

State of the State Address
Governor Ronnie Musgrove
January 16, 2002

Governor Tuck. Mr. Speaker. President Pro Tem Little. Speaker Pro Tem Clark.
Members of the Mississippi Legislature. Elected Officials and Distinguished Guests.
My fellow Mississippians.

Last Sunday, my pastor preached on the story of Jesus and the dinner with Mary and Martha. The question this passage raises is this: Can you do the right thing, and be wrong? The lesson learned is yes; you can do the right thing and be wrong when you allow the good work you do to be less than your best.

As we embark on another year, and face the challenges placed before us, our good work must not be less than our best.

On September 11, our world, our nation and our state entered into a new time – a new time for many, but a time familiar to those of generations before us. It is a time of caution, faith and patriotism. For many, it is a time of fear. For all, it is a time of war.

Four months ago, on a day that seems much more distant now, terrorists attacked America. Our nation stood still and watched in horror and disbelief as the events of that morning unfolded. For reasons we may never understand, and acts of hatred we can never comprehend, thousands of innocent men, women and children became victims.

Then, we witnessed the heroic efforts of the policemen, firefighters and rescue workers as they used all of their strength and determination to save the lives of both strangers and their colleagues.

It was my honor and my privilege to meet a few of these heroes on a visit to New York City. One of the primary lessons of the Bible tells us, no greater love hath man than to lay down his life for another. Hundreds of heroes lived that lesson on September 11.

While visiting the Pentagon on October 1, I said a special prayer for two Mississippi patriots who died senselessly as a result of that act of hatred. Joe Ferguson and Lieutenant Colonel Jerry Don Dickerson, Jr., perished that day – one on American Flight 77, and one in the Pentagon itself. Ferguson was escorting a group of school children on a trip sponsored by the National Geographic Society. Dickerson was in uniform, serving as a member of our armed forces.

These two men grew up in Durant, Mississippi, a town of less than three thousand people. They were two years apart in age, and lived only two blocks apart. The small Mississippi town they called home will never be the same.

Today, we honor their memory in the presence of their families – Ms. Barbara Harrell, mother of Joe Ferguson, and Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Don Dickerson, Sr. Ms. Harrell, Mr. and Mrs. Dickerson, your sons were victims of our nation’s greatest tragedy, while working to make our world a safer place. As a state and as a nation, we will never forget.

For their sacrifices, our good work must not be less than our best.

SECURITY

The ripple effects of the attacks spread around the world. Borders and differences with countries ceased to exist, if only for a time, and we all mourned as one. Then, we responded. Within thirty minutes of the attacks, I assembled our top military, emergency and law enforcement officers to assess the situation and make certain we were doing all we could to protect the people of Mississippi.

By noon on that day, rumors of price gouging on gasoline were running rampant around our state. In a move to protect our consumers, we issued an executive order freezing gas prices – the first state in the nation to do so.

I am proud of the way Mississippi answered its call to action. At all levels, we met the challenge. Law enforcement and emergency agencies readied themselves for situations they had trained for, but hoped would never come. Because of these acts of hatred, we were faced with new challenges in safeguarding our people, our property and our promise.

David Huggins, Colonel L. M. Claiborne, Robert Latham, and Dr. Ed Thompson met and worked for hours with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and U. S. Postal Service to establish guidelines for how to respond to future threats.

And leading the way were the men and women of the Mississippi National Guard. These citizen soldiers stepped up to the task before them – in our airports, at the Grand Gulf Nuclear Facility, and beyond our borders – all in response to our nation’s call.

Under the leadership of Adjutant General James Lipscomb, Mississippi’s National Guard is fighting the war against terrorism, both here at home and overseas. These soldiers have proven that when America needs its very best, it looks first to the soldiers of the Magnolia State.

Mississippi owes a great debt of gratitude to those who fought and sacrificed for our freedom. Just across the street, the memorial to our veterans represents in granite and marble the devotion we hold in our hearts for these brave individuals.

Today, we in this chamber are honored with the presence of five Mississippians who have worn the uniform of America's military. They wear them again today; they wear them with pride. Jack Vance, General Mickey Walker and Carey Ashcraft are veterans of World War II – soldiers of what we now know as “the greatest generation.” Ashcraft was a prisoner of war. Vance fought again in Vietnam, as did Louis Vargas of Brandon. General Walker fought again in Korea, as did Dr. Tom Logue.

