“Who’s in charge of security in New Orleans?” I asked.

My question silenced the raucous discussion in the Air Force One conference room on Friday, September 2, 2005. “The governor is in charge,” Mayor Ray Nagin said, pointing across the dark wood table at Governor Kathleen Blanco.

Every head pivoted in her direction. The Louisiana governor froze. She looked agitated and exhausted. “I think it’s the mayor,” she said non-committally.

Four days had passed since Hurricane Katrina smashed into the Gulf Coast. Winds above 120 miles per hour had flattened the Mississippi coastline and driven a wall of water through the levees of New Orleans. Eighty percent of the city, home to more than 450,000 people, had flooded. Reports of looting and violence filled the news.

By law, state and local authorities lead the response to natural disasters, with the federal government playing a supporting role. That approach had worked during the eight hurricanes, nine tropical storms, and more than two hundred tornadoes, floods, wildfires, and other emergencies we had faced since 2001. State and local first responders were in command of the Katrina response in Alabama and Mississippi, where I had visited earlier in the day. But after four days of chaos, it was clear the authorities in Louisiana could not lead.

The initial plan had been for me to land at the New Orleans airport, pick up Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin, and survey the damage on an aerial tour. But on the Marine One flight from Mississippi, we received word that the governor, mayor, and a Louisiana congressional delegation were demanding a private meeting on Air Force One first.

The tone started out tense and got worse. The governor and mayor bickered. Everyone blasted the Federal Emergency Management Agency for failing to meet their needs. Congressman Bobby Jindal pointed out that FEMA had asked people to email their requests, despite the lack of electricity in the city. I shook my head. “We’ll fix it,” I said, looking at FEMA Director Mike Brown. Senator Mary Landrieu interrupted with unproductive emotional outbursts. “Would you please be quiet?” I had to say to her at one point.

I asked to speak to Governor Blanco privately. We walked out of the conference room, through a narrow passageway, and into the small cabin at the front tip of Air Force One. I told her it was clear the state and local response forces had been overwhelmed. “Governor,” I pressed, “you need to authorize the federal government to take charge of the response.”

She told me she needed twenty-four hours to think it over. “We don’t have twenty-four hours,” I snapped. “We’ve waited too long already.”

The governor refused to give an answer.

Next I asked to meet privately with Mayor Nagin. He had spent four days since Katrina holed up in a downtown hotel. He hadn’t bathed or eaten a hot meal until he used my shower and ate breakfast on Air Force One. In a radio interview the previous evening, he had vented his frustrations with the federal government. “Get off your asses and do something,” he said, “and let’s fix the biggest goddamn crisis in the history of this country.” Then he broke down in tears. When I met him on the plane, Ray whispered an apology for his outburst and explained that he was exhausted.

I asked the mayor what he thought about federalizing the response. He supported it. “Nobody’s in charge,” he said. “We need a clear chain of command.” But only the governor could request that the federal government assume control of the emergency.

By the time the damage had been tallied, Hurricane Katrina ranked as the costliest natural disaster in American history. In truth, it was not
a single disaster, but three—a storm that wiped away miles of the Gulf Coast, a flood caused by breaches in the New Orleans levees, and an outbreak of violence and lawlessness in the city.

On one level, the tragedy showed the helplessness of man against the fury of nature. Katrina was an enormously powerful hurricane that struck a part of the country that lies largely below sea level. Even a flawless response would not have prevented catastrophic damage.

The response was not only flawed but, as I said at the time, unacceptable. While there were inspiring acts of selflessness and heroism during and after the storm, Katrina conjures impressions of disorder, incompetence, and the sense that government let down its citizens. Serious mistakes came at all levels, from the failure to order a timely evacuation of New Orleans to the disintegration of local security forces to the dreadful communications and coordination. As the leader of the federal government, I should have recognized the deficiencies sooner and intervened faster. I prided myself on my ability to make crisp and effective decisions. Yet in the days after Katrina, that didn't happen. The problem was not that I made the wrong decisions. It was that I took too long to decide.

I made an additional mistake by failing to adequately communicate my concern for the victims of Katrina. This was a problem of perception, not reality. My heart broke at the sight of helpless people trapped on their rooftops waiting to be rescued. I was outraged by the fact that the most powerful country in the world could not deliver water to mothers holding their dehydrated babies under the baking sun. In my thirteen visits to New Orleans after the storm, I conveyed my sincere sympathy for the suffering and my determination to help residents rebuild. Yet many of our citizens, particularly in the African American community, came away convinced their president didn't care about them.

Just as Katrina was more than a hurricane, its impact was more than physical destruction. It eroded citizens' trust in their government. It exacerbated divisions in our society and politics. And it cast a cloud over my second term.

Soon after the storm, many made up their minds about what had happened and who was responsible. Now that time has passed and passions have cooled, our country can make a sober assessment of the causes of the devastation, the successes and failures of the response, and, most important, the lessons to be learned.

I replayed the scene in my mind: The storm damage was extensive. The governor bashed Washington for being slow and bureaucratic. The media fixed blame on the White House. Politicians claimed the federal government was out of touch.

The year was 1992, and I watched as Dad endured our family's first bout with natural disaster politics. With the presidential election approaching, Hurricane Andrew had pounded the Florida coast. Governor Lawton Chiles, a Democrat, and Bill Clinton's campaign exploited the devastation to claim the federal government had not performed. Their criticism was unfair. Dad had ordered a swift response to the storm. He sent Andy Card, then transportation secretary, to live in Florida to oversee the recovery. But once the public had formed a perception that Dad was disengaged, it was hard to reverse it.

