

*Remarks to the
American Legion Boys State
June 14, 2001*

Thank you, Governor. Governor? Wait a minute – there’s something familiar about that title...

I need to start off by asking a quick question:
Will Mayor _____ and the officials from the
City of Musgrove please stand?

You know, I've never seen a finer group of citizens. I know you are doing a great job – I'm sure your budget is balanced, your teachers are well-paid, health care and housing aren't even issues, the streets are safe. Keep up the good work!

I'm excited about the chance to be here to talk with you about government, its role in our lives and our joint responsibility for its success.

Much of what you hear about government these days centers on bureaucracy, the size of government, and jokes about dealing with the government.

And, sometimes those things are true.

For example, the Lord's Prayer consists of 66 words. The Gettysburg Address has 286 words. The Declaration of Independence – 1,322 words.

Federal government regulations regarding the sale of cabbage? 26,911 words.

Yes, sometimes government can be a little cumbersome.

I read some material about Boys State earlier this week, and there was a line in there that really jumped out at me – “government is just what you make it.” That is such a simple and basic truth, and one so easily forgotten.

Government is what you make it, and the process begins at the ballot box. Voting in America is not simply a right – it is a privilege, and one that is too often taken for granted.

When you go to vote, you are doing more than marking a ballot. You are recognizing the sacrifices of those who have died to protect our way of life and form of government. (*You may want to tell the story of Waverly Ray here*).

When you vote, you are taking an active role in the shaping of public policy.

When you vote, you are earning the right to complain if government doesn't work.

I'm sure you've heard people say, "my vote doesn't make a difference." Let me say that it does.

In two municipal elections last week here in Mississippi, the votes were tied – complete, actual ties. And how were the elections decided? By following state law—and drawing lots.

One vote either way would have swung the election for a candidate. Your vote does make a difference.

And, I've had my own experience with close votes. In the general election for the governor's office in November 1999, I finished with 49.62% of the vote, and 8,343 votes more than my main opponent. However, I didn't get a majority of the vote and the final decision in the election was made by the state House of Representatives – almost three months later in January 2000.

Only 38 percent of the voting age population turned out to vote in that election.

That's a percentage that must grow, and you can help accomplish that goal.

Government works because people get involved. They follow the issues, they raise awareness about issues, they get involved in campaigns, and they vote. Apathy toward government, in the end, accomplishes nothing. Involvement in government always accomplishes something, and often accomplishes great things.

Because of citizen involvement in our government here in Mississippi, we're accomplishing great things now.

We are on our way to being the first state in the nation to have an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom.

A partnership between the state and private business leaders is raising the money to make this happen, and the students of Mississippi will benefit tremendously from this effort.

We are working hard to provide our teachers with competitive salaries. This is part of what we have to do to recruit new teachers and retain the ones we already have.

You may have read about the issue of teacher pay when it came up in this past legislative session. The Legislature approved raises for public school teachers, but only if the tax revenues for the state grew by at least 5 percent.

I told them then, and it's coming true now, that those projections were far too optimistic. It's like my mother taught me, and I'm sure you've heard this from your parents as well – you can't spend money you don't have.

It can't be done on a personal level, and it certainly can't be done in government.

This is an area where we cannot afford to play politics. There is too much at stake here.

We will do the very best for our teachers and those they teach. They deserve no less.

Mississippi deserves no less.

One of the great success stories of the past year for Mississippi has been the decision by Nissan to locate its newest North American plant here, just north of Jackson in Canton.

This was one of the top economic development projects of the year 2000. Nissan will be investing \$930 million here, and 4,000 new jobs will be created.

It is estimated that another 26,000 jobs will be created through the suppliers locating here close to the plant.

That's good news for Mississippi. That's good news for the people, for the economy, for the schools... it's just good news.

Last weekend, I was at the Mississippi Picnic in New York City. Over a thousand people – many of them people from Mississippi, living in New York – came out for fried catfish, good music and a chance to visit with old friends and make new ones.

I was there because I wanted them to know what we're doing back here. I wanted them to know that Mississippi is just as competitive, just as smart, just as worldly as New York or any other state.

And, I wanted to encourage them to come back home, to give something back to the state where their roots are found.

Hodding Carter, a native Mississippian and a great journalist, once said that there are two things we can give our children – roots and wings.

Your roots are here. Your roots are your family, your friends, your teachers – and they will help you find your wings.

And, I hope your wings take you to new and exciting places, to see and experience all life has to offer. But, in the end, I also hope your wings will steer you back home to Mississippi.

We're working hard every day to bring more good news to the people of this great state. I look forward to the day when you are there working with us, because I know you will be instrumental in making things happen.

I know you will leave Boys State with the knowledge that, yes, "I can make a difference."

I look out on this audience, I think about the work you've done this week, I think about the work you'll do in the future – and I feel good. I feel confident.

In 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter, “It will remain to those now coming on the stage of public affairs to perfect what has been so well begun by those going off it.”

I don't plan on leaving the stage of public affairs anytime soon, but I look forward to sharing the stage with you.

Together, let's make some great things happen for Mississippi.

Thank you.