

*Remarks for the
Operation ABOUT FACE Graduation Ceremony
June 28, 2002*

I am proud to be here today, to be part of the first graduation ceremony for the ABOUT FACE program. This is the first time for any of us to attend one of these graduations, and I assure you it will not be my last.

This program does so much for Mississippi's greatest resource – and when I say our greatest resource, I'm referring to the young men and women who are sitting here today, who have learned how to apply the lessons from school to situations in real life.

The ABOUT FACE Program, though still relatively new, offers so much to our state. It offers each of you graduating here today an opportunity, a new start, a chance to direct your lives toward positive and exciting goals.

When we announced this program late last month, I spoke of the challenge of funding it statewide, of making it available for young people in other areas. Today, I'm proud to say we've overcome that challenge.

The ABOUT FACE program will soon be ready to roll in four other sites around Mississippi – Pascagoula, Aberdeen, Greenwood and McComb.

I want to thank everyone who helped us accomplish this so quickly, in particular General Elton Berry, Kim Folsom with the National Guard Bureau, Jim Lott with the Mississippi Development Authority, and the board members of the Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District.

I want you all to be keenly aware of the obligations and responsibilities you will be taking on. There is a wealth of potential in each of you – don't allow that wealth to be wasted. Mississippi deserves better. Your families deserve better. Most importantly, you deserve better.

You've spent time in this program learning from the citizen soldiers of our National Guard. You've worked closely around the men and women of our nation's military, and seen the discipline and focus they use in their work.

Those soldiers are charged with defending a nation. Today, I charge you to help build our nation.

The soldiers you worked with in this program have set a standard of excellence. They have trained, they have worked, and they have prepared for the time when they are called to action. And when called, they answered with enthusiasm and a commitment to serve.

As graduates of ABOUT FACE, you have also set a standard of excellence. You've trained, worked and prepared for your call to action – and that call to action is coming soon.

We're calling on you to take what you've learned over the past few months. Take the discipline, the knowledge and the sense of confidence you've gained and let it loose on the rest of Mississippi.

Work hard in school. Give back to your communities. Be responsible citizens. Keep your minds and bodies strong. Be the leaders we know you are.

Today, I want you to begin proving to us and to the rest of the world that you're the best of the best. You won't be able to build a reputation as the best if you simply talk about what you're going to do; no one will believe you.

You've got to work hard. That's how the Mississippi National Guard earned its reputation as the best – and that's how you'll earn yours.

The poet e.e. cummings once wrote, “it takes courage to grow up and be who you really are.”

We know who you are; we know the potential and promise within each of you. Find that courage within yourself and reveal to the rest of the world who you really are.

I’m proud of you, your families are proud of you, and with good reason. You’ve earned that pride here today. Your job now is to keep it.

God bless you and good luck.