These men and women have worked, and are working every day, to protect our nation.

We have work to do here as well. In order to protect our state, we must adopt the recommendations of the Governor's Summit on Domestic Preparedness. We must also send a message to the terrorists – if you commit acts of terrorism on Mississippi soil, you will face the death penalty. I am preparing legislation to ensure just that.

Our Department of Public Safety is making a difference for the safety of our people, and they are succeeding beyond all expectations. If we want to change the bad statistics, we can do it. It's just a matter of dedicating ourselves to the job. We did it last year with the Highway Patrol.

We wanted to reduce the number of deaths on our highways, and we did it. We reduced that number by 35 percent. We did it because we were aggressive about our enforcement, our promotion of seatbelt usage, and our commitment to safer streets and highways.

These men and women are working every day to protect our state.

2001 also provided challenges beyond our control.

At 4:30 in the morning on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, while preparing to go deer hunting with my son Jordan, I received a call from Robert Latham. Massive storms and tornadoes were destroying lives and property in central and north Mississippi.

Our response was immediate. I witnessed firsthand the destruction of that day and the resiliency of Mississippi families and communities. All you had to do was look at the devastation of shattered homes and shattered lives – and we knew we had to fight. After being told “no” three times, we kept fighting until we secured a Presidential disaster declaration – unfortunately, our fourth of the year.

The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency met this challenge, and more. A forty percent increase in local county programs has dramatically improved the ability of emergency personnel to respond to all situations.

Whether it is a natural disaster or safe drinking water in our homes, we are prepared. The report of the Governor's Water and Sewer Task Force offers strong recommendations for improving the quality of life for our people. Legislation has been introduced to implement these recommendations, and I urge you to act on it immediately.

These men and women are working every day to protect our communities.

And, it is because of these men and women – our state employees – that we were able to respond as quickly as we did to the attacks of September 11. It is because of our state employees that we were able to respond to the natural disasters affecting our communities. It is because of our state employees that we were able to make our streets safer.

If there were ever a time when we could look and see the benefit and value of these men and women, now is the time. We cannot fail to invest in them. Surely we can craft a multi-year pay package – pay them as professionals and recognize the work they do for our state, the communities and the people of Mississippi.

Our sense of safety and security depends on other factors as well – steady jobs; reliable, accessible health care; and strong public education. These factors are critical to our communities and we must be vigilant in protecting them.

JOBS

In the face of a national recession, we have had unprecedented success in creating high-quality, good-paying jobs for the people of Mississippi. Since I took office, 21,519 Mississippians – from Gautier to Guntown, from Vicksburg to Meridian – are now working in jobs that provide them and their families with a sense of safety and security. Our efforts in job creation resulted in over \$6.5 billion in investments in the state of Mississippi.

However, we still face many challenges. We've lost some good companies and good jobs. The announcement last week of the closure of the Burlington operation, with the loss of 850 jobs, was a particularly hard hit for Clarke County, with an unemployment rate of over 15 percent. It is estimated the rate will climb to more than 20 percent as a result of this plant closure.

When this happens, we react aggressively and quickly. We created a rapid response team for economic development emergencies. They react to a plant closing the way MEMA reacts to a natural disaster. They've been there in Jackson County and Winston County. Bob Rohrlack, the Mississippi Development Authority and I will be there for the people of Stonewall and Clarke County as well. Bob, we're glad to have you back in Mississippi.

We continue our efforts to bring jobs to Mississippi. Tonight, I will be in Webster County to meet with local officials, to work with them to bring jobs to their community – or to save them – as I've done in DeSoto County with 300 jobs, in Scott County with 300 jobs, in Monroe County with 200 jobs and in Jeff Davis County with 150 jobs.

While visiting Bosnia, I watched local children playing in the snow – many with torn and tattered shoes on their feet, some with no shoes at all. I remembered a time, in the not so distant past, where our families struggled as well to feed and clothe their children. Many of you know first-hand what I’m talking about. The work we do to bring jobs to Mississippi is about much more than just statistics. It is about food on the table and a warm bed at night. It is about opportunities for our children and their parents. It is about self-respect, self-confidence and a sense of security.