As governor of Texas, I managed numerous natural disasters, from fires in Parker County to floods in the Hill Country and Houston to a tornado that tore through the small city of Jarrell. There was never any doubt about the division of labor. Under the Stafford Act, passed by Congress in 1988, state and local officials were responsible for leading the initial response. The federal government arrived later, at the state's request.

As president, I became responsible for the other side of the state-federal partnership. I appointed Joe Allbaugh, my chief of staff in the governor's office, to lead FEMA. After 9/11, he sent twenty-five search-and-rescue teams to New York and the Pentagon, the largest such deployment in history. Joe worked effectively with Rudy Giuliani and George Pataki to remove debris, support local fire and police, and deliver billions of dollars to help New York recover.

When I worked with Congress to reorganize the government in 2002, FEMA, an independent agency since 1979, became part of the new Department of Homeland Security. I thought it was logical for officials...
tasked with preventing a terrorist attack to work alongside those preparing to respond. But the move meant a loss of autonomy for FEMA. I don’t know if it was the reorganization or his desire to move to the private sector, but Joe Allbaugh decided to leave. He recommended his deputy, Michael Brown, to succeed him. I took his advice.

The first major test of the new emergency response structure came during the 2004 hurricane season. In the space of six weeks, four major hurricanes—Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne—battered Florida. It was the first time in almost 120 years that one state had faced that many storms. I made four trips to the state, where I visited residents who had lost their homes in Pensacola, citrus growers in Lake Wales whose crops had been wiped out, and relief workers delivering supplies in Port St. Lucie.

Overall, the four hurricanes caused more than $20 billion in damages, knocked out power to more than 2.3 million residents, and took 128 lives. The toll was immense, yet the loss of life could have been far worse. Florida’s governor was a strong chief executive who understood the need for state and local officials to take the lead in disaster response. My brother Jeb declared a state of emergency, established clear lines of communication, and made specific requests to the federal government.

FEMA responded by deploying 11,000 workers across Florida and other affected states, the largest operation in its history. In Florida, FEMA sent 14 million meals, 10.8 million gallons of water, and nearly 163 million pounds of ice. The agency then helped deliver $21 billion in emergency relief to suffering people. Mike Brown earned my trust with his performance, and I wasn’t the only one. A tough critic, Jeb later told me Mike had done a fine job.

The effective management of the 2004 hurricanes saved lives and helped victims to rebuild. Having tested our model against four consecutive major hurricanes, we were convinced we could handle anything.

On Tuesday, August 23, 2005, the National Weather Service detected a storm forming over the Bahamas. Initially dubbed Tropical Depression Twelve, it strengthened into a tropical storm and earned a name, Katrina.

By August 25, Katrina was a Category One hurricane headed toward South Florida. At 6:30 p.m., Katrina ripped off rooftops with eighty-mile-per-hour winds and dropped more than a foot of rain. Despite orders to evacuate, some people unwisely chose to ride out the storm. Fourteen people lost their lives.

I received regular updates in Crawford, where Laura and I spent much of August. The press called my time away from Washington a vacation. Not exactly. I received my daily intelligence briefings at the secure trailer across the street, checked in regularly with advisers, and used the ranch as a base for meetings and travel. The responsibilities of the presidency followed me wherever I went. We had just moved the West Wing twelve hundred miles farther west.

After pummeling South Florida, Katrina charged across the Gulf of Mexico toward Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. My senior aide in Crawford, Deputy Chief of Staff Joe Hagin, kept me updated on the developments. By Saturday, August 27, Katrina was a Category Three. On Sunday, it strengthened into a Category Four and then a Category Five, the most dangerous rating. The National Hurricane Center had also revised its projection of the storm’s direction. As of Saturday morning, Katrina was headed for New Orleans.

I knew the city well. New Orleans was about a six-hour drive from Houston, and I had made the trek often in my younger days. I loved the food, culture, and vibrant people of The Big Easy. I was also aware of the city’s lurking fear. The locals called it The Big One, the pray-it-never-happens storm that could drown their city.

Anyone who has visited New Orleans can understand their anxiety; The low-lying city is shaped like a crescent bowl. A system of levees and canals—the rim of the bowl—provides the city’s primary flood protection. Built by the Army Corps of Engineers, the levees had a troubled history. When I was governor, I read John Barry’s fascinating book Rising Tide, about the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. After huge rains drove up the height of the river, New Orleans officials persuaded the Louisiana governor to dynamite a levee to the south in hopes of sparing the city. The move devastated two rural parishes, Plaquemines and St. Bernard. Over time, the levees were strengthened, especially after Hurricane Betsy hit in 1965. They held through seven hurricanes over the next forty years.
One lesson of the 2004 Florida hurricanes was that solid preparation before a storm is essential to a successful response. When we learned that Katrina was headed for New Orleans, I put FEMA on its highest level of alert. The government prestaged more than 3.7 million liters of water, 4.6 million pounds of ice, 1.86 million meals ready to eat, and 33 medical teams. Taken together, this marked the largest prepositioning of relief supplies in FEMA’s history.

The military moved assets into place as well. Admiral Tim Keating—the head of the new Northern Command, which we created after 9/11 to protect the homeland—deployed disaster-response teams to the Gulf Coast. The Coast Guard put its choppers on alert. More than five thousand National Guard personnel in the affected states stood ready. Guard forces from other states were prepared to answer calls for assistance. Contrary to later claims, there was never a shortage of Guardsmen available, either because of Iraq or any other reason.

All of this federal activity was intended to support state and local officials. My team, led by Secretary of Homeland Security Mike Chertoff—a brilliant lawyer and decent man who had resigned his lifetime appointment as a federal judge to take the job—stayed in close touch with the governors of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. Governor Blanco requested an emergency declaration allowing Louisiana to use federal resources to pay for and support her state’s disaster-response preparations. Only once in recent history—before Hurricane Floyd in 1999—had a president issued an emergency declaration before a storm made landfall. I signed it Saturday night, along with similar declarations for Mississippi and Alabama the next day.

