



United States Senator

**MARY L. LANDRIEU**  
*Louisiana*

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## HURRICANE KATRINA FLOOR SPEECH

*~ September 8, 2005 ~*

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Ms. LANDRIEU. Mr. President, I rise today as the senior Senator from Louisiana. But I was not born a Senator. I was born a Louisianian. I'm a daughter of the Crescent City, raised by a family of places whose names may seem strange and exotic to people in Washington, D.C. and around the nation. Places like Plaquemines, Cocodrie, Kenner, Slidell, St. Tammany, St. Bernard and Bogalusa.

Most people refer to this region of the country – Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama – as the Energy Coast. The Maritime Coast. The Gulf Coast. The largest city in this area is the city of New Orleans. Almost 500,000 people. My hometown. At one time or another every member of this body has told me their own story about what they love about New Orleans and south Louisiana. For some, it's our music. For others it's Mardi Gras. And yet others, it's that special magic. Each one of you has come away from our state with a special memory, a singular moment that reflects the vibrant culture and personality of our state. And what all of my colleagues have mentioned to me over many years is the special, special spirit of the people.

Today, as I stand before my colleagues, Democrats and Republicans, to report to the Senate that our people are hurting. Some are despairing, and many are still crying. But our spirit is strong and it will be this spirit, along with the best work the Senate has ever done, that we will lift this region and rebuild it.

Mr. President, thousands are dead. And only God knows how many. Hundreds and thousands are homeless, jobless and without their businesses, large and small. But amidst water, death, destruction, anguish and anger, our spirit is strong.

And today, there are thousands of heroes. Those heroes, Mr. President, may not be anybody in this chamber, but I'll tell you who the heroes are. They are the leaders of Plaquemines Parish and St. Bernard and Orleans and Jefferson and counties in Mississippi that kept their government functioning even as much of their parish laid under water. In St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parish, that water was eight to twenty feet high in places. And in New Orleans, the water still stands six to ten feet in some places on the east bank. The only thing out of the water the last time I left was Jackson Square, the Cathedral and the French Quarter. Because the people who settled the city were smart enough to put it on the highest ground they could find, and that high ground has been serving this nation so well and so magnificently for over 300 years. And it's still there.

The heroes are the New Orleans sheriffs who secured and evacuated the city jail, not because they were trying to coddle the prisoners, but because there was a threatened

jail break when the system failed and the electricity went off. So the deputies who had lost their own homes and had lost maybe members of their own family, swam through water to get the prisoners out of the prison, not to give them a warm meal, but to secure them, so hardened rapists and murderers would not plague the city at its time of greatest distress.

Our local leaders never once flinched from their duty to protect their residents and save every man, woman or child, regardless of race or income.

It was so desperate that the law enforcement didn't have to triage. The people were triaging themselves. In other words, when the boat drove up, they would put the old people first in the boat. Then they would put the babies in the boat. And all the young, "healthy" people would just stay on the roof until the boat could come back. Sometimes it did and in some cases it was too late.

I flew back here after one plane that I got on had no fuel. I had to come back with the Commandant of the Coast Guard, and he told me himself yesterday the Coast Guard rescued 32,000 people either by boat or by helicopter. And that's not counting what Wildlife and Fisheries agents did in Louisiana, Mississippi or Alabama. That's not counting what regular boat owners, once they could wade through water and turn their boats on went down and did themselves, of which the news media did not cover. Because the only thing the news media could focus on was the Convention Center and the Superdome because it made the best picture. We understand that as politicians. They need visuals. I'm sorry I couldn't provide any more visuals for them, but there was a lot more going on than just at the Superdome and the Convention Center.

Across the state, perhaps the greatest heroes are those we don't know about. The concerned and courageous friends who took care of elderly neighbors and ensured their safe evacuation. One brief story. An elderly African-American woman in a shelter came up to me. She was a retired teacher. Her feet were wrapped because she had cut up her feet in this episode. She said, "Ms. Landrieu, please go back and tell those people in Washington we were fine after the hurricane hit. It wasn't the hurricane that put us under. It was that water that came up from the levee. Don't they know anything up there about the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal? Don't they know anything about the Florida Street Canal?"

I said, "No, Ma'am, but we're going to tell them more about that."

She said, "I stood on my ladder for two days. I've never seen water like that. That water kept going up six inches and going down six inches." Do you know what she was experiencing with the water rising and receding? She was feeling the tide of Lake Ponchartrain. She said, "It kept going up to my nose and going down to my chest."

Mr. President, the Louisiana state flag depicts a pelican. The pelican takes from herself, her own breast to feed her young. Thousands of Louisianians this week brought that state symbol to life.

