

*Remarks for the
National Guard Officer's Conference
April 26, 2003*

- Want to begin by saying how proud I am to be here with you today
 - Thank you for your commitment to your job
 - Thank you for your dedication to our nation

On September 11, 2001, I asked General Lipscomb one simple question – “is the Mississippi National Guard ready?”

His response was just as simple – “yes sir, we are.”

And he was right. Within seven days, the Mississippi National Guard stood up a contingency force at seven airports and the Grand Gulf Nuclear Facility.

Since that day in September, roughly 4,000 National Guard soldiers have served on active duty, called up by me and by President Bush in the war against terrorism.

Today, the war in Iraq is, for all intents and purposes, over – and our troops have liberated a nation from the iron rule of a dictator. Our sons and our daughters, our brothers and sisters, have answered the call of their country to defend the principles of freedom and justice that we hold dear.

In recent weeks, we have watched as thousands of soldiers of the Mississippi National Guard have boarded buses and airplanes en route to service in places we know, and some we don't.

They are deployed to locations in the Middle East, in Asia, and to locations that remain classified. They are in the danger zone, but they are ready. And *know this* – wherever they are, they are well-trained, and *they'll get the job done.*

As commander-in-chief of the Mississippi National Guard, I can't express enough the *pride* I feel knowing that our soldiers are serving their state and their nation.

This much I do know for sure – when America needs the *very best*, the call is made to *Mississippi*.

You are the ones called on by your country because you have proven yourselves time and time again, and you have set a high standard for others to follow.

The impact of your example as soldiers – and of the leadership of Major General Lipscomb – can be seen in the tremendous recruiting numbers for the Mississippi National Guard.

We lead the nation in recruiting. Actually, we're second behind Guam, but we're also a little bigger. But, the proof is in the numbers. When I took office, I told General Lipscomb I wanted to increase the strength of the Guard, and that's what has happened. In the last three years, we have seen a gain of more than 500 new soldiers – and that has happened after a nine year period with no new recruits.

Just as important, the number of soldiers who joined the Mississippi National Guard straight out of high school jumped as well, *from 62% to 82%*.

The role of the Guard in serving as a positive influence for our young people has never been stronger, and I am extremely proud of the fact that you are in our schools working with our kids.

This work takes other forms as well – the About Face program, another area where Mississippi is setting the standard for the rest of the nation, and the Youth Challenge program, helping to turn lives around and build a better future.

The influence of the Mississippi National Guard is felt far beyond our borders, and it is important that it remain a positive influence.

Since the beginning of the war, we watched with a mix of pride and worry as our soldiers carried the fight toward Baghdad, fighting fierce battles under difficult conditions.

They've made it to Baghdad – and the reign of terror of Saddam Hussein has come to an end because our soldiers have made it happen. Our soldiers are winning the war against terrorism and those who would use terror to inflict harm on us and other innocent people.

In times of war, there are those who see a hopeless end; I see an endless hope. America is the greatest nation in the history of mankind, and nothing will change that.

America is not just a country. It is an ideal, a principle. That principle remains strong today and forever – and *it remains strong because soldiers from Mississippi stand ready to protect it.*

It remains strong because of soldiers like the 420 members of the Task Force Rifles, who were awarded the Army Chief of Staff's Deployment Excellence Award for their service in Bosnia.

It remains strong because of soldiers like Major Janice (jan-ESE) Denley, a flight nurse who provided medical attention to soldiers in combat conditions in Afghanistan and was awarded the air medal for her service.

It remains strong because of soldiers like Lieutenant Colonel Pete Mercier (MER-see-ay), who is serving with 29 other members of the 183rd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron , 172nd Airlift Wing, at Andrews Air Force Base to oversee the return of injured soldiers returning from overseas.

And it remains strong because of soldiers like Larry Brown, Henry Brown and Shane Childers – brave Mississippians who made the ultimate sacrifice in this cause.

It is the leadership of those of you in this room, and those under your command, that makes the Mississippi National Guard the greatest group of soldiers in the nation. You are the backbone of America's military, and you are setting a new standard of excellence.

I'm proud of your work, and I'm proud to tell your story to others around our great country.

May God bless our state and our nation.