On Sunday morning, the National Hurricane Center described Katrina as "not only extremely intense but also exceptionally large." Mayor Nagin had given instructions for a voluntary evacuation. I knew New Orleans well enough to understand that wouldn’t work. People had heard apocalyptic storm warnings for years. Some used them as an excuse to party on Bourbon Street in defiance of the hurricane gods. Others didn’t have the means to evacuate. The evacuation needed to be mandatory, with special arrangements for people who needed help, such as buses to transport those without cars—a step the city never took, leading to the heart-breaking scene of empty New Orleans school buses submerged in an abandoned parking lot.

I called Governor Blanco at 9:14 a.m.

“What’s going on in New Orleans?” I asked. “Has Nagin given the mandatory order?”

She said he had not, despite the dire warnings they had received the previous night from Max Mayfield, the director of the National Hurricane Center. Max later said it was only the second time in his thirty-six-year career he had been anxious enough to call elected officials personally.

“The mayor’s got to order people to leave. That’s the only way they’ll listen,” I told Governor Blanco. “Call him and tell him. My people tell me this is going to be a terrible storm.”

“They’re not going to be able to get everyone out in time,” she said. Unfortunately, I knew she was right. But it was better to start now than wait any longer.

“What else do you need from the federal government?” I asked the governor.

She assured me she had been working closely with my team and had what she needed.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes, Mr. President, we’ve got it under control,” she said.

“Okay, hang in there,” I said, “and call Ray and get him to evacuate, now.”

An hour later, Mayor Nagin announced the first mandatory evacuation in New Orleans history. “This is a threat that we’ve never faced before,” he said. Katrina’s landfall was less than twenty-four hours away.

I also called Governor Haley Barbour of Mississippi, Governor Bob Riley of Alabama, and my brother Jeb in Florida. I told them they could count on strong support from the federal government.

A little before 11:00 a.m., I joined a FEMA videoconference with officials from the states in Katrina’s projected path. It was rare for a president to attend a staff-level briefing like this. I saw some surprised looks on the screen when my face appeared. But I wanted to convey to the entire government how seriously I took this storm.
There was a discussion of potential flooding along the coastline and the possibility that water might spill over the top of the New Orleans levees. But no one predicted the levees would break—a different and much more severe problem than overtopping.

"The current track and forecast we have now suggests that there will be minimal flooding in the city of New Orleans itself," Max Mayfield said. "But we've always said that the storm surge model is only accurate within about twenty percent."

A few minutes later, I stepped out in front of the cameras. "Hurricane Katrina is now designated a Category Five hurricane," I said. "We cannot stress enough the danger this hurricane poses to Gulf Coast communities. I urge all citizens to put their own safety and the safety of their families first by moving to safe ground. Please listen carefully to instructions provided by state and local officials."

At 6:10 a.m. Central Time on Monday, August 29, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana. The eye of the storm passed over Plaquemines Parish, at the far southeastern tip of the state, and plowed north across the Louisiana-Mississippi border, about forty miles east of New Orleans. "The worst weather in this system is indeed going to bypass downtown New Orleans and go to our east," NBC News's Brian Williams reported. He said New Orleans was experiencing "the best of the worst-case scenarios." Several journalists on the scene said the city had "dodged a bullet." Governor Blanco confirmed that while some water had spilled over the tops of the levees, they had detected no breaches. My staff and I went to bed thinking the levees had held.

In Mississippi, there was no uncertainty about the damage. Eighty miles of coastline had been obliterated. Downtown Gulfport sat under ten feet of water. Casinos, barges, and bridges were ruined. US-90, a major highway running across southern Mississippi, was shut down. In the city of Waveland, 95 percent of structures were severely damaged or destroyed.

Early Tuesday morning, Day Two of Katrina, I learned that the first reports were wrong. The levees in New Orleans had been breached. Water from Lake Pontchartrain began to pour into the city, filling the bowl. An estimated 80 to 90 percent of residents had evacuated, but tens of thousands had not, including many of the poor and vulnerable in low-lying areas like the Lower Ninth Ward.

While it was important to get relief supplies into the city, our first priority had to be saving lives. Coast Guard helicopters took the lead in the effort. As pilots dodged power lines and trees, rescuers rappelled down dangling ropes in midair to pluck residents from rooftops. When I heard critics say the federal response to Katrina was slow, I thought about those brave Coast Guardsmen who mounted one of the most rapid and effective rescue operations in American history.

"This morning our hearts and prayers are with our fellow citizens along the Gulf Coast who have suffered so much from Hurricane Katrina," I said in San Diego, where I had come to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of America's victory in the Pacific theater of World War II. "... The good folks in Louisiana and Mississippi and Alabama and other affected areas are going to need the help and compassion and prayers of our fellow citizens."

After the speech, I decided to head back to Crawford, pack up for the capital, and return to Washington on Wednesday morning. Joe Hagin had reached out to Governors Blanco and Barbour to discuss the possibility of a visit. Both felt it was too early. A presidential arrival would have required dozens of law enforcement officials to provide security at the airport, an ambulance and medical personnel on standby, and numerous other resources. Neither governor wanted to divert rescue assets to prepare for my arrival. I agreed.

Aboard Air Force One, I was told that our flight path would take us over some of the areas hit by Katrina. We could fly low over the Gulf Coast to give me a closer look. If I wasn't going to land in the disaster zone, I figured the next best thing was to get a sense of the devastation from above.

