

Remarks on Gulf Coast Reconstruction in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi August 29, 2007

Thank you all for coming. This is the second anniversary of an event that changed a lot of people's lives here in southern Mississippi and up and down the coast. And Laura and I are honored to be with some of those who endured the storm and have dedicated their lives to rebuilding this part of the world.

We've been down here a lot, and as a result, I've gotten to know the local officials and have come to admire them as people dedicated to public service the way it ought to be. I first of all want to thank the Senator, Trent Lott, and his wife Tricia, for joining us. Nobody cares more about the people of southern Mississippi than the Lotts. The people of southern Mississippi are fortunate to have not only a active Senator, but a powerful Senator working on their behalf. And so, Senator, thank you for being here.

Gene Taylor cares a lot. Laura and I are proud to be here with Congressman Taylor. Gene was raised here. The Taylors' daughter was married right there recently. This is where he told me he was baptized, married, and if you're compassionate enough, will be buried. [*Laughter*] In other words, this is home. And when you're talking about a man's home, you hear a sense of passion in his voice. The Congressman has worked hard to make sure the people down here are well represented, and he's doing a fine job for the people of southern Mississippi. Congressman, thank you for being here.

The Governor of Mississippi has shown his true mettle and his value to the people of Mississippi. When crisis hit, he was calm. When the crisis began to abate a little bit, he planned. And he's been good for the people down here. He's taken a problem on, and he's coordinated it and managed in a way that you'd expect your chief executive to do. And so, Governor, I want to

congratulate you on a job well done. I appreciate the First Lady being here as well. Thanks for working hard for the people down here.

Joining us are members of—a member of my Cabinet, Alphonso Jackson, Housing and Urban Development man. Don Powell is here. He is the Federal Coordinator of the Office of Gulf Coast Rebuilding. That really means that he is the President's eyes and ears on the ground. And while we recognize that there are bureaucracies that we have to deal with in order to make sure the taxpayers' money is spent wisely, sometimes the bureaucracies get in the way of common sense. And one of Don's jobs is to help spot that—those obstacles to progress and work with the local folks to try to clear them out of the way.

There's still obstacles, and there's still work to be done. But there's been a lot of progress made, and that's what people have got to understand. And I have come to this site, it's what we call ground zero—this is where the worst of the worst of the storm hit—to be able to show the American people that through their generosity, this infrastructure has been rebuilt.

Before I get there, I do want to thank Phil Bryant, the State auditor, for joining us. Appreciate you coming, Phil. And then I want to pay tribute to the local folks that I mentioned.

First of all, Eddie Favre—he's the mayor of the city of Bay St. Louis. Eddie's—for those of you who may be paying attention to this from around the country, he's the man who—would be known as the man who wears short pants. [*Laughter*] Eddie is—he's a colorful character, but he also is a smart man who has dedicated more in his life than he ever dreamed to helping rebuild a city he loves.

Tommy Longo, he's from Waveland. I've always viewed Waveland as a benchmark to determine whether or not this recovery is more than just shallow. In other words, I'll never forget seeing Waveland as we choppered over Waveland. It was, like, nothing; it was gone, completely destroyed. And so when I talk to Tommy—I really view Tommy as a barometer, and if Tommy is optimistic, I'm going to be optimistic; if Tommy says there is progress, I'm going to say, thanks. And Tommy is okay. [*Laughter*] I wouldn't call him the most optimistic guy on the face of the Earth, but given what he's been through and given what he has seen, it is remarkable that he's still willing to serve with optimism.

And so we've got a lot of work to do. These two mayors brought their problems to us—people are worried about insurance here. They're worried about bureaucracy. I'll tell you what they're really worried about; they're worried about the President and other folks in Washington, other than the Mississippi officials, are going to forget what took place down here. And so one of the reasons that Laura and I have come back is to remind people that we haven't forgotten and won't.

Somebody who sometimes is worried about getting forgotten is the county supervisor, Rocky Pullman. Now, Rocky, I guess we've probably met a dozen times, haven't we, Rock? And Rocks reminds me of the county commissioners from the State I've come from. County commissioners are always worried that the city folks are going to get the attention, but the rural folks will be ignored. Not in this case. Rocky has represented the people of Hancock County well, and we spent a lot of time talking to Rocky about debris and trees and other issues still facing the people down here.

