

White House hopefuls skipped Katrina visit

'No one should run until they have been in [our] shoes'

By Jessica Alaimo and Bob Cusack

At least four senators who are considering running for president in 2008 have not visited the Gulf Coast since it was ravaged by Hurricane Katrina six months ago.

Sens. George Allen (R-Va.), Evan Bayh (D-Ind.), Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) and Russ Feingold (D-Wis.) have not had a firsthand look at the devastation Katrina left behind, according to a survey of Senate offices conducted by The Hill.

Spokespeople for Sens. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.) did not return phone calls for comment, but there are no media accounts of

either senator traveling to Louisiana, Mississippi or Alabama since late August.

Not visiting the sites of one of the nation's worst natural disasters could prove to be a political liability for the six senators.

In an interview last week, Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) said, "I don't think anyone can run for president — Democrat or Republican — until they have been in the shoes of [Gulf Coast residents], walked through their neighborhoods and visited their churches."

Meanwhile, each of these six senators has found time to travel to Iowa, New Hampshire or South Carolina — key states in the 2008 primary races. Allen and Bayh have each made five such trips, Biden, Hagel and McCain have made two each, and Feingold has stumped once in Iowa, according to the publication *Campaigns & Elections*.

Possible 2008 contenders in

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the upper chamber who have been to the Gulf Coast since August are Sens. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) and John Kerry (D-Mass.).

Chris Whittington, chairman of the Louisiana Democratic Party, said all lawmakers need to see the damage, adding that pictures and videotapes do not do it justice. "You can't even describe it. You have to see it. It's almost overwhelming."

Of the presidential contenders, Whittington said, "They need to get here as soon as possible."

The Hill called the offices of all 100 senators. Thirty-nine said their senators had visited; six of those 39 represent the affected areas. Thirty-seven offices said their senators had not been to the Gulf Coast since the hurricane hit, and 24 did not return repeated phone calls. (See chart.) Of the 24 senators whose offices did not respond, none attracted media attention if they did visit the affected areas, a review of local articles shows.

Wayne Parent, a professor of political science at Louisiana State University, said presidential contenders have not made a visible presence in the devastation area but noted that 2008 is a long way off in people's minds.

Steven Taylor, associate professor of political science at American University, said politicians have an obligation to their constituents to see where tax dollars are being spent.

"It's politically important," Taylor said. "Lots of money has been sent to that area."

Congress has spent tens of billions of dollars on Katrina-related efforts, and billions more are expected to be appropriated later this year.

While a few political observers said Katrina rebuilding efforts will not be on the political radar screen in 2008, others disagree. Many difficult questions face policymakers, such as whether the federal government should invest billions in levees around New Orleans that can withstand a Category 5 hurricane.

Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco (D) told The Hill yesterday that the Katrina-related debate will extend to 2008 and beyond.

Landrieu echoed Blanco: "The debate will go on for years to come."

Sen. David Vitter (R-La.) did not comment for this article.

The Senate has voted on 13 pieces of legislation relating to Katrina; six have passed. The 13 bills range from establishing a congressional commission to examine the response to Katrina to amending the tax code to provide tax benefits for the affected areas and to providing financial relief to evacuees.

With President Bush's poll numbers flagging, partly because of the federal government's response to Katrina, some believe it will be important for 2008 White House hopefuls to convince voters that



PATRICK G. RYAN

Left: Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and right, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) have visited the Gulf.

Some White House hopefuls

skip visit

they can prepare the country to deal with catastrophes.

Gulf Coast residents think, "for whatever reason, Washington does not seem to care that much," Parent said, "Louisianans are very sensitive about caring about Katrina aftermath."

Louisiana is a toss-up state, usually leaning Republican in presidential elections, and the Katrina issues may spur some Democratic votes, Parent added.

Blanco, Landrieu and others have urged all members of Congress to see the damage.

"This was a flood of biblical proportions," Landrieu said. "I would hope in the coming weeks every [lawmaker] makes it a priority to visit."

Blanco estimates that about 30 percent of House legislators have been to the affected areas, adding, "If you never touch it and see it, you can make cold, calculating decisions" not to back Katrina-related funding packages.

The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee has taken the lead in the upper chamber on the government's response to Katrina, holding 20 hearings on the issue. Every committee member has been to the area except Sens. Tom Carper (D-Del.), Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and Carl Levin (D-Mich.); panel members Sens. Robert Bennett (R-Utah) and George Voinovich (R-Ohio) did not answer the survey.

Sen. Mark Pryor (D-Ark.), a committee member, said last month that it was helpful to get a firsthand glimpse of the damage. "The 9th Ward in New Orleans almost appears that the hurricane happened a week ago," Pryor said of the damage that still has to be cleaned up.

