

## STORMY TENURE

Still bristling at claims that she was an inept chief of state, Gov. Blanco says that her efforts have set the stage for a resurgence in Louisiana

Wednesday, January 02, 2008

By Ed Anderson

BATON ROUGE -- Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, who saw the state through two monster hurricanes in 2005 only to see her own political career take a hit in their aftermath, turns the Governor's Mansion over to Republican successor Bobby Jindal on Jan. 14, but she says she will not fade away nor go very far.

The Democratic governor, whose four-year tenure will always be bound to the state's darkest hours of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and their recovery, says she is not looking to run for office any time soon, but says her political obituary should not be written, either.

"Nor any other obituary for that matter," joked Blanco, who is moving back to Lafayette. "I need a breather from elected politics. I am not going to get into the political arena in the short term. I will let the long term take care of itself."

Blanco, the 50th individual to occupy the governor's office since Louisiana became a state in 1812 and its first female chief executive, has been a political fixture in Louisiana since 1984 when she was elected to the state House, the Public Service Commission and lieutenant governor before becoming governor in 2004. The outgoing governor, worn down by the aftermath of Katrina and Rita and the criticism on the pace of recovery, said she is writing a book to capture the highlights of journals she has kept over the years, predating her life as a public official.

"It is not a Katrina book, it is not a Rita book," she said, although incidents and anecdotes from the back-to-back storms will be a part of the book.

And she said she is "working on some initiatives" including projects involving young people . . . and working to change the emergency response laws" that hurt Louisiana and other states in hurricane aftermath. Blanco was not more specific.

The governor, dogged initially by low poll numbers and the deer-in-the-headlights image portrayed in the media after killer Katrina, announced in March she would not seek a second term as recovery efforts dragged. Her poll numbers have improved since then as the recovery operation gained some traction in recent months.

Blanco said that she decided not to seek another term because she and her family were drained from the long hours of Katrina and what she called an ongoing effort by the national and state Republicans to make her look bad for political purposes. "My decision was the right decision," Blanco said. "We need a decompression period."

Staging a turnaround

Blanco said that she was "never stunned" at the magnitude of the storms and still bristles at her portrayal in the media and by political opponents as a tentative, inept chief of state in the days after Katrina. She said she was decisive, stood up for the state against a White House that wanted her to surrender control of the National Guard to President Bush and did what was needed in the face of a natural disaster no one could anticipate.

"We had political opposition undermining whatever was going on," Blanco said. She said there was no script to follow in evacuating 1.3 million residents from coastal parishes as Katrina approached in dealing with the pervasive destruction of the New Orleans area, and later southwest Louisiana.

"I have gotten past that," she said when asked if she still feels victimized by the White House and GOP Congress at the time the storm hit. "I have gotten past all of that. It is OK."

Blanco said that her decision not to seek a second term "was critical to my successes in the Legislature" in an election year.

"That was a bitter pill for her to not run again," said Pearson Cross, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, Blanco's alma mater. Cross called Katrina "an accident that undid a fairly productive term as governor. Had Katrina and Rita not happened, Kathleen Blanco would probably be getting ready to be inaugurated for a second term and Bobby Jindal would have his sights set on Mary Landrieu's (U.S.) Senate seat." Some of those 2007 legislative wins against vocal GOP opposition included passage of a second pay raise for teachers in three years, bringing them to the Southern average; allocating more than \$700 million to education programs, including full financing for college needs; increasing the state budget for road construction and repairs by at least \$500 million in four years; passing a \$100 million incentive program to coax insurance companies to write additional policies in the state and signing a measure repealing cockfighting, a practice popular in her Acadiana base and other rural areas of the state. The turnaround was striking from the 2006 pre-Christmas session, which ended two days early when GOP lawmakers and some Democrats refused to raise a budget cap to spend more than \$800 million in surplus revenue. Instead Blanco settled for a \$239 million tax credit program for homeowners assessed a fee by the state-run insurer of last resort, and a \$300 million incentive package to lure a German steel mill to the state. The ThyssenKrupp facility instead went to Alabama. In the wake of the two storms, Blanco had success in passing a statewide building code, and after two separate sessions, got lawmakers to go along with a plan to merge levee boards in the New Orleans area, consolidated the seven assessors offices in New Orleans into one, and merge the civil and criminal courts in New Orleans -- and their clerks and sheriffs offices -- into one court. And after nine trips to lobby the White House and Congress, Blanco got more than \$13.5 billion in federal block grant money for housing, businesses and other needs after battling with a GOP-controlled Congress and White House for much of the time.

#### Going after jobs

Xavier University political scientist-sociologist Silas Lee, said Blanco was elected on a promise to open Louisiana for business, the "anti-Mike Foster," a reference to her gubernatorial predecessor who did not like to travel to court industry. Blanco traveled to the Middle East, Japan, China, Taiwan, Spain, Cuba, Mexico, England and other nations hunting industry with some success.

