

*Remarks to the
Stennis Institute Press Lunch
December 3, 2001*

Will Rogers once said, “even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

As most of you know, I don’t do much sitting. I want to make sure we make the most of the incredible potential and promise of Mississippi. I’m confident in the work we’re doing and proud of the progress we’re making.

We're building a strong foundation for success in this state, a foundation built on the top priority of my administration – education.

We've made a commitment to improving the educational opportunities for every individual in our state.

Last July, a promise was made to teachers across the state, a promise to pay them as the professionals they are. We're going to keep that promise.

Every child in Mississippi has God-given talents and abilities. I want to see them make the most of them, and one way to do that is by ensuring the teachers at the front of the class have the tools they need.

I also want to take a moment to recognize the teachers across our state who have just earned their National Board Certification.

This recognition comes from their peers after a year-long process, and we have the sixth highest number of nationally-certified teachers in the nation.

In fact, Mississippi was the first state to offer more pay for teachers earning this certification.

In addition to a pay raise package that will lift Mississippi from 49th in the nation to 19th in terms of teacher salary, we are partnering with the private sector to open the world to our students.

Through the “Computers in the Classroom” initiative, we are going to place an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state. When we complete this program at the end of next year, we will be the first state in the nation to have done this.

Mississippi, first in the nation – sounds good, doesn’t it? I want to hear it more often and about more things.

Another area where we can be a leader is health care. As you know, I've put out a proposal to address the health care needs of our people, needs that affect so much of what we do.

It's simple, really; healthy children go to school ready to learn. Healthy adults go to their jobs ready to work. A healthy population contributes to a healthy economy.

We can bring about tremendous change in our health care system if we just don't sit still, if we stay on track and commit to making a difference.

You've heard us talk about the "worst firsts," those areas where Mississippi leads the nation and we shouldn't.

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

We're going to change those statistics.

I have suggested that we take a portion of the annual tobacco settlement payments, payments which will continue until the tobacco industry ceases to exist. By taking \$100 million out of a payment that this year will be about \$210 million, we can dramatically affect health care in Mississippi.

There are matching federal funds available through Medicaid, and we should be going after them.

If we invest \$100 million into matching funds through Medicaid, we can put \$400 million into health care.

Simply put, give us a quarter and we'll turn it into a dollar.

Since the introduction of this proposal, dozens of health care experts and physicians have been working on it. Two representatives of the Department of Health and Human Services have seen the proposal, and believe it has strong merit.

Plans to address the issues of heart disease and diabetes, two of the leading killers in Mississippi, are now being reviewed to craft into this proposal.

We have a Cardiovascular Health State Plan as well as a State Plan for Diabetes Prevention and Control. These plans have been shaped over the past year and are a good fit for the proposal I've offered.

The proposal is gaining strong support. On October 25, the State Board of Health endorsed components of the proposal. Dr. Ed Thompson stated that the plan offered options that could provide dramatic improvements, and they options should be considered.

I've talked with doctors and health care professionals around the state, and the response is the same.

As promised, I've been working on this. I want to make sure we do absolutely everything we can to make sure we have a healthy Mississippi. It's possible, and we will make it happen.

Health care is only one layer on the foundation of education; economic development is another.

The world is taking notice of Mississippi now, and for all the right reasons. They see what we've done with the Advantage Mississippi Initiative, both in terms of recruiting and retaining business.

They see the Nissan plant, with its investment of nearly \$1 billion and 4,000 jobs. They see the suppliers already coming in and breaking ground, with investments over \$150 million and thousands more jobs.

They see us taken seriously for other major economic development projects.

Bottom line, they see Mississippi as a serious player in the world market – and I’m proud of that. It’s about time people realized that we can compete with anyone, anytime, anywhere.

Today is a big day for economic development in Mississippi; it’s the first official day on the job for Bob Rohrlack, our new executive director of the Mississippi Development Authority.

Many of you have met Bob already, and if you haven't, I encourage you to do so. Bob brings a wealth of experience to his new position, and I'm confident he will help us continue making great things happen.

I'm excited about what's going on in Mississippi, about our potential and our promise, about our ability to accomplish some fantastic things.

But to do this, we have to be realistic in our planning. I have to say I'm disappointed in the budget recommendations recently released by the Legislative Budget Committee.

Let me say, I believe realism and pessimism are not the same. Unfortunately, we have to face the facts that we are in a national recession and consumer confidence is down.

We've been through this before, and we're paying the price now with revenue collections down for the year some \$88 million.

I want to work with the Legislative Budget Committee to develop budget recommendations based on realistic numbers. I've talked with business people and economists around the state and country about the potential for our revenue growth; I'm not basing my arguments on a hunch.

I simply don't want us to develop a credit card budget where we spend as much as we want, then suffer when the bill comes due.

It's not the way families in the state manage their income, and it's not the way we should, either.

I've offered to compromise with the Committee, and it's not too late for us to talk more. By law, we have to agree on a revenue estimate.

The law states “the General Fund revenue estimate shall be the estimate jointly adopted by the Governor and the Joint Legislative Budget Committee.” That estimate has not been jointly adopted, and I would submit to you that any budget recommendation currently on the table is not valid.

Let me show you, too, why the law reads the way it does. Ten years ago, the governor submitted a budget based on revenues not available under the existing law; so, the Legislature changed the law to say the Governor and Legislature had to agree.

Now, with the same appropriations chairmen today as ten years ago, they're saying the law is broken.

The Legislative Budget Committee has offered recommendations, but we can't balance the budget by cutting education.

We can't make our house stronger by weakening the foundation it's built on. It just won't work.

There is time to work together on this issue, and I stand ready to work with them toward a compromise – just as I stand ready for a decision on redistricting.

Unfortunately, the Legislature has abdicated its responsibility to draw four new congressional districts, and seems content to have a court draw the lines.

We control our destiny in this area, and it is disappointing to know the good things that could have come out of this process will not happen.

I've been hopeful that the Speaker and Lieutenant Governor would let me know they had reached an agreement, but it doesn't seem to be happening.

The cost of a special session on redistricting will pale next to the cost to the state for the lawsuits that will surely arise from this issue.

There is time to change the things that are holding us back right now. I've offered to compromise and be a part of an agreement; let's hope it still happens.

Mississippi has so much promise, so much potential. We are held back only by indecision.

I have never looked at a situation and thought, “something must be done.” I look at situations and think, “I must do something.”

I want every Mississippian to think that way. I want us to work together to accomplish those things I know we can do. We have been blessed with the talent; we must invest it well, and not be content with keeping it buried in the ground.

Thank you.