What I saw took my breath away. New Orleans was almost totally submerged. In some neighborhoods, all I could see were rooftops peeking out from the water. The Superdome roof had peeled off. The I-10
bridge connecting New Orleans with Slidell had collapsed into Lake Pontchartrain. Cars floated down rivers that used to be streets. The landscape looked like something out of a horror movie.

The devastation in Mississippi was even more brutal. For miles and miles along the shore, every standing structure had been reduced to timber. Pine trees were strewn across the coast like matchsticks. Huge casinos that sat on barges in the Gulf were destroyed and washed ashore in pieces. The bridge over Bay St. Louis was gone. This must be what it looks like when a nuclear bomb explodes, I thought.

Staring out the window, all I could think about was what the people on the ground were enduring. What goes through your mind when your entire community is destroyed? Do you take a mental inventory of everything you left behind? I worried most about the people stranded. I imagined the desperation they must be feeling as they scrambled to their rooftops to outrace the rising water. I said a silent prayer for their safety.

At some point, our press team ushered photographers into the cabin. I barely noticed them at the time; I couldn’t take my eyes off the devastation below. But when the pictures were released, I realized I had made a serious mistake. The photo of me hovering over the damage suggested I was detached from the suffering on the ground. That wasn’t how I felt. But once the public impression was formed, I couldn’t change it. For all my efforts to avoid the perception problem Dad faced during Hurricane Andrew, I ended up repeating it.

I’ve often reflected on what I should have done differently that day. I believe the decision not to land in New Orleans was correct. Emergency responders would have been called away from the rescue efforts, and that would have been wrong. A better option would have been to stop at the airport in Baton Rouge, the state capital. Eighty miles north of the flood zone, I could have strategized with the governor and assured Katrina victims that their country stood with them.

Landing in Baton Rouge would not have saved any lives. Its benefit would have been good public relations. But public relations matter when you are president, particularly when people are hurting. When Hurricane Betsy devastated New Orleans in 1965, Lyndon Johnson flew in from Washington to visit late at night. He made his way to a shelter in the

Ninth Ward by flashlight. “This is your president!” he called out when he arrived in the dark and crowded space. “I’m here to help you!” Unfortunately, I did not follow his example.

When I landed at the White House Wednesday afternoon, I convened an emergency meeting in the Cabinet Room to discuss the response. “Every agency needs to step forward,” I told the team. “Look at your resources and find a way to do more.”

I gave a statement in the Rose Garden outlining the federal response. The Transportation Department had sent trucks to deliver supplies. Health and Human Services provided medical teams and mortuary units. Energy opened the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to protect against a major spike in gasoline prices. The Defense Department deployed the USS Bataan to conduct search-and-rescue and the USNS Comfort, a hospital ship, to provide medical care. FEMA surged supplies into the disaster region and set up shelters for evacuees. We later learned there were major problems with organization and tracking, leading many deliveries to be delayed or never completed.

These logistical measures were necessary, but they seemed inadequate compared to the images of desperation Americans saw on their television screens. There were victims begging for water, families stranded on overpasses, and people standing on rooftops holding signs that read “Help Me!” More than one person interviewed said the same thing: “I can’t believe this is happening in the United States of America.”

On top of the hurricane and flood, we were now facing the third disaster: chaos and violence in New Orleans. Looters smashed windows to steal guns, clothing, and jewelry. Helicopters couldn’t land because of gunfire. Downtown buildings were aflame.

The police force was powerless to restore order. While many officers carried out their duty honorably, some abandoned their posts to deal with their own personal emergencies. Others joined the criminals. I was enraged to see footage of police officers walking out of a store carrying big-screen TVs. I felt like I was watching a reverse of what had happened
four years earlier in Manhattan. Instead of charging into burning build­
ings to save lives, some first responders in New Orleans were breaking into stores to steal electronics.

A horrific scene was developing at the Superdome, where tens of thousands of people had gathered to take shelter. After three days, the roof was leaking, the air-conditioning had stopped working, and sanitation facilities had broken down. The media issued reports of sadistic behavior, including rape and murder. Between the chaos and the poor communications, the government never knew for sure what was happen­
ing. It took us several days to learn that thousands of other people had gathered with no food or water at the New Orleans Convention Center.

With the police unable to stop the lawlessness, the only solution was a stronger troop presence. As of Wednesday afternoon, New Orleans had about four thousand National Guard forces, with reinforcements on the way. But the Guard, under the command of the governor, seemed over­
whelmed. One option was to deploy active-duty troops and put both them and Guard forces in Louisiana under the unified command of the federal government.

Forces from the 82nd Airborne Division awaited orders to deploy, and I was prepared to give them. But we had a problem. The Posse Co­mmitatus Act of 1878 prohibited active-duty military from conducting law enforcement within the United States. Don Rumsfeld, speaking for many in the military, opposed sending the 82nd Airborne.

There was one exception to Posse Comitatus. If I declared New Orleans to be in a state of insurrection, I could deploy federal troops equipped with full law enforcement powers. The last time the Insur­
rection Act had been invoked was 1992, when Dad sent the military to suppress the Los Angeles riots. In that case, Governor Pete Wilson of California had requested the federal deployment. The Insurrection Act could be invoked over a governor's objections. In the most famous ex­
ample, President Dwight Eisenhower defied Governor Orval Faubus by deploying the 101st Airborne to enforce the Supreme Court's decision desegregating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

On Thursday morning, Day Four, Andy Card formally raised the prospect of federalizing the response with Governor Blanco and her team. The governor did not want to give up authority to the federal gov­
ernment. That left me in a tough position. If I invoked the Insurrection Act against her wishes, the world would see a male Republican president usurping the authority of a female Democratic governor by declaring an insurrection in a largely African American city. That would arouse controversy anywhere. To do so in the Deep South, where there had been centuries of states' rights tension, could unleash holy hell. I had to per­
suade the governor to change her mind. I decided to make my case in person the next day.

