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Mississippi governor talks Katrina on his reelection bid



Lee Celano For The Times

MAKING CONNECTIONS: Gov. Haley Barbour, a former chairman of the Republican National Committee, greets supporters at a fish fry in Long Beach, Miss. His critics say his post-storm success was largely due to his GOP friends in Washington.

Haley Barbour, who impressed many with his quick disaster response, now hopes to ride that popularity to a second term.

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BILOXI, Miss. — Republican Gov. Haley Barbour was standing in a preacher's living room here one recent weeknight, giving his Katrina pep talk to a small group of voters and making the case for his reelection.

In front of him was a comfortable, elegant sofa; behind him was a big flat-screen TV. There are a lot of new TVs and sofas around here since the hurricane. Those insurance and federal

recovery dollars are going to some people. When Barbour talks Katrina with Mississippians, he sounds like a coach praising the world's scrappiest come-from-behind football team.

"Our people weren't looking for somebody to blame," Barbour said, his deep, Yazoo City drawl rounding his vowels. "They weren't whining or moping. . . . We got knocked down hard. And people got back up, hitched up their britches and went to work."

This down-home mantra is Barbour's attempt to instill a unifying sense of pride in this perennial underdog of a state. It's a message he hopes will resonate across lines of race and class.

To voters like Patrick Bass, a 38-year-old black Democrat, it is the language of leadership, the

kind he has come to expect from Barbour. Next door in Louisiana, Bass said, Democratic Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco's post-storm governance seemed "somewhat shaky. Here, we knew [Barbour] had a vision."

Barbour, a former lobbyist and chairman of the Republican National Committee, is riding high in Mississippi, where he is widely considered to be the front-runner in Tuesday's election. Campaign finance reports from October showed him with nearly \$6 million in cash on hand, compared with \$23,000 for his Democratic rival, John Eaves.

Fans of Barbour see him the way many saw former New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani after the Sept. 11 attacks: as a leader who proved his mettle at a trying hour. The point was underscored by Giuliani, a GOP presidential candidate, when he visited Mississippi in September and said the governor would make a good running mate. (It's a scenario Barbour appears to dismiss: "I'm on hurricane duty now," he said.)

The governor's critics, however, contend that his post-storm success was due largely to his Republican friends in Washington. Blanco, who did not seek a second term, has even alleged a "political conspiracy" in which GOP leaders in Washington stiffed Louisiana while lavishing money on Barbour's state.

It is to Barbour's advantage that Mississippi voters can find truth in both characterizations.

Look, I hate lobbyists," said Janet Densmore, 59, a Democrat from the hard-hit coastal city of Waveland. "But I've got to say that in the post-Katrina world, his connections benefited us quite a bit." Densmore was living in a government-provided trailer until September, when she moved into a tiny prefab Katrina Cottage as part of a program that Barbour championed. "And I'm proud of him for it," she said.

Barbour, 60, is a wide-shouldered and amiable presence, the kind of politician who encourages voters to call him by his first name. Clicking on his website's "About Haley" button, however, reveals nothing about his days in Washington. Barbour cut his teeth working on Richard M. Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign; by the mid-1980s, he was working as an advisor to President Reagan. During his tenure inside the

Beltway, he became tight with party leaders, including President Bush.

Four years ago, Barbour defeated the Democratic incumbent in Mississippi and became the second Republican to win the governor's post since Reconstruction. Facing steep deficits, he made some difficult choices early, including signing a law that cut 65,000 poor Mississippians from the Medicaid rolls.

When Katrina hit in August 2005, Democrats and Republicans alike were impressed with Barbour's quick response. "As soon as the winds abated, he was there," said Mike Espy, a former Democratic congressman and Agriculture secretary under President Clinton. Last month, Espy joined a number of prominent state Democrats in endorsing Barbour's reelection bid.

The governor's supporters said they saw Mississippi shine where Louisiana stumbled. For one thing, Mississippians got their housing recovery money quicker. By January 2007, more than 10,000 Mississippi homeowners had received federal rebuilding grants from the program administered by their state. In Louisiana, fewer than 300 had received their money. (Louisiana officials say the comparison is unfair. Congress began fully funding Mississippi's program six months before theirs; Louisiana has since paid out more than 67,000 grants.)

Few doubt that Barbour's Washington contacts paid off for Mississippi, especially before Republicans lost control of Congress in 2006. Until then, Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) had been chairman of the powerful appropriations committee.

But Barbour does not apologize for the money he brought home, and disputes the idea that anyone was out to hurt Louisiana. "I guarantee you the federal government has done everything they can do to help," he said.

By some measures, Mississippi received a disproportionate share of the federal aid for recovery from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma. A study funded by the Rockefeller Institute of Government found that Mississippi had 20% of the major or severe housing damage, but got 33% of the Community Development Block Grant funds. Louisiana had

67% of the damage and received 62% of those funds.

Meanwhile, Katrina has done strange things to Mississippi state coffers: Rebuilding efforts have led to an increase in state tax revenue, allowing Barbour to boast that he balanced the budget without raising taxes.

Though the state may be on the upswing, housing advocates say that the poor along the coast have been left behind. They are especially critical of a plan to use \$600 million in federal housing funds to expand the port of Gulfport, while 11,400 families remain in trailers.

That was the Rev. Henry McNeal's main concern as he listened to Barbour in the Biloxi living room. McNeal's coastal flock are working- and middle-class blacks, many of whom he said were still living in trailers and substandard housing.

When Barbour made his way to McNeal, the pastor asked him whom he should talk to about the issue. Barbour moved in close, looked McNeal in the eye and said, "Talk to me."

Barbour then proceeded to put McNeal in his shoes, leading him through a dizzying five-minute discourse on the intricacies of federal disaster funding. The gist of it: The coast was going to get a better port *and* more housing for the working class. It was just going to take time to get through the federal red tape.

"Remember," Barbour said, "we're making it up as we go along." That "we" was classic Barbour. It might have referred to the wonks in his administration. But maybe it referred to all the plucky, can-do Mississippians digging their way out of the mess. Either way, McNeal, a Democrat, said the governor made a good impression.

"I'm impressed, I really am," he said. "I have a good feeling about him."

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