

# Bush Cuts Texas Vacation Short to Oversee Hurricane Response

By Peter Baker  
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CORONADO, Calif., Aug. 30 -- As the devastation from Hurricane Katrina grew clearer Tuesday, President Bush decided to cut short his month-long vacation and return to Washington to oversee the response to what the White House called "one of the most devastating storms in our nation's history."

After attending ceremonies here to mark the anniversary of the end of World War II, Bush flew back to his ranch near Crawford, Tex., in the afternoon and prepared to leave for Washington on Wednesday morning, moving up his return to the capital by two days. Aides said he was conferring through the day with advisers and would chair a special task force on his return to the White House to coordinate federal relief efforts.

"This morning, our hearts and prayers are with our fellow citizens along the Gulf Coast who have suffered so much from Hurricane Katrina," Bush said at the beginning of his speech at a naval base here. "These are trying times for the people of these communities. . . . The federal, state and local governments are working side by side to do all we can to help people get back on their feet, and we have a lot of work to do."

The abrupt decision to return to Washington represented a turnabout of sorts for a president who for weeks ignored criticism that such a long summer break -- the longest stretch away from Washington of any president in decades -- appeared unseemly at a time when U.S. forces are at war in Iraq. The White House repeatedly defended Bush's sojourn in Texas by noting that modern communications technology meant he was able to lead just as effectively from the ranch as from the Oval Office.

Bush is rushing back to Washington with his poll numbers at all-time lows -- and the public looking to Washington for help on several fronts, including rising gas prices.

With antiwar protesters camping out near the Bush ranch, advisers were particularly sensitive to the image of a president continuing to vacation amid the hurricane crisis. Bush's father, President George H.W. Bush, suffered political damage when his administration was criticized for a slow response to the damage wrought by Hurricane Andrew in Florida in 1992. The current president was quick to respond to four hurricanes in Florida last year.

Asked whether returning to Washington is more symbolic, given his ability to work from the ranch, White House press secretary Scott McClellan said, "No, I disagree," but he did not explain what difference it would make for Bush to be in Washington. "The president's preference is to manage the response from Washington, and that's why he made the decision to return," McClellan said.

In responding to Katrina, Bush has formed a special interagency task force to coordinate and supplement federal efforts, a panel including representatives from the departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Energy, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency.

Bush planned to arrive in Washington about 4 p.m. Wednesday to chair a meeting of the task force, aides

said. They added that although he will be traveling past the affected region en route to the capital, he does not plan to stop to view the damage for fear of getting in the way but will probably visit later in the week when the situation on the ground is calmer.

One of the decisions that will confront Bush in coming days will be whether to tap some of the 700 million barrels of oil in the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to ease energy shortages caused by the hurricane. The bulk of oil platforms, refineries, natural gas facilities and pipelines in the key Gulf of Mexico region were shut down or damaged by the storm, cutting off much of the nation's oil and gas production.

Members of Congress ratcheted up the pressure on Bush to release oil from the reserves. "The SPR is intended to provide relief at times when working families are struggling to make ends meet, and to counter the price shocks that accompany severe supply disruptions," Sens. Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine) and Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) wrote Bush in a letter. "Now is undoubtedly such a time."

But administration officials said the problem may not be oil supplies but the capacity to refine crude.

Aides emphasized that Bush has kept on top of such issues while in Texas and on the road in Arizona and California the past two days. White House Deputy Chief of Staff Joseph Hagin, who is accompanying the president, has coordinated information, and Bush planned to participate in a conference call with federal officials Wednesday morning before leaving Texas.

*Staff writer Jim VandeHei in Washington contributed to this report.*

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