I was as frustrated as I had been at any point in my presidency. All my instincts told me we needed to get federal troops into New Orleans to stop the violence and speed the recovery. But I was stuck with a resistant governor, a reluctant Pentagon, and an antiquated law. I wanted to over­
rule them all. But at the time, I worried that the consequence could be a constitutional crisis, and possibly a political insurrection as well.

On Friday morning, Day Five, I convened a seven o'clock meeting in the Situation Room with the government-wide Katrina response team. “I know you all are trying hard as you can,” I said. “But it’s not cutting it. We have to establish order in New Orleans as soon as possible. Having this situation spiral out of control is unacceptable.”

As Mike Chertoff and I walked out to Marine One for the trip to the Gulf Coast, I delivered the same message to the press pool. “The results are not acceptable,” I said. “I’m headed down there right now.”

We took Air Force One into Mobile, Alabama, where I was met by Governors Bob Riley and Haley Barbour. Both were impressive leaders who had carried out effective evacuation plans, worked closely with local authorities, and launched recovery operations rapidly.

I asked Bob and Haley if they were getting the federal support they needed. Both told me they were. “That Mike Brown is doing a heck of a job,” Bob said. I knew Mike was under pressure, and I wanted to boost his morale. When I spoke to the press a few minutes later, I repeated the praise.

“Brownie,” I said, “you’re doing a heck of a job.”

I never imagined those words would become an infamous entry in the political lexicon. As complaints about Mike Brown’s performance
mounted, especially in New Orleans, critics turned my words of encour­
agement into a club to bludgeon me.

Our next stop was Biloxi, Mississippi. I had flown over the area two
days earlier, but nothing prepared me for the destruction I witnessed on
the ground. I walked through a wasteland. There were uprooted trees
and debris strewn everywhere. Virtually no structures were standing.
One man was sitting on a block of concrete, with two smaller slabs in
front. I realized it was the foundation of a house. The two slabs used to be
his front steps. Nearby was a mangled appliance that looked like it might
have been his dishwasher.

I sat next to him and asked how he was holding up. I expected him to
tell me that everything he owned had been ruined. Instead he said, “I’m
doing fine... I’m alive, and my mother is alive.”

I was struck by his spirit and sense of perspective. I found the same
outlook in many others. One of the most impressive people I met was
Mayor A.J. Holloway of Biloxi. “All the Way Holloway” had been a run­
ning back for the 1960 National Champion Ole Miss football team.
While Katrina destroyed more than six thousand homes and businesses
in Biloxi, there wasn’t an ounce of self-pity in the mayor. He resolved to
rebuild the city better than before. Governor Barbour put the spirit of the
state into words when he said people were “hitching up their britches and
rebuilding Mississippi.”

Our final stop was New Orleans, where I made my appeal to Governor
Blanco on Air Force One. Despite my repeated urging, she made clear
she wasn’t going to give me an answer on federalizing the response. There
was nothing to gain by pushing her harder; the governor was dug in.

After a helicopter tour of the flooded city, we touched down at a Coast
Guard station near the breached Seventeenth Street levee. On one side of
the levee sat the town of Metairie, relatively dry. On the other was Or­
leans Parish, deep underwater for as far as I could see. I stared into the
three-hundred-foot breach, a gateway for a destructive cascade of water.
Unlike 1927, no levee had been dynamited in 2005. But the horrific im­
 pact on the people in the flood’s path was the same.

When I got back to the White House that evening, Andy Card met
me in the Oval Office. He and White House Counsel Harriet Miers had
spent the day—and the previous night—working with the lawyers and the
Pentagon on a way to get federal troops into Louisiana. They had come
up with an interesting proposal: A three-star general would command
all military forces in Louisiana. On matters concerning the active-duty
forces, he would report to me. On matters concerning the Guard, he
would report to Governor Blanco. This dual-hat structure gave the federal
government what we needed—a clear chain of command and active-duty
troops to secure the city—while accommodating the governor’s concerns.
Andy faxed her a letter outlining the arrangement just before midnight.

The next morning, Day Six, a call from Baton Rouge came in to the
White House. The governor had declined.

I was exasperated. I had spent three days trying to persuade the
governor. It had been a waste of time. At 10:00 a.m., I stepped into the
Rose Garden to announce the deployment of more than seven thousand
active-duty troops to New Orleans—without law enforcement powers. I
was anxious about the situation. If they got caught in a crossfire, it would
be my fault. But I decided that sending troops with diminished authority
was better than not sending them at all.

The commander of Joint Task Force Katrina was a six-foot-two, no-
nonsense general known as the Ragin’ Cajun. A descendant of Creole
ancestors from southern Louisiana, General Russ Honoré had lived
through many hurricanes and knew the people of the Gulf Coast well.

General Honoré brought exactly what the situation required: com­
mon sense, good communication skills, and an ability to make decisions.
He quickly earned the trust of elected officials, National Guard com­
mmanders, and local police chiefs. When a unit of Guard and police forces
tried to enter the Convention Center to make a food delivery with their
guns drawn, Honoré was caught on camera yelling, “Weapons down,
damn it!” The general came up with a perfect motto to describe his ap­
proach: “Don’t get stuck on stupid.”

While we couldn’t federalize the response by law, General Honoré
effectively did so with his strong will and force of personality. Mayor
Nagin summed him up as a “John Wayne dude... who came off the
doggone chopper, and he started cussing and people started moving.”
Had I known he could be so effective without the authority I assumed he needed, I would have cut off the legal debate and sent troops in without law enforcement powers several days sooner.

On Monday, September 5, Day Eight, I made my second trip to the Gulf Coast. General Honoré met me in Baton Rouge and briefed me on the response. Search-and-rescue operations were almost complete. The Superdome and Convention Center had been evacuated. Water was being pumped out of the city. Most important, our troops had restored order without firing a shot.

