

*Remarks to the
Mississippi Association of Builders and Contractors
July 14, 2001*

Good evening, and thank you for the opportunity to join you here tonight. I'm glad to have the chance to visit with you and talk about some of the great things that are happening in Mississippi, particularly with respect to your business.

It's been said that the only thing that comes to us without effort is old age. We've been putting out a lot of effort lately, and it's paying off.

One focus of my administration has been improving the atmosphere for business in Mississippi. Last summer, we took a giant step forward in that area with the passage of the Advantage Mississippi initiative.

This program revamped our economic development efforts and refocused our energies in attracting business to Mississippi.

Through it, we landed one of the top economic development projects in the country. You know what I'm talking about, and I'm sure some of you are working on it now.

The Nissan plant currently under construction means an investment of \$930 million into our economy and 4,000 new jobs for the people of Mississippi.

The impact from this investment alone is tremendous. And, there's more to come.

Suppliers will be locating here to support Nissan, and we're looking at more jobs and further investments in construction, infrastructure and material.

We've made great progress in economic development, and Nissan is just the beginning.

Their investment in Mississippi sends a signal to the business world that says, “yes, Mississippi is a good place to do business. It has the workforce. It has the location. It has the commitment and the capability to compete with anyone, anywhere, anytime.”

To continue our success in economic development, we must continue our efforts to improve education.

As technology continues to be an integral part of doing business, a trained, well-educated workforce must be in place to attract business.

And where do we start with these efforts in education? Two words – teacher pay.

A couple of months ago, the Mississippi Economic Council released its “Economic State of the State” survey. One of the questions asked in the survey was, “if you were governor or a legislator for a day, what would you do?”

For both business leaders and private citizens, the number one answer was “increase teacher pay.”

I'm sure you're all aware of the fact that I've called a special session to remove the five percent provision placed on the teacher pay raise legislation last year.

This provision said that the raises would take effect only if revenues grew by more than five percent.

I opposed the provision then, and for the past year I have been calling for its removal. I'm pleased that the Lt. Governor has joined me in this effort.

There's been some discussion about why I'm not waiting to handle this issue in a special session with congressional redistricting, or waiting until the regular session.

First of all, this issue stands on its own merits. It's one of the most important things we can address for our state.

We need to address the issue now because we've got teachers waiting to see what we do. Many are looking at moving out of state for higher salaries; we need to keep them here.

I also don't want to combine teacher pay with redistricting, because the redistricting will most likely be a divisive issue. We simply can't afford to have teacher pay lost in the discussion.

And, we will begin budget discussions in the next few weeks. It is important to have the teacher pay issue settled before these discussions begin.

I'm committed to the children and teachers of Mississippi, and I won't let up until we finally live up to the promises we've made to them.

You know, no one has ever tripped over a mountain. It's the little rocks that we stumble over. If we can carefully step over those little rocks of education, economic development, health care, public safety... if we can make it over those rocks, then we'll cross the mountain.

And when we do, we'll see the great state of Mississippi reach its full potential.

We've got the people, we've got the talent, we've got the drive to reach our goals. I'm excited about what's happening in Mississippi.

I feel good about where we're going, and so should you. We've met our challenges head-on, we've been proactive instead of reactive, and we're seeing the results.

Thank you for the role you play every day in building our dreams. Thank you for your commitment to building Mississippi.