

Bush Surveys Bridge, Pledge Aids

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Aug 4, 12:27 PM (ET)

By DEB RIECHMANN

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) - President Bush surveyed Minneapolis' collapsed highway bridge from the ground and air Saturday, viewing the concrete slabs and twisted steel that once spanned the Mississippi River. He pledged to help rebuild the vital link as quickly as possible.

After visiting with rescuers and people caught as the bridge crumbled, the president said he came away with the belief "not only are they committed to a better life, not only are they committed to turning something ugly into something good, but it's going to happen."

His Marine One helicopter circled the site several times during a 10-minute tour, allowing him to gaze down upon the muddy waters where some bodies are trapped. He saw pieces of the highway littered with vehicles, including a school bus hugging a guard rail. Rescue boats below helped in the search for victims.



(AP) Marine One, carrying President Bush, top, flies over the collapsed Interstate 35W bridge over the...
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Later, Bush put on an orange and red hard hat and walked around the bridge site. Yards from the school bus, he stood with Gary Babineau, a construction worker who helped rescue children after the collapse.



(AP) President Bush walks with Col. Margaret H. Woodward, Commander, 89th Airlift Wing, right, as he ...
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"I met a man who was on the bridge when it collapsed and his instinct was to run to a school bus of screaming children and to help bring them to safety," Bush said. "A lot of peoples' first instincts here in the Twin Cities was to save the lives of somebody who was hurting."

Babineau was in a pickup truck on his way home from work when he saw the bridge fall in front of him. His truck did not slide into the water.

"I think if someone did not think it was safe to drive on I think they would have come forward and if they didn't, you know, shame on you. These things do happen. I don't think it's anyone's fault," Babineau said.

After walking around the site, Bush went to a makeshift command post where he spoke with the families of two victims, as well as first responders and rescue workers.

The president praised rescuers and investigators "who are working as hard as they possibly can to save life and to find life, to go under these murky waters to find the facts. And it's going to take a while."

Still criticized for his administration's sluggish response to Hurricane Katrina, Bush hurried to Minnesota soon after the I-35W bridge buckled on Wednesday. The collapse sent dozens of cars sliding in the Mississippi River, killing at least five people and injuring about 100 others.

"Our message to the Twin Cities is we want to get this bridge rebuilt as quick as possible. We understand that this is a main artery of life here," Bush said. The eight-lane span once carried 141,000 vehicles a day.

He added, "I make no promises on the timetable." But he said his transportation chief, Mary Peter, will take charge of the project. "I do promise that she's going to listen to the local authorities to find out what the folks here need. I do promise that when she sees roadblocks and hurdles in the way to getting the job done she'll do everything she can to eliminate them."



(AP) President Bush, right, with James E. West, left, from John Hopkins University and a 2006 National...
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In Washington, Congress sought to direct \$250 million to rebuild the bridge. A final vote was needed in the House on Saturday, but Congress would have to appropriate the money in future legislation.

Federal transportation officials have announced plans to investigate the agency responsible for inspecting highway bridges. The inspector general for the Transportation Department said the inquiry would focus on the Federal Highway Administration's inspection program and ways to improve the agency's oversight of more than 70,000 bridges that have been found structurally deficient.



(AP) President Bush, right, with Charles M. Vest, left, from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a...
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After the collapse, federal officials ordered states to immediately inspect bridges of similar designs. Peters said those inspections had not found any immediate problems.

Federal and state officials, meanwhile, are working with the National Transportation Safety Board to understand why the bridge collapsed.

"I don't want to speculate before they get in and complete their work about what the cause was, but clearly this was not something that we expected to happen given the history of this bridge, the inspection process and how this bridge was rated," Peters said during the flight with Bush to Minnesota.

She spoke about the need to find better ways in the future to prioritize spending on roads, bridges and other public works.

"We certainly have aging infrastructure here in the United States ... but I do believe that American highways and bridges are safe," Peters said. "But certainly we need to look to the future and make sure that we are spending our money where we need to be spending the money."

The government has announced a \$5 million grant to help remove tons of debris and reroute traffic from the major artery in and out of Minneapolis. The White House said the president would support the necessary funding to get the span quickly rebuilt.

The administration's reaction to any disaster is inevitably compared with its slow response to Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast in August 2005.

In March, Bush visited survivors of tornadoes that ripped through Alabama and Georgia. In April, he offered words of hope at Virginia Tech after a gunman killed 32 people and committed suicide. In May, Bush went to Kansas after a tornado wiped out the tiny town of Greensburg.

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