As brave and bold as my fellow Louisianians have been - and our heart goes out to the people in Mississippi and Alabama - we have been moved beyond measure by the generosity and selflessness of our fellow Americans. New York City itself sent 600 of its finest and bravest police officers and firefighters who were willing to run into a collapsing tower on September 11<sup>th</sup> knowing what we didn't know, knowing that the radios on their hips were not going to work. But they ran in the building anyway.

Those police officers are on their way right now to help the city of New Orleans. And I want to thank the Senators from New York, the delegation from New York, for sending them.

Cities, suburbs, and states across the nation have welcomed our citizens as their own. Senator Lincoln told me yesterday on the phone, "Mary, send them north. As soon as they cross the borders, I've got them in my arms." I thank Senator Lincoln and thank all the Senators that have called.

And so, if it's possible that my heart is a little heavy today, I've seen more in the last two weeks than I've seen in my entire life, and I hope never to witness it again. But while my heart is heavy, my heart today is also lifted with gratitude for my fellow Americans.

Of course, already some in Washington are pointing fingers at state and local officials – officials that had little more than just the good sense that God gave them while trying to save everyone that they could, all amidst criticism that they have had to bear from other government officials.

In this chamber alone, every one of you voted the other night to send billions of dollars of aid and assistance. As Harry Reid said earlier today, it will probably cost us a lot more. I'm sorry I could not even report to you an accurate estimate of what that might be, but I predict it will be over \$200 billion.

As I stand here today, Senator Vitter, my partner, remains in the state to continue assessing damage. He has been a steady voice through this, and I want to acknowledge him.

This unprecedented catastrophe will require unprecedented support. I am concerned today because our nation, our national government failed in its greatest responsibility, and that is protecting the lives of Americans. I'm not saying the military failed, or the Coast Guard failed and most certainly not the National Guard that was there before the storm hit and is still there.

Let me talk a minute about my National Guard. Eight thousand of them have already been to Iraq and back, not once but twice. 3,000 of them are scheduled to come home in September. The Governor and I and Senator Vitter were planning a homecoming for them. They are going to get quite a homecoming because many of them are from south Louisiana, and they don't have houses to come home to. I am here to tell you, that while they may not have houses, they do have a home. We will do the best we can, and General Landreneau is well aware of the situation with his men and women on their way back from Iraq to hold their families tight.

We must learn from this experience. If we do not, we will fail again.

I've learned more in two weeks than I could ever have hoped to learn. I'm going to continue to learn, and I ask the Senators to open their hearts and minds and learn. We don't ever want this to happen to any other city or any other place in this country for as long as we're on this earth.

It is not true that Louisiana was not prepared. Surely we could have done a better job in every case, but our evacuation plan -- and I want to give credit to the Governor of Mississippi and the Governor of Louisiana -- Haley Barbour and Kathleen Blanco, who have been planning since Hurricane Ivan struck a year ago where everyone

got stuck on the interstates and the back roads. Those two governors worked out a plan because we share a highway. We don't have a Louisiana highway that goes north and a Mississippi highway. We share our highways, and those governors made a plan to get everybody out, and it worked as well as something like that can work. We had two million people approximately to evacuate in about two days. We got a lot of people out.

But when the storm hit and the levees broke, our calls went unanswered. In years past, our bills have languished here on the calendar. Money we requested before has been postponed year after year, year after year, year after year. I don't even want to talk to my colleagues about coastal erosion. They've heard it from me so many times and from everybody in the Louisiana delegation. They can give that speech better than I can.

But I'll tell you one thing about our federal government. Our federal government, whether it was FEMA or this administration or former administrations or us, gambled that the predictions that countless experts voiced time and time again were mere rhetoric. They gambled that no one would notice if Louisiana's critical and vital role in our national economy was threatened.

And Washington rolled the dice and Louisiana lost.

I cannot stand here today and tell you that if all the money we had asked for, if it would have kept the levees up, but I can tell you that it would have given us more protection than we had.

Nor can I say with certainty that full funding for restoring our coasts would have protected those who perished in St. Bernard or in Jefferson or Washington parish or the counties in Mississippi and Alabama. But I can assure you that we would have had at least had a fighting chance. And I intend to find out just how much of a fighting chance we would have had.

And I intend to find out why the federal response, particularly the response of FEMA, was so incompetent and insulting to the people of our states.

Already some in Washington, are pointing fingers that something is wrong with my state and local officials, and if they would have been a little smarter, a little tougher, a little braver, maybe this could have been avoided. This hurricane was a category four. It was one of the worst storms we've seen in this century. The eye of the storm went right over Slidell, Louisiana. Waveland, Mississippi, I understand from Senators Cochran and Lott, is gone. Biloxi is quite damaged, and that's where the storm came.

I'm sorry we couldn't do anything about that, but I want you to know, the people of our states have survived storms before. That was not what put us under. It was the levee systems that broke in New Orleans, a city that invented the gravity pump. A city that helped the Dutch secure the Netherlands and sent our engineering to Venice to keep that city floating. We invented those pumps in south Louisiana! We know about pumps. Harry Reid's seen them himself.

