

Suggested Remarks for Senator Barack Obama
Homeland Security Hearing
New Orleans, Louisiana
Monday, January 29, 2007

Good morning. I am happy to be back in New Orleans today and I want to thank Chairman Lieberman for holding today's hearing.

In previous trips to this city, I've toured the lower Ninth Ward, St. Bernard Parish, and Lakeview. I saw the broken landscape of a battered city. I walked among the shuttered businesses and empty homes. I listened to FEMA and local officials talk about the work left to do, about the schools still closed and the hospitals that aren't functional and the trailers that were meant to be temporary but now seem frighteningly permanent. And I walked to the places where the levees breached and the water rushed in and the flooding began.

But I've also seen the face of hope here in New Orleans. I had the great privilege of giving the commencement address to Xavier University last August, and I saw the faces of proud young men and women who overcame great odds and unbelievable obstacles. I met the students who survived the horror of the hurricanes and then spent the first half of their senior year scattered throughout the country, unsure of whether they would ever return to their school, but who would later join together to form the largest class to ever graduate from that fine university.

I toured the Musician's Village, where hometown heroes like the Marsalis family and Harry Connick, Jr. are working with Habitat for Humanity to develop homes for displaced musicians and others, and I know that the sweet sounds of New Orleans jazz will ring from those streets once more.

So I know, despite great odds and incredible challenges, that New Orleans is still a place of hope.

But what I don't know, and what I hope to find out today, is whether we in the federal government are doing our part to help the people of New Orleans rebuild.

I've seen reports on the Housing Authority's plans to raze several low-income housing developments, but I haven't seen concrete plans to meet the long-term housing needs of all the displaced people in New Orleans.

I know the health infrastructure is still being rebuilt – so I want to ask, how are the health care needs of the city being met? How are the mental health needs of the city being met – especially the children?

I'm also still unclear on whether we have eliminated the waste, fraud and abuse in the federal contracting process. I've asked many times whether the no-bid contracts

handed out in the wake of the Hurricanes have been terminated, and unfortunately, I still haven't received a clear answer.

And so, I hope we get some answers today, because rebuilding the city of New Orleans is not just for the good of the Gulf Coast, or the State of Louisiana, it is for the good of our nation.

In the weeks after Katrina, an ashamed nation looked at what had been allowed to happen here and said "Never again. Never will we turn our backs on these people. Never will we forget what happened here." The President came down and said, "We will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives."

Just eighteen months later, we heard not one word – not one word – in the President's State of the Union address about New Orleans. And so I have one more set of questions to ask today: "Are we willing to do whatever it takes? To stay as long as it takes? Are we in danger of forgetting about New Orleans?"

Over 230 years ago, a fire raged through a city. Due in part to government incompetence, the fire was dismissed as a dying remnant from a fire the day before, so the response was slow, and the result was disastrous. More than 200 people lost their lives in that fire. Out of a population of 300,000 – 100,000 were left homeless. More than 2000 acres were ravaged, 17,500 buildings were destroyed, and more than \$222 million in property was lost.

But that city rebuilt. Through the determination of private and public partners – the city rebuilt. And less than 22 years later, that city, my hometown of Chicago, hosted the World Exposition and reestablished its place among the world's greatest cities.

So, while I know our Bears aren't too popular around here these days, we must all remember, we have come together to help other great American cities rebuild. New Orleans must be one of those. We all have a stake in this, and we must ensure that all of us are doing our part.