



EN ESPAÑOL




## Rebuilding Trust with New Orleans: Remarks of Senator Barack Obama

New Orleans, LA | February 07, 2008

It's good to be back in New Orleans. I'm just sorry that I'm a few days late for Mardi Gras.

New Orleans is a city that has always shown America what is possible when we have the imagination to see the unseen, and the determination to work for it.

It's a city where slaves met in Congo Square to raise their voices in improbable joy; and a young man named Louis from "back of town" played his first tunes.

It's a city where Jackson turned back the British; and a great port connected America's heartland to the Gulf.

It's a city where races and religions and languages all mixed together to form something new; something different; and something special - an imperfect place made more perfect through its promise of forgiveness.

Now, in the wake of this quintessentially American city's greatest test, we see the stirrings of a new day. This great university is well into another academic year. The St. Charles streetcar is rattling downtown. The Endymion (en-dim'-ee-uhn) parade again winds through the streets of Mid-City. A son of New Orleans - Eli Manning - even won an improbable Super Bowl victory.

Most importantly, with each passing day, with each student who goes to school; with each business that opens its doors; with each worker who puts in a shift; New Orleanians are reclaiming their future, and showing America just what can be done in this country when citizens lift up their communities.

But there is another side to this story. Because we know that this city - a city that has always stood for what can be done in this country - has also become a symbol for what we could not do.

To many Americans, the words "New Orleans" call up images of broken levees; water rushing through the streets; mothers holding babies up to avoid the flood. And worse - the memory of a moment when America's government failed its citizens. Because when the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast extended their hand for help, help wasn't there. When people looked up from the rooftops, for too long they saw empty sky. When the winds blew and the floodwaters came, we learned that for all of our wealth and power, something wasn't right with America.

We can talk about what happened for a few days in 2005. And we should. We can talk about levees that couldn't hold; about a FEMA that seemed not just incompetent, but paralyzed and powerless; about a President who only saw the people from the window of an airplane. We can talk about a trust that was broken - the promise that our government will be prepared, will protect us, and will respond in a catastrophe.

But we also know the broken promises did not start when a storm hit, and they did not end there.

When President Bush came down to Jackson Square two weeks after the storm, the setting was spectacular and his promises soaring: "We will do what it takes," he said. "We will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives." But over two years later, those words have been caught in a tangle of half-measures, half-hearted leadership, and red tape.

Yes, parts of New Orleans are coming back to life. But we also know that over 25,000 families are still living in small trailers; that thousands of homes sit empty and condemned; and that schools and hospitals and firehouses are shuttered. We know that even though the street cars run, there are fewer passengers; that even though the parades sound their joyful noise, there is too much violence in the shadows.

To confront these challenges we have to understand that Katrina may have battered these shores - but it also exposed silent storms that have ravaged parts of this city and our country for far too long. The storms of poverty and joblessness; inequality and injustice.

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When I was down in Houston visiting evacuees a few days after Katrina, I met a woman in the Reliant Center who had long known these storms in her life.

She told me, "We had nothing before the hurricane. Now we got less than nothing."

We had nothing before the hurricane. Now we got less than nothing. I think about her sometimes. I think about how America left her behind. And I wonder where she is today.

America failed that woman long before that failure showed up on our television screens. We failed her again during Katrina. And - tragically - we are failing her for a third time. That needs to change. It's time for us to restore our trust with her; it's time for America to rebuild trust with the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

When I am President, I will start by restoring that most basic trust - that your government will do what it takes to keep you safe.

The words "never again" - spoken so often in those weeks after Katrina - must not fade to a whisper. The Army Corps of Engineers has rebuilt levees that were most damaged by the storm, but funding has sometimes stalled, and New Orleans remains unprotected.

We can't gamble every hurricane season. When I am President, we will finish building a system of levees that can withstand a 100-year storm by 2011, with the goal of expanding that protection to defend against Category 5 storm. We also have to restore nature's barriers - the wetlands, marshes and barrier islands that can take the first blows and protect the people of the Gulf Coast.

If catastrophe comes, the American people must be able to call on a competent government. When I am President, the days of dysfunction and cronyism in Washington will be over. The director of FEMA will report to me. He or she will have the highest qualifications in emergency management. And I won't just tell you that I'll insulate that office from politics - I'll guarantee it, by giving my FEMA director a fixed term like the director of the Federal Reserve. I don't want FEMA to be thinking for one minute about the politics of a crisis. I want FEMA to do its job, which is protecting the American people - not protecting a President's politics.

And as soon as we take office, my FEMA director will work with emergency management officials in all fifty states to create a National Response Plan. Because we need to know - before disaster comes - who will be in charge; and how the federal, state and local governments will work together to respond.

But putting up defenses is not sufficient. Because renewing trust with the people of New Orleans is not just about stronger levees and pumping systems - it's about people.

So many of us live a life that is ordered, with comforts we can count on. Somewhere, we know, there are people who don't have a house with a sturdy roof; who have nowhere to go when they can't make rent; who don't have a car to drive to another city when a storm is coming; who can't get care when they're sick, or get the education that would give them a chance at their dreams.

But too often, we lose our sense of common destiny; that understanding that we are all tied together; that when a woman has less than nothing in this country, that makes us all poorer.

That is why the second thing we need to do is to make sure that reconstruction is making a real difference in peoples' lives.

Across this city, we see the evidence that George Bush's promises were empty. It's not acceptable that federal money is not reaching communities that need it, or that Louisiana officials have filled out millions of forms to get reconstruction funds. When I am President, the federal rebuilding coordinator will report directly to me, and we will ensure that resources show results. It's time to cut the red tape, so that the federal government is a partner - not an opponent - in getting things done.