Mississippi is no stranger to tough times; and, like those Mississippians before us, we will not – we cannot – we shall not – fail in our mission. We should re-double our efforts to promote the promise and potential of our great state and our people.

Jobs are so important to our people that we must not do less than our best.

Because of the national economy, many people do not have the opportunity to work. We do. We cannot stop fighting for jobs. If we have to work longer, if we have to work harder, that’s what we must do.

No, now is definitely not the time to back off on our investments in jobs.

HEALTH CARE

We must also commit ourselves to the basic health care needs of the citizens of Mississippi. I have unveiled a proposal to accomplish this goal. Copies of this plan are available and we will introduce legislation next week.

We’re attacking the problems of senior citizens, providing a prescription drug benefit for Mississippians like Marie Hawkins and Sallie Robinson, who have worked hard all their lives and now struggle to balance the costs of food with the costs of prescription drugs. Ms. Hawkins, Ms. Robinson – we work for you. You have my solemn promise that we will never forget that.

We’re attacking the problem of cardiovascular disease by working with patients to manage their high blood pressure, to prevent unnecessary strokes, and even death.

We’re attacking the problem of diabetes by working with patients to manage their disease in order to avoid dialysis, amputation and blindness.

We’re attacking the problems faced by rural citizens in keeping access to health care open and available.

We must ensure our dedicated state employees have the quality health insurance they deserve.

And, we must protect one of Mississippi's best investments – the Health Care Trust Fund. Mississippi is one of only five states to remain committed to using the tobacco settlement for the health care needs of our people. Many states have used their tobacco settlement to fund deficits in their general budget. Our commitment is, always has been, and always will be, to a healthier Mississippi.

In recent weeks, we've met with thousands of people across the state, including rural doctors, nurses and social workers who are on the front lines of providing vital health care services in places like Bay St. Louis, Clarksdale, Petal and Ripley. Their input has helped shape my proposal so that we may take the next step in meeting the health care needs of the people of Mississippi.

I challenge you to take that next step with me.

MEDICAID

Medicaid is so much more than another government agency. It means health insurance for our children, elderly and disabled. The success of Medicaid is evidenced by the enrollment of 87,000 new recipients in the past year. In January of 2000, less than 600 children were enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program. Today, that number is nearly 50,000.

No child in our state will be denied health care. Healthy children go to school ready to learn. Mississippi's children deserve every opportunity to make the most of their God-given talents.

Eighty percent of the residents of nursing homes depend on Medicaid for essential and vital care. We're not just talking about numbers and statistics here. We're talking about our parents and our grandparents.

Medicaid does all of this for the people of our state on only seven percent of our budget, and with astonishingly low administrative costs of four percent. Medicaid is, without a doubt, the best bargain in state government.

I want to commend this Legislature for its efforts to expand Medicaid services. We should take pride in knowing that more of our people are receiving health care. The role of Medicaid is to ensure a healthy Mississippi, one ready to compete at all levels. Anything less is unacceptable.

For the well-being of our people, our good work must not be less than our best.

EDUCATION

In the 4th century B.C., it was written that the foundation of our state is found in the education of our youth. That statement still rings true in the 21st century. Our commitment to the strength of that foundation is more important now than ever before.

The State of Mississippi is blessed with thousands of excellent, dedicated teachers. It is important to recognize that we are a leader in nationally board certified teachers. We were the first state in the nation to offer more pay to teachers with national board certification, and it has paid off. Today, we aren't 50th, we aren't 40th, we aren't 30th, we aren't even 10th – we're 6th in the nation in the number of nationally board certified teachers. For the last school year, 405 of our teachers achieved this recognition.

One of these teachers is with us here today. Lynne Cox teaches English at the Mississippi School for the Deaf. Lynne earned her certification as an Exceptional Needs Specialist – the first teacher of the deaf in the country to do so. Lynne, thank you for your dedication to your profession, to your students, and to our future.

I remember riding around on the hot, dusty roads of Tate and Panola counties in 1987, running for the state senate. My vision then was to raise teacher pay to the southeastern average. With persistence, hard work and the help of others who shared this vision, it finally happened.

In July, we committed ourselves to giving our teachers the raises they deserve. We committed to paying them as the professionals they are, and I want to thank you for making that commitment with me. We are going to recognize their contributions in classrooms around the state. The average teacher salary in Mississippi will rise from 49th in the nation to 19th in the nation when fully implemented.

