

*Remarks for the
Cleveland Rotary Club
October 30, 2002*

(discussion of priorities – story of Jordan / 15-point buck)

You all know my main priority is education. I believe we share a common commitment to education, to providing the very best foundation we can for our children to grow up, compete and succeed here at home. I think you would agree with me that a quality education is the basis for a quality job.

We're making progress now in education that's making other states step back and watch what we're doing. We're not being reactive anymore; we're taking a proactive stance and making a difference.

We're putting Internet-accessible computers in every public school classroom in the state, and we're not just buying these computers – they're being built by students across the state.

I was up in Hernando last week, visiting a group of students during a computer “blitz build.”

With the help of ExplorNet, these students are building computers from scratch, putting their own knowledge into a vehicle to help teach the next class of students.

It’s amazing watching these kids, because they get so excited about the work they’re doing.

One young man said that building computers meant more to him than anything – except football.

Another one said it was the kind of practical, hands-on education that he enjoyed. What a great way for our students to learn and to lead.

It's important, too, to point out that Mississippi is going to be the first state in the nation to have these computers in every classroom. Just last week, a policy analyst with the National Governors Association commented on what we're doing here.

You know what he said? He said that this project "puts Mississippi at the head of the wave of technological innovations."

Mississippi. At the head of the wave of technological innovations. Not something most people would expect to be hearing, but it's true. It's happening around us every day.

Last month, Mississippi was selected as one of six states to participate in the first phase of the "Following the Leaders" project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. I'm proud to say that the Hayes Cooper Center here in Cleveland is one of fifteen schools in the state to be taking part in this initiative.

This project focuses on helping states implement the mandates of the recent “No Child Left Behind” legislation recently passed by Congress. I was proud to be one of two governors in the nation appointed by Governor Engler of Michigan to lead the effort to pass this legislation.

When the announcement was made about our selection, it was said that we had “an infectious enthusiasm and commitment to students,” as well as the “immediate capacity to use ‘Following the Leaders’ tools effectively.”

Those are strong endorsements of the work we've been doing, and a challenge to us for the work that's yet to be done.

The work of building opportunity is well underway. From the rural school districts to the halls of graduate schools, we must work together to improve the alignment of policies and practices across educational sectors, and strengthen accountability in meeting this aggressive agenda.

Yet, while the work is underway, there's so much more to do – and that work must begin with the financial support we are willing to put behind its efforts.

It's no secret that every state in the nation is facing tight budgetary times. The condition of the national economy is presenting challenges to us in so many areas, forcing us to re-focus on issues such as tuition and scholarships.

These tight times, however, demand that we set priorities and stand by them.

In Mississippi, I will continue to call for the adequate resources necessary to achieve success in education – at all levels.

To accomplish this demands tough decisions.

We cannot afford to base our budget on the simple hope that our economy will turn around.

We have to use realistic numbers, not the numbers we would all prefer.

If the creation of a budget that supports all levels of education depended solely on what we wished would happen with the economy, we would have no problem.

But that's not the case. When we craft our budgets, budgets that must – first and foremost – provide for the education of all our people, we must make tough decisions about where the funds for those budgets will come from.

Simply, we are building our foundation as strong and secure as we can. We are all aware of the biblical proverb about building a house on sand. We are building ours on the most stable rock we can, and that rock is education.

It's exciting to think about what we can do with education as a priority. There is no limit to what can happen. Horizons are broadened, the sky is the limit.

(tell your own story here; upbringing, first in family to attend college)

I understand the hard work it takes to go where others haven't, and I appreciate the challenges faced by students today.

We've chosen a path covered with challenges and surrounded by opportunity. How we walk that path and use our resources will determine our success for generations to come.

I want to talk about something else we have in common, and that's growing Mississippi. I mentioned earlier about how we are working to offer quality education so we can attract quality jobs, and those jobs are already coming in.

When I visit with officials from other companies around the country and around the world, they only want to know about one thing – whether or not we’re open for business. Make no doubt about it – Mississippi is open for business, and the numbers back it up.

We’re growing jobs in this state. From Nissan to a small business, more people are working. You’re all familiar with the good news of Nissan – the \$1.5 billion investment, more than 5,000 jobs, and the message that Mississippi can compete at the highest levels of the global marketplace.

You need to be familiar with something else.
You need to know – many of you already may know – that last month, Mississippi was named as one of the top ten states in the nation for small business survival. We've got more than 54,000 small businesses working in the state that support that statement.

The chief economist for the group that released the survey had this to say, and I want you to listen carefully because his words are important.

He said, “when it gets its policy mix right, a state is well-positioned to compete both nationally and globally, with policies geared to help economic growth accelerate, incomes increase, and job creation improve.”

He’s right on target. Mississippi’s right on target. We’ve got our policy mix right, we’re competing around the country and around the world. Job creation and incomes are rising.

The latest statistics from the Mississippi Development Authority bear this out. Over the past two years, more than 1,700 new facilities; over 47,000 new jobs; and \$12.9 billion invested in our state.

Over 21,000 of those new jobs – with investments of \$5.3 billion – came from the expansion of existing industries in the state.

We're recruiting new business, we're retaining existing business, we're making a difference in Mississippi.

Monday's edition of *The Bolivar Commercial* carried a story I'm sure most of you may have seen, with the kind of headline we all like to see: "Unemployment drops in area." Bolivar County's unemployment dropped out of the double-digit range; statewide, only ten counties have double-digit unemployment.

Now, that's still ten counties too many, but we are making great progress.

The bottom line is this: Mississippi is growing, and it's not happening because we're sitting around waiting for someone else to help us out.

We are working together to go after jobs, to improve our schools, to grow our economy, to show the world we can compete anytime, anywhere.

That's something we have in common. That's something we can talk about here today, and talk about with pride.

Thank you.