

*Remarks to the
Como Rotary Club
September 26, 2001*

Thank you. It's great to be here in Como, and I appreciate the invitation to be with you today. I brought someone with me today that many of you know as the former mayor of Senatobia, and he now works with me on economic development issues for the state – Steve Hale.

As we meet here today and in this place, I want us to take a minute to reflect on the things that we so often take for granted.

Our freedoms of speech and religion; our freedom to travel from one state to another at will; our government, which however flawed, has still set the standard for the rest of the world.

Those things that we take for granted were attacked two weeks ago yesterday, and our world has changed forever. We were hit and hit hard, but America is not down. We will never go down.

If anything, the attacks have made us stronger, and shown the world that America is not simply about material wealth.

And, I have a feeling we may have made those who brought down our planes and our buildings a little more frustrated by the unity we have shown.

They thought they had broken us, but what they got instead was a nation of Americans – there's no more black or white, Christian or Jew – a nation of Americans sharing in the ideals that have made this country great.

All over the world, the terrorists are seeing the response of countries to their actions.

They are seeing their financial avenues blocked, their cause disavowed, their network beginning to unravel.

Perhaps even more infuriating to them, they are seeing people around the world mourn with us. They are seeing the American flag displayed around the world. They are hearing the crowds sing “God Bless America” around the world.

And they are learning that America is not just a country, but an ideal for those who seek freedom and justice – and that ideal will never be defeated.

Here at home, Mississippians are answering the call of President Bush to help rid the world of the disease of terrorism. Airmen from the 255th Air Control Squadron in Gulfport and the 186th Refueling Wing out of Meridian have already been activated.

When the country needs its best, it turns to Mississippi. I know you share my pride in the commitment of those men and women in the Mississippi National Guard and Reserves who stand ready to serve their country.

Just a few miles north of here in Senatobia, the men and women of the Headquarters 2nd Battalion, 198th Armor, stand ready to serve. I hope they don't have to go, but if they do I know they will serve with pride and honor.

They will do so because they are proud
Americans from the great state of
Mississippi – and that means a great deal.

America has been knocked down, but we
haven't been knocked out. We will rise to
the occasion and bring an end to those use
terror to accomplish their goals.

We know our future is secure, because our
faith is strong.

Since the attacks of September 11, President Bush has called for the nation to return to its normal routines. If you had been planning to buy a new car, buy it. Let's continue to do our work.

That call from the President has been heeded in my office, as we continue to do the work of the people of Mississippi. First and foremost in our work right now is our effort to strengthen health care for every Mississippian.

As a public leader, I believe strongly that the goal for myself and all other elected officials is to improve the quality of life for all Mississippians.

We've made good progress, and we are poised for more. We landed the Nissan plant last year, one of the top economic development projects in the country. This plant brings an investment of \$930 million and 4,000 jobs, and we did it in only five months.

We passed true, committed teacher pay legislation that will raise the average salary from 49th in the nation to 19th. For the first time in a long time, we will pay our teachers as the professionals they are.

Our next challenge has risen before us, and I have a plan for that as well. This challenge is the health and well-being of the people of Mississippi.

For too long, we have led the nation in areas where we don't want to be first – areas I refer to as our “worst firsts.”

Mississippi is first in the nation in prevalence for diabetes, first in heart disease death rate, first in lack of breast cancer screenings in women over 50, first in population underserved by primary care physicians, and first in the age adjusted death rate.

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

Those are not good numbers; they do not represent where we should be or where we can be.

We can change those numbers, and I want to tell you how I want to do it.

Several years ago, Mississippi landed a historic settlement against the tobacco industry in a fight led by Attorney General Mike Moore.

His aggressiveness is the reason we have over \$600 million sitting in a trust fund today, and more money on the way.

When the settlement was made, the Legislature wisely set up a Health Care Trust Fund for the annual payments from the tobacco companies. And, it is important to point out these payments will only end when the tobacco companies go out of business.

There is no foreseeable end to these payments.

This trust fund was set up to invest the payments, and earnings on the fund are to be used for health care. By law, the principal of the fund cannot be used.

Here's my proposal: Next year's payment from the tobacco companies is estimated to be around \$210 million. Let's invest a portion of that payment – I propose \$100 million – and use it to maximize federal matching funds for health care.

There are two principles to this idea that must be remembered: First, this proposal does not touch, in any way, the principal of the trust fund, and second, the trust fund will continue to grow.

How do we maximize the money? By taking advantage of the 3 to 1 match offered through the Division of Medicaid. Simply put, give us a quarter and we can turn it into a dollar for health care.

We can submit requests for waivers to the Department of Health and Human Services. These waivers are designed to help states think creatively in meeting health care needs, and Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson is a big fan of them.

In fact, during his terms as Wisconsin's governor, Thompson was known as "the waiver king."

His aggressiveness in going after federal waivers has resulted in 96% of the people in Wisconsin being covered by health insurance.

Here in Mississippi, we're nowhere close to that. Seventy-five percent of our state employees do not have their dependents on the state plan. Again, this is something we can change.

Another thought to consider is whether we pay now or pay later. Consider someone suffering from diabetes – do we help them receive the care they need today, or do we pay for dialysis tomorrow?

Preventive maintenance. We do it with our cars; why not with our people?

Finally, the state and school employee health insurance plan doesn't offer much relief for these hard-working people.

In fact, State Auditor Phil Bryant recently concluded an audit of the plan, and reported on the significant reduction in the plan's deficit – a reduction brought about by “premium increases, benefit changes, and an increase in the deductibles.”

Those who can least afford the rising costs of health care are being hit with the brunt of the expense. The average employee out-of-pocket cost has increase nearly 79%, while the average plan payment per employee has only increased 27%. We can change this.

Under my proposal, we would eliminate the deductible for doctor's visits, reduce dependent costs, and institute a co-pay plan.

Health care should not be a luxury to be enjoyed by those who can afford it. It is a necessity and our people deserve and demand every opportunity to access quality health care.

Yesterday, I formally presented my proposal to a joint legislative committee. I want us to have plenty of time prior to the legislative session to work on this proposal together, because that's what it's going to take.

It is my hope that, at a time when our nation has come together, we can come together in the capitol to bring meaningful progress and change to Mississippi's health care arena.

The health of our people means so much to the health of our state and our country.

Healthy people spur a healthy economy.

Healthy children go to school ready to learn.

We can't afford to let opportunities pass us by.

Thank you for the chance to be here today.

God bless our state, and God bless America.