Every parent in Mississippi is entitled to know their children are learning. We have raised the bar. We have instituted tough accountability measures in order to make certain that our children are receiving the highest quality education possible. Now, we must make certain we give the teachers the tools they need to succeed, and not unfunded mandates. The current allocation for school supplies will barely buy a pencil for each student. We must do better. It is our responsibility to lay the foundation for our state, and one from which we cannot retreat.

Mississippi is being recognized around the country for its forward-thinking approach in the educational arena. Michigan Governor John Engler, chairman of the National Governors Association, appointed me as one of two lead governors on the President's national education package, and as lead governor in the nation for the reauthorization of special education. From our kindergartens to our universities, we are determined to provide the best education possible for the children of Mississippi.

Because of our determination, every public school classroom in the state will have an Internet-accessible computer by the end of this year. This effort will ensure that every child in Mississippi, from Hickory Flat to Hot Coffee, has the opportunity to learn and explore the world in a way we could have never imagined in previous years.

At last week's Leadership Summit on Higher Education, representatives from government, business and education gathered to unveil an aggressive agenda. The driving force behind the agenda is the establishment of an education coordinating body comprised of the Institutions of Higher Learning, the State Board for Community and Junior Colleges, and the State Board of Education. We must act on this agenda quickly.

For 27 years, our state has struggled with the Ayers case. Eighteen months ago, I brought the parties involved to the table to reach a final settlement, once and for all. 27 years is too long to tie the hands of our universities. Today, that settlement is within our reach. The settlement of Ayers will be a defining moment in our state's history; let's write that definition now. I challenge you to bring it to closure by the end of this week.

The spirit, the resolve, the determination, the desire to help our people – that's why we worked hard to get to this point. That's why we didn't give up.

FINANCE

There is one simple step by which we can improve our ability to respond and react to changing economic situations. Our agency heads and state employees are dedicated professionals. Let's give our agency heads the flexibility they need to make adjustments in their budgets when the times demand it. It is an efficient and responsible action to take.

Just like when families and businesses face tough times, we must look for ways to save money. Last week, the Bond Commission refinanced nearly \$308 million in outstanding debt – the largest refinancing in the state's history. Through this one action, we've saved \$10 million. In a fiscally responsible and prudent move, the Department of Corrections reduced its current budget shortfall by more than \$14 million.

Just like when families and businesses face tough times, we have to plan ahead. Last spring, I asked state agencies to hold back five percent of their appropriations for the first half of this fiscal year. Because of this action, we were able to lessen the effect of the national recession on the services we provide to the people of Mississippi.

During these tough times, it is our charge from the people of Mississippi to work as one to guide our ship of state through these troubled waters and into a safe port for our future.

You have heard me speak before about our investment in human capital. Every dollar we spend in education is an investment in human capital. Every dollar we spend on health care is an investment in human capital. Every dollar we spend in bringing jobs to Mississippi is an investment in human capital. I challenge you to make these investments now.

These investments will demand our best, and our best will protect our communities. Our best will bring new jobs. Our best will ensure quality health care. Our best will fix our schools. Our best says we will provide for our people with the money we already have.

Our best will require hard work.

For all these reasons, the good work we do must not be less than our best.

The spirit of doing our best was demonstrated by the quiet determination of Sam Wright, Clyde Woodfield, Jimmy Thornton, Dick Livingston and Glen Deweese – men who served in this Legislature with dignity and pride. We owe it to their memory to do nothing less. We owe it to the memory of Joe Ferguson and Jerry Don Dickerson. We owe it to Lynne Cox, Sallie Robinson and Marie Hawkins. We owe it to Jack Vance, Carey Ashcraft, Louis Vargas, Tom Logue, and everyone who wears the uniform of the United States armed forces. We owe it to the people of Mississippi.

Let us keep things in perspective. Our country and our state have faced far greater problems than those before us today. That does not make today's dilemmas less important; it does show that we have overcome greater obstacles, and we will do it again.

This nation's 30th president, Calvin Coolidge, said it well. "Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'press on' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."

Our persistence will allow us to face the challenges and opportunities with results unprecedented in our state's history. It will take hard work, and it will take our best. It is up to us to press on.

God bless the great state of Mississippi, and God bless America.

