

Storm Politics Present Risks and Rewards

di Peter Baker

ST. PAUL — On the day Hurricane Katrina made landfall three years ago, President Bush helped Senator John McCain celebrate his birthday with a cake that melted on a blazing hot airport tarmac, just as the president's approval ratings would in the weeks to come.

This time around, the party's off. Or at least it is for Mr. Bush and Mr. McCain, who on Sunday sought to focus attention on efforts to prepare for Hurricane Gustav at the expense of carefully laid plans for this week's Republican National Convention.

In some ways, it was a nightmare moment for Republicans. The hurricane's approach put front and center once more some of the worst failings of the Bush presidency at the very moment Mr. McCain was to begin presenting a vision of the post-Bush Republican Party to the nation.

With television tracking the storm's approach and showing images of an emptying New Orleans, it was hard for voters to escape reminders of how Mr. Bush had emerged from Hurricane Katrina severely wounded by judgments of incompetence and lack of empathy.

But rather than run away from the hurricane and its political risks, Mr. McCain ran toward it. He hustled on Sunday to Mississippi to make an appearance there, an unmistakable contrast to Mr. Bush, who flew over New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina but did not set foot in the region until four days after landfall. And Mr. McCain appeared on television with a semi-presidential bearing, briefing Americans on emergency preparations and calling on the nation to put aside partisanship.

It was a gamble that Mr. McCain could turn to his advantage a situation that otherwise threatened to wash away his opportunity to introduce himself and his running mate, Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska, through the careful choreography of his convention.

"There are two sides to the coin," said Joe Gaylord, who was a top adviser to Newt Gingrich, a former House speaker. "On the one hand, you'd like the time to be able to present your message to the public. On the other hand, when the country's going through something like this — and remember just how searing Hurricane Katrina really was for the country — to have that happen almost on the anniversary in almost the exact location, to not pay attention would be a huge mistake."

Mr. McCain and Mr. Bush were not the only ones to put aside the campaign for a moment in deference to the storm. Senator Barack Obama, the Democratic nominee, said he would tap his broad fund-raising list to solicit donations and volunteers to help hurricane victims. But this was to be the Republicans' week, and politically they would seem to have the most to gain or lose.

For Mr. Bush, it was a chance for a do-over. Though many Bush advisers continue to make the case that he was unfairly blamed for the uneven response to Hurricane Katrina, he has few opportunities left before he leaves office in less than five months to burnish his legacy, and this was clearly one.

So on Sunday, Mr. Bush met with federal emergency officials in Washington and, while he will again stay away from New Orleans for the moment to avoid getting in the way, he made plans to travel on Monday to Texas to be in the neighborhood.

For Mr. Bush, the television pictures may bring back haunting memories and spur thoughts of what he could have done differently in 2005.

"We kept making the point that the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans were dysfunctional," said Dan Bartlett, the former Bush White House counselor, in a recent interview. "Yeah, but that's why people wanted us to do something. But it was hard to see that when you were in the middle of it."

Mr. Bush may never erase the black mark, but now at least he has a chance for redemption. "This is an opportunity for the administration to show that it's learned some hard lessons," said Mark McKinnon, a former consultant to both Mr. Bush and Mr. McCain. "It's an opportunity to show government working this time. And if it does, that'll be good for New Orleans, that'll be good for the country and it'll be good for the administration and for the party."

Mr. McCain's decision to get out front and center played into his "Country First" campaign slogan, allowing him to reinforce his message that he is not a typical partisan and to draw a sharp contrast with the Bush administration's response of three years ago.

Even some Democrats agreed. "McCain has the opportunity, as long as he doesn't look like he's politicizing it, to look like he's putting political rhetoric aside," said Robert Shrum, a Democratic consultant who has been involved in conventions since 1972.

Neither Mr. Shrum nor other veteran political strategists could remember a convention turned on its head in quite this way, and so there was little precedent to consult in deciding how to adjust. Convention organizers watched helplessly as cable television focused nonstop on the hurricane on a day that otherwise would have been devoted to chewing over Mr. McCain's biography or his selection of Ms. Palin as his running mate.

But the unspoken advantage for Mr. McCain may be a convention without Mr. Bush or Vice President Dick Cheney. The senator's campaign was never enthusiastic about showcasing the unpopular president at Mr. McCain's coming-out party. As it was, Mr. Bush had been scheduled to leave after his opening-night speech and retreat to Camp David, never appearing with Mr. McCain, who would not arrive until later in the week.

Now the hurricane has done what the McCain team did not think it could do. "For McCain and the Republicans, it's already blown Bush and Cheney out of the convention," Mr. Shrum said. "There was no other way to keep them away."

David Carr contributed reporting from Minneapolis.