Laura and I visited an evacuee center run by a church called the Bethany World Prayer Center. Hundreds of people, including many from the Superdome, were spread across a gymnasium floor on mats. Most looked dazed and exhausted. One girl cried as she said, “I can't find my mother.” My friend T.D. Jakes, a Dallas pastor who had joined us for the visit, prayed for their comfort and well-being. T.D. is the kind of man who puts his faith into action. He told me members of his church had welcomed twenty victims of Katrina into their homes.

There were similar examples of compassion across the Gulf Coast. For all the depressing aspects of the Katrina aftermath, these stories stand out as shining examples of the American character. Southern Baptists set up a mobile kitchen to feed tens of thousands of hungry people. New York City firefighters drove down in a truck the New Orleans Fire Department had loaned them after 9/11. Volunteers from the American Red Cross and Salvation Army set up twenty-four-hour-a-day centers to help disaster victims get assistance. Every state in the country took in evacuees. The city of Houston alone welcomed two hundred fifty thousand. The evacuation went down as the largest movement of Americans since the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

To lead private-sector fundraising for Katrina victims, I had tapped an unlikely duo: Dad and Bill Clinton. Katrina was actually their encore performance. After a massive tsunami struck Southeast Asia in December 2004, they had teamed up at my request and raised more than $1 billion for the victims. As they traveled the world together, the former presidents—41 and 42, as I called them—developed a bond. Dad rose above the disappointment of 1992 and embraced his former rival. I appreciated that Bill treated Dad with deference and respect, and I grew to like him. When I asked them to lead another fundraising drive after Katrina, they agreed immediately. Mother called me afterward. “I see you’ve reunited your father and your stepbrother,” she quipped.

Unfortunately, the spirit of generosity did not carry over to everyone. At an NBC telethon to raise money for Katrina victims, rapper Kanye West told a prime time TV audience, “George Bush doesn't care about black people.” Jesse Jackson later compared the New Orleans Convention Center to the “hull of a slave ship.” A member of the Congresional Black Caucus claimed that if the storm victims had been “white, middle-class Americans” they would have received more help.

Five years later, I can barely write those words without feeling disgusted. I am deeply insulted by the suggestion that we allowed American citizens to suffer because they were black. As I told the press at the time, “The storm didn’t discriminate, and neither will the recovery effort. When those Coast Guard choppers, many of whom were first on the scene, were pulling people off roofs, they didn’t check the color of a person’s skin.”

The more I thought about it, the angrier I felt. I was raised to believe that racism was one of the greatest evils in society. I admired Dad’s courage when he defied near-universal opposition from his constituents to vote for the Open Housing Bill of 1968. I was proud to have earned more black votes than any Republican governor in Texas history. I had appointed African Americans to top government positions, including the first black woman national security adviser and the first two black secretaries of state. It broke my heart to see minority children shuffled through the school system, so I had based my signature domestic policy initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act, on ending the soft bigotry of low expectations. I had launched a $15 billion program to combat HIV/AIDS in Africa. As part of the response to Katrina, my administration worked with Congress to provide historically black colleges and universities in the Gulf Coast with more than $400 million in loans to restore their campuses and renew their recruiting efforts.

I faced a lot of criticism as president. I didn’t like hearing people claim I had lied about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction or cut taxes to benefit
the rich. But the suggestion that I was a racist because of the response to Katrina represented an all-time low. I told Laura at the time that it was the worst moment of my presidency. I feel the same way today.

During Week Two of the Katrina response, Mike Chertoff recommended that we make a personnel change. State and local officials had been complaining about the slowness of FEMA, and Chertoff told me he had lost confidence in Director Mike Brown. He felt the FEMA director had frozen under the pressure and become insubordinate. I accepted Chertoff's recommendation to bring in Vice Admiral Thad Allen—the chief of staff of the Coast Guard who had done a brilliant job leading the search-and-rescue efforts—as the principal federal officer coordinating operations in the Gulf Coast.

On Sunday of that week, Day Fourteen, I made my third visit to the Gulf Coast. I choppered onto the USS Iwo Jima, which had docked in the Mississippi River. Two years earlier, I had deployed the Iwo Jima to free Liberia from the dictator Charles Taylor. It was surreal to be standing aboard an amphibious assault ship overlooking a major American city suffering the wounds of a violent storm.

The next morning, we boarded ten-ton military trucks for a tour through New Orleans. The Secret Service was anxious. The drive was one of very few times a president had traveled through a major metropolitan city in an open-top vehicle since the Kennedy assassination in 1963. We had to dodge dangling power lines and drive through deep pools of standing water. Virtually all the houses were still abandoned. Some of their walls were spray-painted with the date they had been searched and the number of bodies discovered inside. I saw a few people wandering around in a daze. Nearby was a pack of mangy dogs scavenging for food, many with bite marks on their bodies. It was a vivid display of the survival-of-the-fittest climate that had overtaken the city.

On September 15, Day Eighteen, I returned to New Orleans to deliver a primetime address to the nation. I decided to give the speech from Jackson Square, named for General Andrew Jackson, who defended New Orleans against the British at the end of the War of 1812. The famous French Quarter landmark had suffered minimal damage during the storm.

I viewed the speech as my opportunity to explain what had gone wrong, promise to fix the problems, and lay out a vision to move the Gulf Coast and the country forward. Abandoned New Orleans was the eeriest setting from which I had ever given a speech. Except for generators, the power was still out in the city. In one of the world's most vibrant cities, the only people around were a handful of government officials and the soldiers from the 82nd Airborne.

