

*Remarks to the
Covington County Chamber of Commerce
August 13, 2001*

Thank you, James, and thank you for the invitation to be here with you this evening. I am excited about the opportunity to talk with you about the great things happening in Mississippi and our plans for the future.

Let me begin with what I consider to be one of the most important things that's happened in this state in a generation – a true commitment from the state of Mississippi to our teachers and our children.

We've passed historic legislation that will raise our teacher salaries to the southeastern average, something we've been working on for years.

This legislation will, over time, lift Mississippi from 49th to 19th in the nation in terms of teacher salaries.

Through the work of the Legislature on July 23, we sent a message to the rest of the nation that Mississippi has set education as a priority for its people.

In fact, the New York Times even wrote an editorial about the teacher pay raise, saying that, with scarce resources and a small economy, we had put together the kind of attractive package that states like New York have yet to match.

It sure feels good to know that people around the country are looking at us and saying, we should be doing what they're doing – the people in Mississippi are building a great foundation for their future.

Now that we've passed the teacher pay raise, we need to look carefully at other issues as well. During the next legislative session, I want to make sure we help our state employees and faculty at our universities and colleges.

I unveiled a proposal at the Neshoba County Fair to make this happen.

My proposal would take a portion of the annual tobacco payments – estimated for next year at \$210 million – and divert it into health care programs that would allow us to receive matching federal dollars.

One thing I want to make clear – the tobacco trust fund, which currently has about \$650 million in it, would not be touched. In fact, under this plan, it would continue to grow.

I simply suggest that we use part of the annual payments, payments that will keep coming as long as the tobacco companies are in business, and make the most of those dollars.

If, for example, we took \$100 million out of next year's payment and put it toward Medicaid, we could get a four to one match from the federal government.

With one simple move, we could turn \$100 million into \$500 million. Think about what that money could do for health care for the people of Mississippi.

Then, by freeing up general funds, let's give our state employees and faculties a pay raise.

Let's help them help their families by improving their insurance, so they can afford to get the health care they need when they need it.

I have talked with the legislative leadership and the attorney general about this proposal. Every member of the Legislature has been invited to the Governor's Mansion to discuss the plan over lunch; in fact, I met with another group of them today.

I introduced this plan five months before the legislative session so that we would have time to study this proposal from every angle, and figure out how to make the most of it.

We are going to work together to make this plan work, and we're going to do it because it's the right thing to do and the right time to do it.

Certainly there are many variables to consider in this proposal, but again, I want to work with the Legislature on this. We are facing a sluggish national economy, and I don't anticipate that will change in the next year or so.

Because of the condition of the economy, which is something all states are dealing with and many are in much worse shape than we are, we have to be creative. We have to create our own opportunities.

I said this at the Neshoba County Fair, and I'll say it again – I won't make promises to you based on false information or false hope. That's not why I have this job.

The promise I will make to you is that the welfare of the people of Mississippi is at the forefront of all we do.

We've shown what we can do when we put our minds to it, and the rest of the country is taking notice. Let's show them again what we can do, and do it for the people of Mississippi.

Thank you.