He added that he had taken both a helicopter tour and a bus tour around the devastated area. In Mississippi, he said, "an entire city block may have one building on it."

Mark Dayton (D-Minn.) assessed the damage in January. "I saw how little recovery had occurred and how desperate and awful the situation was."

Senate GOP leaders who have visited the Gulf Coast include Frist, Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas), Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), Harry Reid (D-Nev.), Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.). Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) has not, and Sens. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) did not respond to the survey.

Some senators who have not visited the Gulf Coast said they plan to visit in the future but did not offer specific timetables. Others said they have met with survivors.

"Arkansas is home to several evacuees, and she has visited several evacuee camps," said Katie Laning, press secretary for Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.).

On Sept. 14, senators boarded a bus to tour the damage. According to the Biloxi *Sun Herald*, their tour guide choked up while assessing the damage. Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.)

rushed to comfort him.

"We're going to get you what you need to rebuild this town," Cochran told him.

Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) chimed in, "When the chairman

of the Senate Appropriations Committee says that, you know you're going to get it."

The survey did not encompass Hurricanes Wilma or Rita, which damaged surrounding ar-

reas shortly after Katrina hit. Florida suffered damage from both, and Sens. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) and Mel Martinez (R-Fla.) said they were busy tending to the needs of their constituents.

Gulf Coast travel

Senators who have been to the Gulf Coast since Katrina (39)

Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii)	Mark Dayton (D-Minn.)	Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.)
Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.)	Jim DeMint (R-S.C.)	Trent Lott (R-Miss.) *
Max Baucus (D-Mont.)	Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.)	Mark Pryor (D-Ark.)
Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.)	Pete Domenici (R-N.M.)	Harry Reid (D-Nev.)
Sam Brownback (R-Kan.)	Richard Durbin (D-Ill.)	Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.)
Lincoln Chafee (R-R.I.)	John Inhofe (R-Texas)	Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) *
Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.)	Michael Enzi (R-Wyo.)	Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) *
Tom Coburn (R-Okla.)	Bill Frist (R-Tenn.)	Olympia Snowe (R-Maine)
Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) *	Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas)	Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.)
Norm Coleman (R-Minn.)	James Inhofe (R-Okla.)	Ted Stevens (R-Alaska)
Susan Collins (R-Maine)	Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.)	Craig Thomas (R-Wyo.)
John Cornyn (R-Texas)	John Kerry (D-Mass.)	David Vitter (R-La.) *
Larry Craig (R-Idaho)	Mary Landrieu (D-La.) *	John Warner (R-Va.)

Senators who have not been to the Gulf Coast since Katrina (36)

Wayne Allard (R-Colo.)	Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.)	Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.)
George Allen (R-Va.)	Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa)	Mel Martinez (R-Fla.)
Evan Bayh (D-Ind.)	Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.)	Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) *
Christopher Bond (R-Mo.)	Tom Harkin (D-Iowa)	Patty Murray (D-Wash.)
Jim Bunning (R-Ky.)	Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.)	Ben Nelson (D-Neb.)
Conrad Burns (R-Mont.)	James Jeffords (I-Vt.) *	Bill Nelson (D-Fla.)
Richard Burr (R-N.C.)	Tim Johnson (D-S.D.)	Earack Obama (D-Ill.)
Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.)	Herbert Kohl (D-Wis.)	Jack Reed (D-R.I.)
Thomas Carper (D-Del.)	Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.)	Ken Salazar (D-Colo.)
Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.)	Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.)	Rick Santorum (R-Pa.)
Kent Conrad (D-N.D.)	Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.)	Paul Sarbanes (D-Md.)
Russ Feingold (D-Wis.)	Carl Levin (D-Mich.)	Arlen Specter (R-Pa.)

Senators who did not respond (24)

Robert Bennett (R-Utah)	Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.)	Pat Roberts (R-Kan.)
Joseph Biden (D-Del.)	Judd Gregg (R-N.H.)	John Rockefeller (D-W.Va.)
Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.)	Orrin Hatch (R-Utah)	Gordon Smith (R-Ore.)
Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)	Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii)	John Sununu (R-N.H.)
Mike Crapo (R-Idaho)	Richard Lugar (R-Ind.)	Jim Talent (R-Mo.)
Mike DeWine (R-Ohio)	John McCain (R-Ariz.)	John Thune (R-S.D.)
Elizabeth Dole (R-N.C.)	Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.)	George Voinovich (R-Ohio)
Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.)	Robert Menendez (D-N.J.)	Ron Wyden (D-Ore.)

*Murkowski and Jeffords are scheduled to visit the Gulf Coast this month

*These senators represent the Gulf Coast