With St. Louis Cathedral bathed in blue light behind me, I began:

Good evening. I'm speaking to you from the city of New Orleans—nearly empty, still partly under water, and waiting for life and hope to return. . .

Tonight I . . . offer this pledge of the American people: Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives. And all who question the future of the Crescent City need to know there is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again.

I laid out a series of specific commitments: to ensure victims received the financial assistance they needed; to help people move out of hotels and shelters and into longer-term housing; to devote federal assets to cleaning up debris and rebuilding roads, bridges, and schools; to provide tax incentives for the return of businesses and the hiring of local workers; and to strengthen New Orleans's levees to withstand the next big storm.

I continued:

Four years after the frightening experience of September the 11th, Americans have every right to expect a more effective response in a time of emergency. When the federal government fails to meet such an obligation, I, as president, am responsible for the problem, and for the solution. So I've ordered every Cabinet Secretary to participate in a comprehensive review of the government response to the hurricane. This government will learn the lessons of Hurricane Katrina.
I took those promises seriously. Over the coming months, I worked with Congress to secure $126 billion in rebuilding funds, by far the most for any natural disaster in American history. I decided to create a new position to ensure that one person was accountable for coordinating the rebuilding and ensuring the money was spent wisely. Thad Allen held the role at first. When I nominated him to be commandant of the Coast Guard, I asked Don Powell, a fellow Texan and former chairman of the Federal Deposit Insurance Commission, to take his place.

I told Chief of Staff Andy Card—and later Josh Bolten—that I expected regular progress reports on our initiatives in the Gulf Coast. Top government officials gathered routinely in the Roosevelt Room for detailed briefings on issues such as how many victims had received disaster benefits checks, the number of Gulf Coast schools reopened, and the cubic yardage of debris cleared.

I wanted the people of the Gulf Coast to see firsthand that I was committed to rebuilding, so I made seventeen trips between August 2005 and August 2008. Laura made twenty-four visits in all. We both came away impressed by the determination and spirit of the people we met.

In March 2006, I visited the Industrial Canal levee, which had ruptured and flooded the Lower Ninth Ward. We saw huge piles of debris and trash as we drove to the site, a reminder of how far the neighborhood still had to go. Mayor Nagin and I grabbed our hard hats, climbed to the top of the levee, and watched pile drivers pound pillars seventy feet underground—a solid foundation designed to withstand a Katrina-size storm. Nothing was more important to reassuring New Orleans’s exiled residents that it was safe to return to the city they loved.

On the second anniversary of the storm, Laura and I visited the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Charter School for Science and Technology. Two years earlier, the school had been submerged under fifteen feet of water. Thanks in large part to a determined local principal, Doris Hicks, MLK became the first school in the Lower Ninth Ward to reopen. As a former librarian, Laura had been saddened by the number of books destroyed in the storm. She started a private fundraising campaign to help New Orleans schools rebuild their collections. Over the years, her leadership and the generosity of the American people helped send tens of thousands of books to schools across the Gulf Coast.

The story in Mississippi was just as uplifting. In August 2006, I went back to Biloxi, where I visited four days after the storm. Beaches that had been covered with debris a year earlier had been returned to their shimmering white-sand beauty. Seven casinos, supporting hundreds of jobs, had reopened. Church congregations that had been separated were back together again. Few people’s lives had changed more than Lynn Patterson’s. When I met him a year earlier, he was digging cars out of the muck in a neighborhood where all the houses were gone. When I came back to Biloxi, he gave Laura and me a tour of his new home, which had been rebuilt with the help of taxpayer dollars.

In the wake of Katrina, I asked Fran Townsend—a talented former New York City prosecutor who served as my top homeland security adviser in the White House—to study how we could better respond to future disasters. Her report reaffirmed the longstanding principle that state and local officials are best positioned to lead an effective emergency response. It also recommended changes in the federal government’s approach. We devised new ways to help state and local authorities conduct early evacuations, developed backup communications systems, established a National Operations Center to distribute timely situation reports, and set up an orderly process for deploying federal resources—including active-duty troops—in cases where state and local first responders had become overwhelmed.*

The new emergency response system was tested in August 2008, when Hurricane Gustav barreled across the Gulf of Mexico toward New Orleans. I held regular videoconferences with federal, state, and local officials in the days leading up to the storm. Mike Chertoff and the new FEMA director, former Miami-Dade fire chief Dave Paulison, relocated

*In the fall of 2006, Congress amended the Insurrection Act to allow the president to deploy federal troops with law enforcement powers during natural disasters. Then, in 2008, they repealed the amendment.
to Baton Rouge to oversee preparations. Shelters were ready and well
stocked. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, the talented Republican
elected in 2007, worked closely with Mayor Nagin to order a mandatory
evacuation. "You need to be scared and you need to get your butts out of
New Orleans right now," the mayor said.

When Gustav made landfall, the first reports were that New Orleans
had dodged a direct hit. I had heard that before. This time, though, the
levees held and damages in New Orleans were minimal. A few weeks
later, Hurricane Ike smashed into Galveston, Texas. Property damage
was extensive—only Andrew and Katrina were costlier—but thanks to
good preparation at the state level, many lives were spared. For all the
devastation Katrina caused, part of the storm's lasting impact is that it
improved the federal government's ability to support state and local gov­
ernments in responding to major disasters.

Even when the neighborhoods of New Orleans are restored and the
homes of Mississippi are rebuilt, no one who endured Katrina will ever
fully recover. That is especially true for the tens of thousands who lost
their homes and possessions, and—worst of all—the families of the more
than eighteen hundred Americans who died.

