

*Remarks to the
American Legion Auxiliary Magnolia Girls State
June 12, 2002*

It is great to be here for this 55th session of Girls State – I believe strongly in the work being done here and in the potential that each of you hold for the future of this state.

I want to congratulate Governor Casey Hendrix on her election yesterday, along with all others elected to office. You have a tremendous responsibility now, but one that is shared by everyone else who ran for office. We all have an important role to play in our government.

(story of lawyer on plane to DC)

It doesn't always matter, though, what we do for a living. It's what we do for each other that makes a difference. It's what we do for our children, for our senior citizens, for those who can't do for themselves, that makes a difference. Much of what you hear about government these days centers on bureaucracy, the size of government, and jokes about dealing with the government.

And, sometimes those things are true.

For example, the Lord's Prayer consists of 66 words. The Gettysburg Address has 286 words. The Declaration of Independence – 1,322 words.

Federal government regulations regarding the sale of cabbage? 26,911 words.

Yes, sometimes government can be a little cumbersome.

There are those who believe that government is too big and shouldn't be the sole source of support for people. I agree. But, I do feel that government has a positive role to play in the lives of all Mississippians and all Americans – and that role has been prominent in this past year...

We've created more jobs for the people of Mississippi. In the past two years, more than 21,000 new jobs have been created and more than \$6 billion has been invested in our state.

Suppliers for the Nissan facility are locating around the state – from Vicksburg to Tupelo to Forest to Canton – each of them bringing more jobs and more investments.

Site Selection magazine – one of the premier publications in the economic development industry – ranked Mississippi as one of the ten best states in the nation for doing business.

Plants around the state that were on the verge of closing are staying open because we stepped in and convinced them that doing business in Mississippi was better than closing shop and going somewhere else.

This past March, Mississippi made it to the “final four” – not in basketball, which would have been great, but in economic development. We were one of the last four states that Hyundai looked at as a potential site for their first North American plant.

More than ever before, companies from around the country and around the world are looking at Mississippi as a competitive place to do business. They know we are serious about economic development, they know we're serious about bringing jobs to our people, and they know we're serious about providing a workforce that's ready, willing and able.

Last July, I signed into law a historic package designed to raise the average teacher salary in Mississippi from 49th to 19th in the nation over the next few years. When we did this, even the New York Times wrote in an editorial that Mississippi had put together the kind of package that continued to elude New York.

That's a strong statement about what we're doing here, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that hundreds of thousands of people read that editorial – and I'm sure their attitude and opinion of Mississippi changed for the better.

We're working to make our schools stronger and help the next generations of Mississippians to prepare for the future by putting Internet-accessible computers in every classroom.

I know all of you are probably very comfortable with computers and the technology that powers them – and that’s good news for Mississippi.

Each of you is going to be competing in the 21st century economy – an economy that is borderless, wireless and global – and you are going to be prepared for it.

I want to make sure those who follow you are prepared as well.

In order for our people to make the most of the educational opportunities and job opportunities before them, we must also ensure they are healthy and ready to work. That's another role where government can be a positive force.

You've probably been hearing a lot in the news about the Medicaid program. This program helps care for more than 650,000 Mississippians. It provides much-needed health care for our senior citizens, disabled and children.

All of us know someone who depends, in some part, on Medicaid. I want to make sure it's there for them when they need it, but we also need to make sure it's run in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

I've established a Health Care Commission – made up of doctors, pharmacists and other health care professionals from around the state – to help revamp this program and make it work better.

A healthy population is ready to learn and it's ready to work. That's the bottom line – and Mississippi can't afford not to meet this bottom line.

Our country has changed dramatically in the past year. On Tuesday, September 11, of last year, we were getting into a new work week. We were heading to our jobs and our schools and probably grumbling a little bit about work projects or upcoming tests.

That same day, we went home in a state of shock. Two of the great symbols of America – the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington – were attacked by hijackers on commercial airliners.

Those terrorist acts – guiding massive planes, with their innocent cargo, into those buildings – changed our world. It changed my world, and it changed your world.

The issue of public safety was carried to an extreme degree as we sought to protect ourselves against unknown threats and fears. I'm proud of the way Mississippi reacted to those threats and fears.

State agencies from the Department of Public Safety to the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency to the Mississippi National Guard have worked since that horrible day to provide greater protection for the people of Mississippi.

There will be many more challenges to face before we solve the problems of jobs, education, health care and public safety. But, you know what? We're going to overcome those challenges. We're going to do it because we have the intelligence, the capability, the energy, and the promise of young people like you.

Last weekend, I was at the Mississippi Picnic in New York City. Over a thousand people – many of them people from Mississippi, living in New York – came out for fried catfish, good music and a chance to visit with old friends and make new ones.

I was there because I wanted them to know what we're doing back here. I wanted them to know that Mississippi is just as competitive, just as smart, just as worldly as New York or any other state.

And, I wanted to encourage them to come back home, to give something back to the state where their roots are found.

Hodding Carter, a native Mississippian and a great journalist, once said that there are two things we can give our children – roots and wings.

Your roots are here. Your roots are your family, your friends, your teachers – and they will help you find your wings.

And, I hope your wings take you to new and exciting places, to see and experience all life has to offer. But, in the end, I also hope your wings will steer you back home to Mississippi.

There's an old saying that "government is just what you make it." Never forget that – you have a role to play in shaping government and the policies that come from it.

Each of you has a special gift and talent. I hope you will put it to use in Mississippi. We have a bright future ahead and your input makes it even brighter.

Thank you for the invitation to be here today,
and I'll be glad to answer any questions you may
have.