a great nation is how it deals with its weakest and neediest citizens, then Hurricane Katrina has revealed some very unpleasant truths. How we deal with those truths will show what kind of nation we really are.