

Clarion-Ledger column for 6/24/01

Boys State delegates strong hope for the future

Earlier this month, I had the opportunity to speak to the delegates of American Legion Boys State during their meeting at Delta State University. After meeting with these young men, I left with a strong sense of confidence in the leaders of the future.

Over 400 young men from around Mississippi converged on Delta State for this week-long exercise, in which they formed political parties and elected a governor (congratulations to Governor Tommy Haskins from Madison) and other officials (including the Mayor of the City of Musgrove, Nick Wilkerson). They conducted the business of government and managed the day-to-day situations that arise as part of governing.

The focus of Boys State is to provide a “hands-on” perspective of government and the role of the individual in making government work successfully. This effort is extremely important in our society; we must do everything we can to encourage people to be involved in government.

It isn't often that I have the chance to address such a large crowd of young people. These were extremely bright young men, and they were eager to hear the good things that are happening in Mississippi. Their excitement, their openness, and their attention were evident that day, and it made me proud to know of their desire to be a part of making things happen.

We talked about our progress in education, such as efforts to raise teacher pay to the southeastern average so we can recruit and retain the best teachers. We talked about the “Computers in the Classroom” initiative, which will put Mississippi at the head of the national class in internet access for public school students.

We talked about economic development, the Advantage Mississippi initiative we put together last year, and its use in landing one of the top projects in the country with the Nissan plant.

The delegates listened carefully, asked relevant and well-thought questions, and demonstrated an impressive depth of knowledge about our government. The questions covered the spectrum of issues, from local to statewide concerns. Their comments and observations provided a refreshing perspective on the work we do every day for the people of Mississippi.

It is my hope they will continue to be involved in the democratic process by which we govern. To a certain extent, our success depends on their dedication to their education, to their fellow Mississippians, and to the premise that we can compete with anybody, anytime, anywhere.

As a state, we are blessed with young men and women who care deeply about Mississippi and its success. I met with some of them last week. I'll meet with more in the weeks and months to come. And, as always, I know I'll come away from those meetings feeling good about our future.