

*Remarks to the
New Albany Rotary Club
November 30, 2001*

Good afternoon.

(tell story of Tennessee-LSU game; 10,000 ways to wear orange, and 10,000 ways to do business)

Great things are happening in our state. We are capturing the attention of the world outside our borders because of the exciting things we've got going on, and I'm sure you will agree that it's good for Mississippi to be recognized for being on the cutting edge.

We're on the cutting edge in education. Just this past week, it was announced that 405 teachers across the state have earned National Board Certification. This year-long process recognizes the very best in teachers, as determined by their peers.

We now have over 1,100 teachers in Mississippi with this certification – the sixth highest number in the nation. Let me repeat that – the sixth highest in the nation. Not 50th, not 40th, not 10th – sixth highest.

Mississippi was also the first state in the nation to offer more pay to teachers with national board certification.

We are also on track to be the first state in the nation to place an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom, a goal we'll meet by the end of next year.

We've put together a unique partnership between the public and private sectors, a partnership that has raised money and solicited used computers for the classrooms.

We're going to ensure that our children are ready to compete in the economy of the 21st century, an economy that will be global, borderless and wireless.

Now, combine this with our commitment to pay teachers like the professionals they are. In July, we made this commitment law and the rest of the nation stood up and took notice.

The day after the special session on teacher pay, the New York Times ran an editorial piece commenting that “Mississippi had been able to put together the kind of package that continued to elude New York.”

High praise for our work here, and I’m proud our commitment to our teachers has received such widespread notice. I want the world to know that we’re serious about education in Mississippi, we’re serious about building a better world for our people, we’re serious about shaping a brighter future for our children.

You know and I know that education is the foundation for all of this work. We're building a strong foundation.

And on that foundation, we're going to build an economy like our state has never seen.

Last year, we landed the top economic development project in the nation, and we did it like no one else.

It's a process that normally takes 18 months. From our first contact with Nissan to the day we announced – 5 months. We did it because we were ambitious, we were aggressive, and we wanted the project more than anyone else.

That's the way we're handling economic development now. With the Advantage Mississippi Initiative, we are making great progress in recruiting new businesses and retaining existing ones.

We've also got one of the best economic development professionals in the country coming to work with us starting next Monday. Bob Rohrlack is going to hit the ground running as the new executive director of the Mississippi Development Authority, and he brings great credentials.

First and foremost among those credentials? A master's in economic development from the University of Southern Mississippi. Bob knows Mississippi. He knows our past; he knows our potential – and most importantly, he knows we're going to live up to our potential.

That potential stretches to every corner of Mississippi and it stretches to every Mississippian. It cannot and will not be wasted.

Finally, to make the most of that potential, we must have a healthy Mississippi. It's tough to do your best at work or in school if your health isn't good. We recognize that a healthy child goes to school ready to learn, and a healthy adult goes to a job ready to work.

I have put out a proposal to address the health care needs of the people of our state, the needs we've referred to as our "worst firsts."

These are the areas where we lead the country, but don't want to.

We're first in prevalence for diabetes, heart disease death rate, lack of breast cancer screenings in women over 50, population underserved by primary care physicians and age-adjusted death rate.

We're second in overweight population,
hospitalizations and emergency room visits.
We're fifth in uninsured population.

These are numbers we can change, and
we're going to do it.

I want us to think creatively about how we
can make a difference, and I believe we
begin by looking at how we can maximize
our health care dollars.

Through the historic settlement with the tobacco companies, Mississippi receives a massive check each year. To date, we have about \$650 million sitting in a health care trust fund that was established by the legislature. That money does nothing more than earn interest. By law, once it's in the fund, it cannot be touched.

This year, we will receive about \$210 million from the tobacco companies, and we will continue to receive annual payments from them as long as they are in business. The revenue stream from the tobacco industry may not end for another 50 years.

I want us to use that money wisely, and I want us to use it for nothing else but the health care needs of our people.

If we were to take \$100 million out of the annual payment, before it goes to the trust fund, we could match it through federal Medicaid dollars and grow it to \$400 million.

Simply put, give me a quarter and I'll turn it into a dollar.

Think about the difference we could make in peoples' lives with that kind of investment – a difference between life and death, a difference between continuing to work and earning disability.

We could do so much for the people, and the trust fund would continue to grow. My proposal – and I want to make this very clear – does not touch the health care trust fund. And again, I only want to use money for health care.

Wasn't that the original intent behind the settlement against the tobacco industry?

Don't the people of Mississippi deserve to get something out of this settlement?

At a time when our budget is restrained by a sluggish economy, I believe this is a wise and prudent method for improving health care without breaking the bank.

I firmly believe that saying "I must do something" solves more problems than saying "something must be done."

You won't hear me say, "something must be done." I have a responsibility to 2.8 million people in this great state, from Bay St. Louis to Corinth, and I will fulfill that responsibility.

We live in America's state of promise. It is a promise too long unkept. That has changed.

Mississippi is doing more and doing it better than ever before. The momentum is there, and it is growing.

I am excited about the goals we've set for ourselves. I know you share those goals with me, and I look forward to reaching them.

Thank you.