Instead of giving no-bid contracts to companies headed by the President's former campaign manager, we will make sure that rebuilding benefits the local economy. I have worked across the aisle in the Senate to crack down on no-bid contracts, and to make sure that emergency contracting is only done immediately after an emergency. When I am President, if there is a job that can be done by a New Orleans resident, the contract will go to a resident of New Orleans. And we'll provide tax incentives to businesses that choose to set up shop in the hardest hit areas.

Instead of letting families languish in trailers, we will ensure that every displaced resident can return to a home. Today, tens of thousands of homeowners could end up without assistance because of funding shortfalls. That is unacceptable. We must work with Louisiana to make the Road Home program more efficient. We should set a goal to approve every application for Road Home assistance within two months. And we need to increase rental property, so that we can bring down the cost of renting a home.

Instead of shuttered hospitals and provider shortages, we will help the Gulf region rebuild a health care system that serves all its residents. We'll provide incentives like loan forgiveness to bring more doctors and nurses to New Orleans, and we'll build new hospitals - including a new Medical Center downtown, and a state-of-the-art Veteran's hospital.

And instead of unsafe streets and shocking crimes, we will help New Orleans rebuild its criminal justice



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system. We'll start a new COPS for Katrina program to put more resources into community policing, so that heroic officers - men and women like Nicola Cotton, who gave her life serving the city she loved - have more support. And we'll launch a regional effort that brings together federal, state and local resources to combat crime and drug gangs across the Gulf Coast.

The children of New Orleans are America's children. We cannot stand by while they see a future filled with violence, or poverty, or hopelessness. Our true measure of success must be ensuring that the children of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast can dream the same dreams as every child in America.

That is why the third part of our effort to rebuild trust must be providing a world-class education.

Over two years after Katrina, too many schools are still closed. Kids are still going to class in makeshift buildings and trailers. Class sizes run as large as forty children for each teacher. This is not acceptable. It's time for FEMA to speed up payment of the \$58 million that Congress recently allocated for school repairs. And it's time to invest in education, so that New Orleans has the first-class school system that it has needed for so long.

That starts with the person standing in front of the classroom. Many heroic, high-quality teachers have returned to New Orleans - but we need more. That is why I have called for \$250 million to bring quality teachers back to the Gulf region. Any teacher or principal who commits to come here for three years should receive an annual bonus; and those who teach in subject areas where we face shortages - such as math and science - should receive an additional bonus.

In New Orleans - and across this country - we need to stop talking about how great our teachers are; we need to reward them for their greatness with more pay and more support. We need to recruit new teachers by helping them pay for a college education. We need to expand mentor programs to pair experienced teachers with new recruits. And we need to help them move up the career ladder and gain new skills.

We can't accept an education policy where we pass a law called No Child Left Behind and leave the money behind. And we can't just have our teachers teaching to a test - we need to encourage science and innovation; music and the arts. If there is any city in the world that shows us the value of culture and creativity, it is New Orleans.

And our commitment to education can't stop with a high school diploma. I have fought in the Senate for post-Katrina support for Xavier, Southern and Dillard. And I put forward a loan forgiveness program, to make it easier for students to come back to Tulane and colleges and universities across the Gulf region. It's time to make a college education affordable - not just in New Orleans - but for all Americans. That's why I'll give students who need a hand an annual \$4,000 tax credit if you're willing to do your part by serving your community.

And we need to tap the tremendous resource of community colleges. When I am President, we'll reward schools that graduate more students. And we'll help our schools determine what skills are needed to help local industry, so that graduates are well-prepared to lift up the economy, and to rebuild their communities.

Because the trust we seek is not a one-way street. It's going to take folks working together and doing their part. The government cannot rebuild the Gulf Coast for the people of the Gulf Coast; the government can only rebuild the Gulf Coast with the people of this region.

All of this will cost money. The federal government has already promised the resources, but they need to be spent more efficiently and more wisely. When I am President, we will target funds to programs that make a difference, and make sure that resources meet the needs of the people - and that means working closely with state and local officials, and asking that they keep up their end of the bargain.

I promise you that when I'm in the White House I will commit myself every day to keeping up Washington's end of this trust. This will be a priority of my presidency. And I will make it clear to members of my Administration that their responsibilities don't end in places like the 9th ward - they begin there.

But I will also ask the people of this city to do your part. Because together, we can do more than rebuild a city; we can create a model for America - for how we prepare for disasters; for how we fight poverty; for how we put our kids on a pathway to success.

If we do this, then we can once again make New Orleans the city that stands for what we can do in America, not a symbol for what we can't do.

If we do this, then we can begin to turn the page on the invisible barriers - the silent storms - that have ravaged this city and this country: the old divisions of black and white; of rich and poor. It's time to leave that to yesterday. It's time to choose tomorrow.

Here at Tulane, your degree will open up many doors. I hope that many of you will choose to stay here in New Orleans, and to make this work your own. Because you are the change that this city seeks. You can be this city's tomorrow. You can help close those divisions. And by doing so, you can help to heal this nation.

What better place to begin this work than New Orleans?

Here, in the city that gave us jazz, we know that even the most painful note can be followed by joy. Here, in



this city, if we look hard enough, we can imagine the unseen - homes filled with families; businesses putting folks to work; schools extending opportunity; the next verse in the American song. That is what is possible if we can trust each other; and if we have the imagination to see the unseen, and the determination to work for it.

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