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## Katrina's Damage Lingers For Bush

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Many See Storm as President's Undoing

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Saturday, August 26, 2006; A01

For Rep. Patrick T. McHenry (R-N.C.), three images define George W. Bush's presidency: Bush throwing out the first pitch of the 2001 World Series at Yankee Stadium, Bush with a megaphone atop the rubble of the World Trade Center -- and Bush staring out the window as Air Force One traversed the Gulf Coast thousands of feet above the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

The first two images epitomize strength and resolution, the image the Bush White House likes to cultivate. But in one year's time, the last one -- of the president as aloof, out of touch, even befuddled -- all but erased the memory of the others, according to pollsters, pundits and Republican politicians who say they have suffered in the wake of the president's decline.

From the demise of his Social Security overhaul to the war in Iraq, many factors have contributed to Bush's slide in popularity in the past year. But the winds of Katrina may have been the force that finally wrenched the Bush presidency off its moorings, these observers said.

"That has always been the driving [attribute] of Bush -- his ability to lead -- and Katrina undermined it badly," McHenry said. "He has rebounded in one year's time from what he lost in one week's time." But, he added, "it was a long and arduous climb" -- and it is not complete.

The president will appear Monday and Tuesday on the Gulf Coast to mark the first anniversary of the hurricane. To the White House, the president has a strong story to tell: approval of more than \$110 billion in resources for the Gulf region, 12 previous visits to the region by Bush and 82 by members of his Cabinet, the restoration of more than 220 miles of New Orleans's flood walls and levees, the floodproofing of pumping stations, and the addition of floodgates to protect against storm surges.

Bush aides said the president will accept responsibility for the botched federal response while stressing that the government has learned from the Katrina mistakes and promising to see through the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast.

White House counselor Dan Bartlett said it is difficult to separate the impact of Katrina from the Iraq war and the other problems that have pulled down Bush's approval rating. "It was a setback at the time, but it was recoverable and has been," Bartlett said.

In Louisiana and other Gulf Coast states, Bush's efforts have made a difference, both in rebuilding the region and in restoring his credibility, said Rep. Jim McCrery (R-La.).

But McCrery and several other Republicans said the year-old images of Bush's overflight aboard Air Force One, his good-natured joshing amid the devastation about college party days on Bourbon Street, and his "heck of a job" commendation of Michael D. Brown, then the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, still linger.

"Outside the real storm, it was a political storm that we all suffered a little damage from," said Rep. Jack Kingston (Ga.), a member of the House Republican leadership. "Katrina was not just a break in the levee of the great Crescent City, but it was a break in the levee of political goodwill and the Teflon coating that the administration had been enjoying up to then."

In the weeks after Katrina, Bush's disapproval rating rose from 48 percent to 52 percent, while the proportion of those who approved of the job he was doing as president fell from 44 percent to 40 percent, according to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

The proportion of people who saw Bush as a strong and decisive leader stood at 60 percent in late August 2005, according to a Gallup poll. One week and a hurricane later, it was down to 52 percent. By mid-September, it had fallen to 49 percent.

About 63 percent of Americans disapproved of Bush's handling of Katrina, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll conducted this March.

"This is an event that calcified the criticisms people were having about Bush, made it more personal and had a big impact on how people look at him," said Andrew Kohut, the Pew Center's director.

Frank Newport, the editor in chief of the Gallup Poll, is more skeptical that there was much of an enduring "Katrina effect" on the president, saying Bush's ratings recovered by the end of 2005 before sliding again in 2006.

Katrina was clearly not the only problem facing Bush in 2005. Bush's full-throated push to add private investment accounts to a slimmed-down Social Security system had been rebuffed by his own party. That August, as Bush vacationed in Texas, the administration appeared to cede the debate on Iraq to antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan as she camped outside the president's ranch.

But those events only made Katrina's impact that much more powerful, historians and Republican lawmakers say. "The sort of limited commitment that this president has to using federal power to ameliorate domestic problems registered powerfully in this Katrina episode," said presidential historian Robert Dallek. "It triggered Bush's downturn."

It was not only the slow, ineffectual response to the initial devastation that was responsible for the decline, critics and supporters say, but also the policy initiatives that came later. Urban Democrats and minorities, already prone to dislike Bush, focused on FEMA's botched relief efforts in the early days. But as the White House moved to placate those critics with a shower of financial support, the administration began alienating many Republicans, who wanted to use the disaster to turn the Gulf Coast into a showcase for conservative ideas.

Bush did push through legislation creating tax-favored Gulf Opportunity Zones that offered lucrative tax incentives for businesses to invest and rebuild. But more ambitious tax plans never got off the ground. The most far-reaching school-choice plans were scaled back. The most visible housing program came in the form of hundreds of thousands of government-bought trailers and mobile homes, which former House speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) predicted would create "ghettos of despair."

And the highest-profile attack on a government regulation -- Bush's suspension of the Davis-Bacon Act's rules on wage rates for federal contractors -- was quickly scrapped in the face of union and Democratic protests.

"Crises create opportunities," said Rep. Tom Feeney (R-Fla.). "This could have been an opportunity to redo the school systems with free-market principles. It was an opportunity to not just hand over contracts to unions at whatever cost. Now, that's spilt water over the levees."

White House aides suggest that this criticism is unfair, noting that millions of dollars have been spent on school vouchers and on helping homeowners rebuild their property. "The city of New Orleans will see their schools come back stronger, and in fact there will be an explosion of charter schools that can help the region come back quickly," said White House spokeswoman Dana Perino. "Of course we would have liked to do more in many areas, but the president believes the American taxpayer has been generous."

In the political realm, the White House showed an uncharacteristic reluctance to strike back at Democrats and liberal groups that were attacking the administration for its handling of Katrina. Kingston said many conservatives were ready to attack New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin and Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, both Democrats, whom they saw as the embodiment of years of incompetence, corruption and cronyism. But the signal from the White House was to hold their fire.

Kingston said all Republicans continue to pay the price for the approach Bush took in the weeks after the hurricane.

"What you ended up with was a lot of people who did not like the administration from the beginning now with the tangible reason they had been looking for for five years," Kingston said. "And on the other side you had his friends, who wanted to circle the wagon, defend the president and take a stand, and instead they were asked just to keep passing the bills."

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