Blanco said that her efforts have resulted in the creation of 28,000 new jobs with an additional 13,000 to come and industrial investments of more than \$18 billion.

"Her legacy is going to be defined by the storms and her response to them," said Barry Erwin, president of the Council for a Better Louisiana, an independent government watchdog group. "People will judge her by that. It is the 800-pound gorilla. You can't get by it."

Erwin said to Blanco's credit, she kept the educational priorities initiated by Foster in place and expanded them. "She didn't zigzag off in a different direction," Erwin said.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, another nonpartisan government watchdog organization, said that although Blanco will be tied to the hurricanes, she should "be recognized for her integrity . . . and giving it her all."

On the issues that PAR focuses on, such as ethics, health care, economic development and education, Brandt said her shining moment came in expanding prekindergarten programs to give 4-year-olds a better chance in school, pushing an agenda that brought teacher pay to the Southern regional average with accountability standards, redesigning high school course loads and requirements, and fully financing higher education based on a formula devised years ago.

"One of the things she will not get credit for is supporting the state takeover of failing schools," which was given impetus by the storms, Brandt said. One of her biggest failures, Brandt said, was "not being able to get a handle on work-force needs" of the state although she lured jobs to Louisiana. And, except for the former film director pleading guilty to taking bribes from a movie producer to get a large tax credit and her deputy chief of staff being accused -- but never charged -- with sexual harassment, her administration was scandal-free, Brandt said.

#### 'Convenient scapegoat'

"The obvious response is to say that history will not treat Blanco kindly, and that she will forever be linked with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita -- perhaps even more importantly -- to the frustrations of the recovery process," said Kirby Goidel, a professor of mass communications and political science at Louisiana State University. "In the long-run Blanco will also emerge as a sympathetic figure: not only does she confront the largest natural disaster in American history but she also becomes a convenient scapegoat of the incompetence of the federal response."

Goidel said that if Blanco did not have to deal with Katrina and Rita, she "would have likely been re-elected and considered a solid, if often overly cautious and overly incremental reform-minded governor. Blanco

emerges as sympathetic because even in the midst of tragedy and forces that went far beyond her capacity to manage, she maintained a core commitment to trying to do what was best for the state. . . . She may have been overwhelmed by events, she may not have accomplished as much as she would have liked, but she consistently tried to do right by the state.

"In doing so, she helped set a stage that allows Jindal much more opportunity to be successful."

Rep. Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, chairman of the House Republican Delegation and a frequent critic of Blanco, said that "her legacy will be defined by the recovery (effort). Quite frankly, I think it is too early to tell. . . . All of us had a warped expectation about how long the recovery will occur."

He said if history has to be written on Blanco's tenure now based on the recovery, "it would be pretty rough (on her). Over a 10-year period, I don't know how this will be judged."

Wayne Parent, a political science professor at LSU, said that in the long-term, Louisiana may embrace Blanco more favorably. "If Louisiana starts to recover in the long term, and gets back on its feet, she will share in that credit. . . . She is perceived as an honest governor but Katrina has overshadowed everything she has done. . . . She will be regarded as an honest governor who was trying."

Xavier University's Lee said that Blanco will leave a "checkered legacy" because the recovery efforts have not been managed well. "They (the storms and the recovery) were bigger than she was. . . . There were no textbooks but the (recovery) expectations were so high."

Keeping her head up

"I think the recovery is a powerful story" although slow to unfold, Blanco said. "Everyone who was touched by the storm (at then local state and federal, levels) took a public beating. . . . The recovery is going to take 10 to 15 years before citizens feel critical mass. . . . It takes time to rebuild a community."

She said public officials may have made the mistake of being overly optimistic about the length of the recovery. Besides better financing of education from prekindergarten through college, Blanco said her legacy "will be the foundation we left for future governors from the storm, from the battles I fought in Washington with recalcitrant people" including a \$2 billion surplus for the Jindal administration to spend and more than \$13.5 billion in recovery dollars from the federal government.

"If we are looking long-term, I think people will look back in awe at what was able to be accomplished," she said. "Nothing comes simply packaged."

Blanco said that one of her biggest shortcomings during the political maelstrom in the days after Katrina was not getting the state's story out better.

"We should have told our story more powerfully," Blanco said. "I have yet to find my voice" in telling the state's story.

Blanco, a devout Roman Catholic, said despite it all, she felt that she "was chosen to be here at this time. Only God knows why. . . . It has been an honor and a privilege being governor."

. . . . .

Ed Anderson can be reached at eanderson@timespicayune.com or (225) 342-5810.