

*Remarks for the
National Business Women's Week Luncheon
October 16, 2001*

Thank you, Linda, for the invitation to be here with you all today. I'm glad for the opportunity to be with you, to talk with you about what's happening in Mississippi, and to thank you for the role you play in making positive things happen.

Last night I spoke to a "Profiles in Leadership" dinner in Cleveland. I spoke about the definition of a leader as a "visionary with a poorly developed sense of fear and no concept of the odds against her."

Today, we honor all those women who have taken a leadership role in business around our state and our nation, those visionaries who have paid no attention to the odds and have worked hard to realize their goals.

Women now represent almost half of the total national workforce. The workplace is changing every day, and I am proud of the role women are playing in helping bring that change about.

We are now seeing women at the highest levels of business and government, demonstrating tremendous competence and ability. Look at Condoleeza Rice, National Security Advisor to President Bush and the work she is doing during this time of national crisis.

President Bush has named other women to his cabinet, including Gale Norton, Secretary of the Interior; Elaine Chao, Secretary of Labor; and Ann Veneman, Secretary of Agriculture, who spoke in Cleveland at a Delta Council meeting just this past May.

And we see women taking strong leadership roles here at home, women like Carolyn Shanks, President of Entergy; Sister Dorothea; President of St. Dominic Hospital in Jackson; and of course, all of you here in this room today.

I am excited about this progress and the hope it offers for the next generation of young women. Today, our daughters are encouraged to go after goals that other generations may have not pursued.

I have a daughter, Carmen Rae, who is a wonderful, independent 13-year-old. She is making her way in this world with a great sense of interest in so many things. She plays the drums. She played football for her junior high team. Nothing slows her down, and I love watching her set a goal and go after it.

That's one way we can help good things happen for our daughters and all our children – encourage them to go after the things that others may say can't be reached.

That's what we've been doing here in Mississippi lately.

We've made great strides in educating our children. We've made a commitment to paying our teachers like the professionals they are, a commitment that will raise our state from 49th to 19th in the nation over the next few years in terms of average teacher salary.

I'm proud that Mississippi is being seen as a leader in education by other states. In fact, the day after the July special session, The New York Times published an editorial praising the work we had done together.

Mississippi, according to The Times, had – with its scarce resources and small economy – put together the type of package that continues to elude New York.

I don't know about you, but I think it's about time Mississippi set the standard in educational progress in our country. And, we're doing it in other areas of education as well.

Through a unique partnership between the state and private industry, we are working toward our goal of placing an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state. By the end of next year, Mississippi will be the first state in the nation to reach this milestone.

The lead business person on the private sector side of this partnership is none other than Carolyn Shanks, who I mentioned earlier. She has done a tremendous job of raising awareness and, more importantly, raising money for this program.

The “Computers in the Classroom” initiative, working with the new commitment to teachers, will prepare the children of this great region and the entire state for the marketplace of the 21st century – a marketplace that will be borderless, wireless and global.

That is how we're meeting the promise of the Delta.

We are looking at new ways to address the health care issues affecting so many Mississippians, and especially those in the more rural areas. For too long, we have led the country in those areas where we want to be in last place – first in diabetes, first in heart disease, first in population underserved by primary care physicians.

Now, we have an opportunity to change those rankings; we don't have to continue leading in the "worst firsts."

Here's how we do it: we use a portion of the historic tobacco settlement to make a dramatic difference in the lives of the people of this state. We can remove the obstacles that have held us back, and commit ourselves to a better future.

Let's take a portion of those dollars and use them for what they were earmarked for – the health care needs of the people of Mississippi.

Let's use those dollars to maximize available federal matching funds. In other words, give us a quarter and we'll turn it into a dollar.

Let's then use those dollars for things like expanding screenings for cancer and heart disease; putting more nurses in schools to help our children; and easing the health insurance burden on state and school employees by eliminating deductibles for doctor visits and reducing dependent costs.

Let's expand and improve screenings and treatment for breast and cervical cancer.

Let's make it easier for working parents to provide for the health care needs of themselves and their children.

You've heard the phrase, "pay me now or pay me later." That's what we're talking about here. We can spend money on the front end on preventive measures, or we can spend more money later on dealing with the effects of untreated illnesses.

I want us to be proactive instead of reactive.

I want us to continue setting standards for other states to emulate. I want us to build a healthier economy, a healthier population, and a healthier educational system – and you are the ones to help make it happen.

Thank you for what you have done so far, and I look forward to what we can accomplish in the days to come.