We know that the head of the National Hurricane Center said that he briefed the President of the United States on the threat of Katrina in a video conference call the day before she hit land.

We know the President said -- quote -- "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees." Everybody anticipated the breach of the levee, Mr. President, including computer simulations in which this administration participated. Even the clay

figurine, Mr. Bill, from Saturday Night Live anticipated the breach. His creator, a friend of mine, has used him in public service announcements for over two years, saying this will be the effect if this happens. How can it be that Mr. Bill was better informed than Mr. Bush?

We know the Secretary of Homeland Security pronounced himself -- quote -- "extremely pleased with the response of every element of the federal government," even as the cable news networks were broadcasting images telling how he was so tragically wrong.

We know that FEMA was unaware that 20,000 Americans were stranded at the convention center without food, without water, without security, without clothes, without buses, without toilets and with no way out, and I had to stand there and listen to the news media say these people were lawless. These were mothers and fathers trying to find water for their kids. I might have been a little upset under the circumstances myself.

We know, Mr. President, that someone has to be accountable. Let me be the first to take any blame that is to be assigned.

I will not allow my local officials to be made into scapegoats for others. I will not allow carping from those who were not there to diminish my Governor, my Lieutenant Governor, who happens to be my brother, who spent three days in a rescue boat, despite the pleas of his own wife, his sister, his mother and father, not to go. He went anyway, and he lifted both the living and the dead out with his own hands.

Within 24 hours of the storm hitting the Gulf Coast, Senator Frist called and Senator Reid called. I appreciate so much that they were right there. I tried to reach Thad Cochran, he tried to reach me. I tried to reach Trent Lott. And David Vitter and I were together the whole time, but we couldn't get through on our cell phones. I know they called, and I thank them very much.

The record for rebuilding costs will be staggering. But it will pale in comparison to the staggering incompetence of this national government who is responsible.

Black people suffered, white people suffered, poor people suffered and rich people suffered. The whole city is under water on the East Bank. The wealthy neighborhoods have ten feet of water, and the poor neighborhoods have ten feet of water. Water does not know boundaries. It doesn't know demographics. It doesn't know Democrat or Republican. It doesn't know to stop at rich neighborhoods. It doesn't know just to go to poor neighborhoods. It goes everywhere. And there are wealthy people who are desperate. They don't know how to restart their businesses and keep their employees paid. They have no idea where to put their businesses. Do they leave the state? Do they go to Atlanta? Do they come back? What do they do with their wife and children? Do they take them and put them to school in Atlanta, or do they set their businesses up on the highest ground they can find?

The poor people are very disoriented. They have a hard time normally and they're having a real hard time now.

I want to say a special word of thanks personally to Ted Koppel for the beautiful piece he did last night, because I haven't been able to watch much television myself, but I got to see his piece. And we need journalists like that. I kept thinking, where's Walter Cronkite, and all I had is Geraldo Rivera.

I want to personally thank my family, my parents, my children, who evacuated with me that morning.

And the final word is this to the president: Mr. President, we need you. We need your help. The last time I shook the President's hand he looked at me and he said, "Senator, I appreciate your passion."

And I said, "Thank you, Mr. President, because passion is what we need."

He said, "I'm sorry you lost your childhood home. I know that's upsetting to you."

I want to be clear for the record in that piece that you all saw with me with George Stephanopoulos. I was not crying in anguish because the home that I walked out of with my children was gone. I knew it would be gone when I left. It was an anguished cry of plea to the only person that I thought could hear, and that was God himself, and I know he has heard, because the people of my state have cried out to him for now over a week and a half. But as he gives us the grace and the wisdom to do our job, I hope we can do it well because there are hundreds of thousands of families that are depending on us to do our best work.

Today we're going to rebuild New Orleans and the coasts of Mississippi and Alabama. Because America needs New Orleans right where it is, as well as the parishes of St. Bernard, St. Tammany, Orleans, Jefferson; and Plaquemines, and Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties in Mississippi; and Baldwin and Mobile counties in Alabama.

The Gulf Coast region of our nation is simply too important to be left for dead. One of the founding geniuses of our freedom, Thomas Jefferson, understood that. 200 years ago he purchased Louisiana - then it stretched from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains. And that purchase put us on the road to greatness, from sea to shining sea.

It is an energy coast. It was put there for a reason. We did not go there to sunbathe. We went there to set up the Mississippi river, to tame that river, to create channels for this country to grow and prosper. The Higgins boats that saved us from World War II were built in New Orleans. Forty-three thousand people built those boats and headed them out to Normandy. We're going to rebuild our shipping industry. We're going to rebuild our maritime industry, and we are going to rebuild this great Gulf Coast of the United States.

Thank you.