Mending fences: Bush, Blanco, others join to honor hurricane heroes; Bush Sr. in Lafayette for paramedic luncheon  
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By Jan Risher

With former President George H.W. Bush's visit to Lafayette on Friday, state and national political leaders took the opportunity to set aside differences that arose in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Looking at ease and polished, Gov. Kathleen Blanco presented a video of President George W. Bush, who introduced his father at a banquet to honor employees of Acadian Ambulance.

"The president and I have developed a fairly strong and positive relationship," Blanco said. "We worked together toward the recovery. It's an honor for me to introduce him and his father."

Acadian Ambulance brought leaders from local, state and federal government together as it recognized its Paramedic of the Year at a Cajundome luncheon. The Lafayette-based employee-owned company was instrumental in helping to evacuate New Orleans hospitals after the storm. Via video, President Bush praised Acadian Ambulance's role in the Hurricane Katrina recovery and rescue efforts. He noted the company's "remarkable ability to improvise" in the face of one of the nation's greatest disasters.

Former President Bush praised Acadian Ambulance Chief Executive Officer and founder Richard Zuschlag's energy and imagination.

"I've been around the world. I've met kings and queens. You name it, but nothing beats a person from Louisiana doing his or her best," he said.

About 1,300 people attended the event. Acadian Ambulance's President David Pierce described the once-a-year-gathering as a family reunion.

Former President Bush likened Acadian Ambulance's Katrina role to his famous "thousand points of light" campaign.

"Government cannot solve every problem," former President Bush said. "Who says there are no heroes anymore? There are plenty of heroes in this room."

Prior to the event, Blanco called the Senate report released Thursday, which harshly criticized the White House's Katrina response, "armchair quarterbacking at its best."

"We have too much work to be done. There are too many people in pain for me to focus on the pain they're trying to inflict on me. I'm going to focus on my work," Blanco said as she walked into the event.
Former President Bush admitted that listening to criticism of his son was much more difficult than listening to criticism of himself.

"You know what I mean. When the umpire calls your son out at home plate, and you knew he was safe," Bush said. "I believe in family. I still believe in heroes."