In a different way, it is true of me, too. In a national catastrophe,
the easiest person to blame is the president. Katrina presented a politi­
cal opportunity that some critics exploited for years. The aftermath of
Katrina—combined with the collapse of Social Security reform and the
drumbeat of violence in Iraq—made the fall of 2005 a damaging period
in my presidency. Just a year earlier, I had won reelection with more votes
than any candidate in history. By the end of 2005, much of my political
capital was gone. With my approval ratings plummeting, many Demo­
crats—and some Republicans—concluded they would be better off op­
posing me than working together. We managed to get important things
done, including reauthorizing the AIDS initiative, fully funding our
troops, confirming Sam Alito to the Supreme Court, and responding to
the financial crisis. But the legacy of fall 2005 lingered for the rest of my
time in office.

This is not to suggest that I didn't make mistakes during Katrina.
I should have urged Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin to evacuate
New Orleans sooner. I should have come straight back to Washington
from California on Day Two or stopped in Baton Rouge on Day Three.
I should have done more to signal my sympathy for the victims and my
determination to help, the way I did in the days after 9/11.

My biggest substantive mistake was waiting too long to deploy active-
duty troops. By Day Three, it was clear that federal troops were needed to
restore order. If I had it to do over again, I would have sent the 82nd Air­
borne immediately, without law enforcement authority. I hesitated at the
time because I didn't want to leave our troops powerless to stop sniper
attacks and the other shocking acts of violence we were hearing about
on TV. We later learned these accounts were wildly overstated, the result
of overzealous correspondents under pressure to fill every second of the
twenty-four-hour cable news cycle.

Ultimately, the story of Katrina is that it was the storm of the cen­
tury. It devastated an area the size of Great Britain, produced almost nine
times more debris than any previously recorded hurricane, and killed
more people than any storm in seventy-five years. The economic toll—
three hundred thousand homes destroyed and $96 billion in property
damage—outstripped that of every previous hurricane on record.

Yet destruction and death did not have the final word for the people
of the Gulf Coast. In August 2008, I visited Gulfport, Mississippi, and
Jackson Barracks in New Orleans, the home of the Louisiana National
Guard, which had flooded during Katrina. It was striking to see how
much had changed in three years.

In Mississippi, workers had cleared forty-six million cubic yards of
storm debris, double the amount Hurricane Andrew left behind. More
than forty-three thousand residents had repaired or rebuilt their homes.
Traffic flowed over new bridges spanning Biloxi Bay and Bay St. Louis.
Tourists and employees had returned to revitalized casinos and beach­
front hotels. And in an inspiring sign, every school damaged by Katrina
had reopened.

While many predicted New Orleans would never be a major city
again, 87 percent of the population before Katrina had returned. The I-10
bridge connecting New Orleans and Slidell had reopened. The number
of restaurants in the city had exceeded the pre-Katrina figure. More than seventy thousand citizens had repaired or rebuilt their homes. The floodwalls and levees around New Orleans had been strengthened, and the Army Corps of Engineers had begun a massive project to provide "100-year flood protection." The Superdome that once housed thousands of Katrina victims became the proud home of the Super Bowl champion New Orleans Saints.

The most uplifting change of all has come in education. Public schools that were decaying before the storm have reopened as modern facilities, with new teachers and leaders committed to reform and results. Dozens of charter schools have sprouted up across the city, offering parents more choices and greater flexibility. The Catholic archdiocese, led by Archbishop Alfred Hughes, continued its long tradition of educational excellence by reopening its schools quickly. The year after Katrina, New Orleans students improved their test scores. They improved more the next year, and even more the year after that.

When I gave my Farewell Address from the East Room of the White House in January 2009, one of the guests I invited was Dr. Tony Recasner, principal of Samuel J. Green Charter School in New Orleans. Tony started at the school in July 2005, after it had underperformed so severely that it was taken over by the state. Then Katrina hit.

When I visited in 2007, Tony told me about his innovative teaching methods, such as having students focus on one subject at a time for several weeks. He also told me about the results. Despite the enormous disadvantages facing his students, the percentage of those reading and doing math at grade level had more than tripled. "This school, which did not serve the community well in the past, is now really going to be a beacon of light," Tony said.

The spirit of renewal at S.J. Green Charter School is present all across the Gulf Coast. With leadership from people like Tony, a new generation can build a better life than the one they inherited. And the true legacy of Katrina will be one of hope.

On July 30, 2008, Mohamad Kalyesubula sat in the front row of the East Room. He was a tall, trim African man. He had a big, bright smile. And he was supposed to be dead.

Five years earlier, Laura and I had met Mohamad in Entebbe, Uganda, at a clinic run by The AIDS Support Organization, TASO. Located in a simple one-story brick building, the TASO clinic served thousands of AIDS patients. Like most suffering the advanced stages of the disease, Mohamad was wasting away. He ate little. He battled constant fevers. He had been confined to a bed for almost a year.

I expected TASO to be a place of abject hopelessness. But it was not. A handpainted sign over the door read "Living Positively with HIV/AIDS." A choir of children, many of them orphans who had lost parents to AIDS, sang hymns that proclaimed their faith and hope. They ended with a sweet rendition of "America the Beautiful." "I have a dream," Mohamad told me from his hospital bed. "One day, I will come to the United States."

I left the clinic inspired. The patients reaffirmed my conviction that every life has dignity and value, because every person bears the mark of Almighty God. I saw their suffering as a challenge to the words of the Gospel: "To whom much is given, much is required."

America had been given a lot, and I resolved that we would answer the call. Earlier that year I had proposed, and Congress had passed, a $15 billion initiative to fight HIV/AIDS in Africa. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, PEPFAR, constituted the largest international health initiative to combat a specific disease. I hoped it would serve as a medical version of the Marshall Plan. "This is my country's pledge to the people of Africa and the people of Uganda," I said at the TASO clinic. "You are not alone in this fight. America has decided to act."