Ground zero got hit really hard. I mean, this is the place where the storm did its most damage. And while there is better recovery down the coast, people here are still trying to crawl out from underneath

the extensive damage. It's really one of the messages I heard. And we're proud that Pascagoula is doing better and Biloxi is doing better. That's good. It's good for the State, and we're thrilled that that's happening. But the folks here had a special, extra problems to deal with, and I heard you loud and clear. And I want to thank you for sharing that with me.

The American people have written a check—written checks for \$114 billion to help the people on the coast. And so one thing I do want the American people to know is how grateful the people of this part of the country are for their generosity. We felt we had an obligation to help, and we've helped. Now, of that 114 billion, about 80 percent has been obligated. Mississippi has taken the obligated money and is spending it wisely. There's still 20 percent of the authorized that hasn't been shipped out yet, so there's more money coming. And there's—obviously, we've got some more issues that we're trying to work through in time.

One area where there's been great State-Federal cooperation and local cooperation is the rebuilding of this Bay St. Louis Bridge. Now, remember when we first choppered over here, Governor; the bridge was—there might have been a few pylons showing. You could see the planks underwater of that bridge. And this is a major connector for the people in this part of the world. This is a economic lifeline. So the Federal Government said, we have an obligation to repair infrastructure. I think the Congressman told me we've written a little more than \$260 million worth of checks to help get this bridge built, but more importantly, this bridge was built in record time because of the close cooperation between the State and the Federal Government and the local folks. And it's a beautiful looking bridge, and it's working.

There's another bridge in the foreground here, and that's a private sector bridge.

That's the railroad bridge that's up and running. The private sector is responding here in southern Mississippi. The State of Mississippi—it's interesting—I want to tell our fellow citizens about what they have done here in 2 years' period. One, they've helped move 31,000 families out of temporary housing into permanent homes. I don't think we would have been that optimistic 2 years ago when we were recovering from the storms that it would be possible to make those kind of moves that quickly.

This is a State that opened virtually every public school that was damaged in the storm, a State that understands that education is part of the—an important part of the recovery effort. There's a billion dollars have gone out to help homeowners with repairs and rebuilding. The State is active in trying to help the citizens regain their footing. Tax revenues are up.

Now, that's positive, but that doesn't mean there's not more work to be done and more efforts made to help ground zero recover. The interesting thing about the folks who live in this part of the world, they may have lost their building, but they never lost their soul or their spirit. I think the Senator called them—resilience is what he'd like to define people. I call them optimistic about life.

And one such person is Kay Gough, who is with us today. Kay is somewhere—there she is, right there. Here's an interesting story. First of all, she's a—she loves Bay St. Louis. She recognizes the uniqueness of the community. She's a lifelong reader.

She was concerned about what happened to her community. So what did she do? She opened a bookstore on Main Street, Bay St. Louis. First business up, right? One of the first, yes. And it's an interesting example of the entrepreneurial spirit and a—combined with a civic duty. She said there's still a lot of work that needs to be done to get people back in these communities so that they can be buying her books. She said, "We want people to know that we want to be a part of the recovery and we want to be a part of the community."

It's that community spirit that has been very impressive to me and Laura. It's that can-do attitude. It's the attitude that said, "Okay, a storm came. We understand it, we don't like it, but we're going to deal with it." That's the Mississippi spirit.

And so we're glad to be back. We're glad to be back in a part of our country that is going to be better than it was before. It's—there's still work. We understand that. There's work in Louisiana to be done; there's work in Mississippi to be done. But the progress that has been made really speaks to the coordination of Government effort, but it really speaks to the great spirit of the people who live down here.

May God bless them, and may God continue to bless our country. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:23 p.m. at Our Lady of the Gulf Parish Community Center. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Haley R. Barbour of Mississippi and his wife Marsha.

Statement on the 15th Anniversary of the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program

August 29, 2007

Today is the 15th anniversary of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program, established in 1992 under the leadership of President George H.W. Bush and

Senators Richard Lugar and Sam Nunn. CTR programs are a critical tool used to address one of the gravest threats we face: the danger that terrorists and proliferators