

*Remarks for the
Belzoni Rotary Club
June 3, 2002*

Good afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity to be here with you today. This visit is part of our third “Capital for a Day” program; we are taking your government out of Jackson on a regular basis, and bringing it directly to you.

Over at the Multi-Purpose Building, directors and staff of all executive agencies are on hand to talk with you about any issues and concerns you may have. They will be there until about 6:00, and I would encourage you to visit them. I’d like to ask all the directors here with us today to please stand.

We will have a public reception beginning at 4:00, and I hope to see you all again there.

It's good to be here in Belzoni. The fabric of this community is strong, and we want to make it even stronger. Like all communities around the state and nation, there have been some challenges to take on and overcome – but the strength of your fabric has helped you do that.

Everyone in this room today plays a role in the business of Mississippi, and I appreciate the aggressive and effective manner in which you take on that role. I share that role with you – and it's a role I take seriously as well.

It's been said that "business is a combination of war and sport." The investment, the commitment and the experience we bring to doing business in Mississippi determine whether we win or lose.

That's why we've been investing in Belzoni and Humphreys County. This year, we are putting over \$850,000 into the county alone, for projects ranging from drainage improvements to family projects to post-employment assistance services.

The Delta is a special place, but it also has special challenges.

Meeting those challenges and creating opportunities from them is the focus of our work. Jobs, education, health care and public safety are the four priorities for Mississippi that I outlined in my State of the State address in January – and I believe those are priorities for this area as well.

Let's look at jobs in the area. The largest employers in the county are agricultural based – companies like ConFish and Freshwater Farms. The jobs that come with these industries are valuable, and we must do all we can to protect them and build on them.

We have a tremendous tool in this effort in the Advantage Mississippi Initiative.

Nearly two years ago, the State of Mississippi went after one of the biggest projects around – and we brought it home. What did we get? Nissan. What did we use to get it? The Advantage Mississippi Initiative.

Mentioned as one of the top ten economic development projects in the nation, the Nissan project alone is creating 4,000 direct new jobs and investing nearly \$1 billion in our state. The spin-off Tier 1 suppliers, like M-Tek, Unipres, and Calsonic Kansei, represent another billion dollars and more than 20,000 new jobs.

The Nissan plant is being built right now about 60 miles from here. It will be up and running by this time next year.

Our work to bring in more large projects hasn't slowed. The Hyundai project was a tremendous opportunity for the state, and in the end we got closer to it than 46 other states. The very fact that Mississippi was one of the four finalists for Hyundai's first North American plant speaks volumes about what we're doing here.

There are other successful stories to share – not as large as Nissan, perhaps, but equally important to the man or woman who gets a job or keeps a job because we were able to recruit or retain a business.

Having a job means so much to the fabric of a community. When someone has a job, it means they can keep a roof over their head, food on their table, and clothes on their children. It means they keep a sense of security and a sense of confidence about their lives.

There are companies that want to do business in Mississippi, and we're happy to help them.

A few weeks ago, I returned home from a business development mission to Japan. During our time there, we met with representatives from Nissan and some of the Tier 1 suppliers now setting up shop in Mississippi.

We met with members of different trade organizations, local businessmen and the foreign press. Everyone we met with had a positive viewpoint of Mississippi.

We talked about the Advantage Mississippi Initiative. We talked about the quality of our workforce and the availability of skilled workers. We talked about what we're doing in education to strengthen our economic growth even further.

These are the issues they wanted to hear about in Japan.

Mississippi is a good place to do business. The national recession has presented challenges, but we have worked hard to overcome them.

We are committed to creating quality, high-paying jobs for the people of this state. We are committed to recruiting and retaining strong businesses for this state.

We have the workforce. The recent Pathfinder study found that a new employer in the central area of the state would be able to hire from a pool of more than 68,000 *underemployed* workers.

This doesn't take into account the people who are currently unemployed and would jump at the chance for a good job.

The issue of available workforce isn't really an issue.

Let's look at some more things happening in Mississippi. In the past two years, we've created more than 21,000 new jobs and more than \$6 billion has been invested in our state and our people.

During a national recession, we've been able to do some great things, and we've been able to do them because we are committed to building this state.

First and foremost, we will not back off on our investments and efforts to grow Mississippi.

During the 2002 legislative session, the Mississippi Development Authority was facing cuts of up to 28 percent, but we fought for the MDA, and in the end, we reached common ground on the funding commitment for economic development.

If we don't invest in the primary economic development agency in the state now, we shouldn't expect to see strong results later. It's that simple.

We want jobs here in the Delta. Whether we build on what we have or bring in new businesses, we want jobs. Whether we get them from another state or another country doesn't matter. Whether they are agricultural, manufacturing or technical jobs doesn't matter.

What matters is putting our people to work, supporting our employers, and making sure the sense of security and confidence I mentioned earlier is strong in Humphreys County.

There have also been stories in the paper recently that show Mississippi is working, and working hard.

We led the nation in existing home sales during the first quarter of 2002, with more than 60,000 homes sold. The nearly 30 percent increase is attributed to the number of people coming to new jobs in Mississippi, the number of people who are able to afford new homes, and lower interest rates.

We led the nation in exports during the first half of 2001, with our exports up 30 percent.

We're building and shipping offshore oil rigs, machinery, paper, plastics and furniture. Our exports totaled more than \$3.5 billion, and over 60,000 jobs in the state are related to exports.

The Magnolia State is competing well in the global marketplace, and we're getting ready to take our game to the next level.

At the beginning of May, we formally opened the Mississippi World Trade Center – one of the objectives of the Advantage Mississippi Initiative.

With the opening of the center, opportunities for economic expansion for our state will be realized. Our World Trade Center will bring global attention to our state and offer further evidence that Mississippi can compete with anyone, anytime, anywhere.

We want business in Mississippi, and we're bringing business to Mississippi. Regardless of the inappropriate and irresponsible action taken by the U.S. Chamber, we're moving on with our work.

What they did with their call for a boycott and purchases of full page ads was no more than political blackmail. I want to ask, how many of you have ever supported a boycott? You know no one ever wins in a boycott.

Certainly, there is room for changes to the civil justice system in the state. And, as I have said time and again, when the legislative leadership can demonstrate they have an agreement on legislation that can make it past the committee process and onto the floor, I will call a special session.

I want to commend the legislative leadership for appointing committees to look at the issues of civil justice reform. We pledge our support to work with them toward a reasonable solution. It's time to move ahead.

I have met with doctors across the state, and they have told me their number one concern is the rising cost of medical malpractice insurance. My office has been working to address the issues of cost and availability.

We are looking at some innovative ideas that will offer our health care providers stable and affordable insurance. This is about more than just civil justice reform; it is about ensuring access to quality health care for the people of Mississippi.

What we are doing is unique and innovative. We have had calls from other states asking about our plan, because other states are facing the same challenges we are in this area. We have the opportunity to take the lead on this issue and do some great things, and that opportunity will not be missed.

This plan will be finalized soon, and as you know, I will be calling a special session this summer to address this important health care issue.

The people of Humphreys County must have access to quality health care. A healthy population is ready to work, it's ready to learn, it's ready to be successful. We're going to make sure this happens here and across the state.

It's been said that "without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community." There is a distinct sense of caring here, and that's what makes the fabric of this community so strong.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today.