La. paramedics praised: Ex-President Bush lauds storm service

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LAFAYETTE - Former President George H.W. Bush on Friday thanked the employees of Acadian Ambulance for their service in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, saying that people who question whether heroes still exist need look no further than a lunchtime gathering of paramedics.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco, playing hostess for the program, also took time out for pointed words for people who have tried to egg on a perceived dispute between her and the son of Acadian's guest, President Bush, in the wake of the storms - a dispute she said does not exist.

"We both take hard licks from people on the artificial battlefront," she said deriding those who do so as "armchair quarterbacks" who feel justified in judging actions taken despite generally being far removed from what really happened.

"The president and I don't have the time and energy to waste on petty political bickering," Blanco said. "Both of us are clearly focused on recovery."

The elder Bush visited Lafayette on Friday to congratulate Acadian Ambulance's paramedic of the year - Carl Dugas - honor all employees of the company and talk about the work he and former President Clinton have done to raise relief money for victims of the hurricanes.

"Faced with danger and death, you saved lives. Faced with despair, you gave hope," Bush said.

Bush told the gathering of Acadian employees that they had been at the forefront of one of the greatest rescue and relief efforts in the history of the nation.

"Who says there are no more heroes? There are plenty of them right here in this room," he said.

President Bush introduced his father to the gathering via a videotaped message in which the president also thanked Acadian Ambulance and the people of Lafayette and Baton Rouge for their relief efforts.

The elder Bush also commented on the efforts of his son and Blanco, noting that when dealing with something as complex as the aftermath of Katrina and Rita, all will not go smoothly.

"There's bound to be sharp elbows, there's bound to be questions," Bush said.
Bush drew a parallel between Blanco and his son's working relationship and that of himself and Clinton in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and their joint effort - the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund.

Bush and Clinton were once political rivals. Clinton defeated Bush in the 1992 presidential re-election.

Bush said the two now work so closely together that his wife, Barbara, now refers to Clinton as "son," and the running joke is that the Bushes will do anything to get another president in the family.

"It's been a pure joy working with the man," Bush said of Clinton.

"Because you're going at somebody, and some elbows do get sharp, doesn't mean you're enemies," he said. "In America, you ought to come together and do something more important than your own political goals."

Bush said his son asked for the Bush-Clinton team to step in following Katrina to start a fund-raising effort.

The Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund has raised about $125 million, he said.

Those donations range from multimillion-dollar gifts from corporations and foundations to one of $16 from a child who ran a lemonade stand to raise it, Bush said.

Bush said a big part of his motivation to help came from dedication he saw as he followed events in people, like Acadian's medics, who were doing so much after the storms."

"The hardest work has already been done by the people in this room," he said.

Blanco added her thanks to the Acadian Ambulance employees, saying that they "answered the devastation with action."

"You were the foot soldiers," she said. "You are Louisiana's heroes. You are America's heroes. A grateful state an national are so proud and so grateful for you."

Blanco also spoke about how she and others are readying the state for the upcoming hurricane season.

"Our state is prepared for June 1, the dreadful day that makes everyone nervous," she said.

Blanco said state leaders are using lessons learned last year to improve the security of the state.
She said mobile communications and technology to link emergency responders are improved and the state is reworking evacuation plans "to reflect the new reality on the ground."

"We will be prepared, we are rebuilding," Blanco said.

She also said she was gratified that President Bush called for Congress to approve $4.2 billion in hurricane relief aid for the state and then a further $2.2 billion to shore up levees.

"On behalf of the citizens of our state, I say thank you, President Bush, for the level of commitment," Blanco said. "I have come to appreciate Louisiana's friend and my friend, the president of the United States, George W. Bush."