

*Remarks to the
NCO Association Conference
April 13, 2002*

It is always great to be around the men and women of the Mississippi National Guard! I am proud, and the citizens of Mississippi are proud, of the work you have done – and the work you are doing – for our state and our nation!

You have always been there when needed. When America looked for its best soldiers to enforce the peace in Bosnia, she looked to the Task Force Rifles.

I had the opportunity – and the honor – to visit these soldiers in Bosnia last December. I don't know that I've ever been more proud of Mississippi or her people.

The soldiers of the Task Force Rifles demonstrated, in every way, why America called on them for the mission in Bosnia. They were the best trained. They had the best discipline. They had the best commanders.

Simply put, they were the best – and our country knows it.

The men and women of the Task Force Rifles, like all of you here, practice the concept of the “citizen soldier” here at home. During their time in Bosnia, that concept was practiced in the atmosphere of a war-torn nation.

Just as they do in the communities of Mississippi, these soldiers made themselves an integral part of the communities they served in Bosnia. The people of this region realized firsthand the ideals and compassion of America, along with the hospitality of Mississippi.

That reputation is shared with all soldiers of the Mississippi National Guard. Following the tragic events of September 11, you were the ones called to service.

You protected our airports and the Grand Gulf nuclear facility. You supported air missions overseas and security missions here at home.

The 172nd Air Wing, the 255th Air Control Squadron, the 186th Air Refueling Wing, the 114th Military Police – their service has played, and continues to play, a key role in the security of America.

The world changed on September 11. We were hit and hit hard, but we weren't knocked down – and we've never stood taller.

We are an ideal for millions outside our borders – we are the personification of the principles of freedom, liberty and justice.

Your job is to protect those principles, to keep them strong and steady as a symbol for the rest of the world.

You're doing your job well.

You're also doing the work that needs to be done to keep the Guard strong. Enlistment in the Mississippi National Guard is up, which means the strength of the Guard is up.

The Mississippi Army National Guard met their end strength goals for Fiscal Year 2001, with the most enlistments they've had in the past five years. A total of 1,740 men and women joined this past fiscal year.

And, the Army National Guard also had their first net increase in nine years, with an increase of 215 soldiers.

The Mississippi Air National Guard was equally successful.

For the first time in five years, the Air Guard ended their fiscal year above 100 percent of their authorized strength, with an end strength of 102.7 percent.

What does this mean to our state? It means that a 100-person unit will generate approximately \$300,000 in federal and state dollars for that community.

Right now, we are in 80 of the 82 counties in Mississippi – a total of 94 communities.

The impact of the Guard units in these communities is tremendous.

At a time when the focus of national security has increasingly involved the Guard, it is good to know our forces were fully manned and trained prior to September 11. The men and women of the National Guard – all of you here today – represent the best of what the Guard is about: civilians in peacetime, soldiers in war.

And Mississippi has always answered our nation's call, and we're answering the call today.

The fact we have accepted this responsibility doesn't come without a price. Meeting recruitment and retention goals is challenging.

We are called on by our nation in higher numbers and for greater missions, and with good reason. We have proven to America and the world that, when needed, we will respond.

It's been written that "life without liberty is like the body without a spirit."

Thank you for the work you do to keep the liberty and the spirit strong. God bless you and God bless America!