

*Remarks for the
Mississippi Sheriff's Association
June 5, 2002*

Sheriff Dickerson, thank you for that kind introduction.

There's something about being in a room full of law enforcement officers. I've never felt safer than I do right now.

I think we share some similarities in our jobs. I would say we all disbelieve most of what we hear and a good bit of what we see; that we have our weekends planned for a year; that we believe the worst is about to happen anytime someone says, "boy, it sure is quiet." And, there's the feeling that coffee *is*, in fact, one of the major food groups...

I'm proud to have the opportunity to be a part of this event, because it gives me a chance to say a sincere "thank you" to you and all those officers who serve with you.

That's something we don't do often enough with our law enforcement officers.

Because of the work you do each and every day, the people of Mississippi know that their streets, their families, and their homes are safer.

Today, I want to publicly and formally thank you for the work you do. Long before the events of September 11, you were on the front lines of our homeland security. In the days since, you have taken on a new level of responsibility – and you have done it well.

After the tragic attacks of September 11, our world changed and we were forced into a different frame of thinking. The issues we had always taken for granted, such as opening our mail or going to a large public event, were changed. We all wanted – and still want – to feel safe.

But in finding that safety we cannot forget the work that you do in leading us to it. We are not the ones on patrol. We are not the ones faced with life-or-death situations on a regular basis. We are not the ones who are first on the scene of a fatal accident or disturbing crime scene.

That's your job – and you do it well.

Because of the work you do, because of the capability of the people working with you, the people of Mississippi are able to rest a little easier. Thank you for doing an incredible job.

Even with your dedication and that of the officers who serve under you, we still have many areas of concern when we talk about public safety.

In my State of the State address in January, I outlined four priorities for our state – jobs, health care, education and public safety. Each is a cornerstone we’re using to lay the foundation for a better, stronger Mississippi.

I am proud to say that the cornerstone of public safety is strong, and its strength comes from the collective effort made by each of one you here today and your fellow officers around the state.

There are, however, many challenges to the strength of that cornerstone.

The rapid growth of private prisons and the funding that has been appropriated to maintain them is just such a challenge.

Since the construction of the private prisons began, we have struggled with maintaining a balance between them and our state-run operations. I do not believe we should be funding operations that duplicate those already managed by our Department of Corrections – that’s why I have vetoed funding for the prisons for the past two years.

This past session, I partially vetoed the appropriations bill for the Department of Corrections, because it provided \$54 million for private prisons and prevented Commissioner Robert Johnson from transferring any of those funds for regional prisons or county jails.

In the end, it was the special interests – and not the interests of the people or the law enforcement community – that came out on top.

The decision to override those vetoes, however, sent a clear message – and one that I believe doesn't support the work done by you and all other law enforcement officers in this state.

I will not stop working to ensure your needs are met above the needs of the special interests.

Other challenges to the cornerstone are getting our attention as well.

We are seeing alarming statistics regarding the use of recreational drugs such as Ecstasy or methamphetamine. Our young people are falling victim to this substance that doesn't discriminate against anyone. It inflicts an equal amount of harm on those who take it.

Our Bureau of Narcotics, in cooperation with local authorities, is leading the battle against this drug. With your help, progress is being made.

The young people who fall prey to illicit drugs can be saved, and that is our common purpose. These young people represent the future of our state and we must do all we can to keep them strong.

Another drug, although legal for those of age, is just as dangerous. It is cheaper and easier to purchase than Ecstasy, but the results of its abuse can be just as tragic.

Alcohol abuse does more than affect those who abuse it. It puts innocent citizens at risk when someone chooses to drink and drive.

You know all too well the results of actions like this.

That's why I signed into law a bill to lower the Blood Alcohol Content level from .1 percent to .08 percent.

By targeting those who would choose to drink too much and attempt to drive, we send a message to those who break the law as well as those who obey it.

We will not tolerate anyone who would endanger innocent people, and we will do everything within our power to protect those who respect the law.

Another step forward in the protection of our citizens will come with making seat belt use mandatory and setting penalties to enforce it.

Too many Mississippians are killed needlessly because they weren't wearing a seat belt.

Seat belts work. I'm proof of that. They are the best means of preventing fatalities and serious injuries.

It doesn't take more than three seconds to click a seat belt, and it's an easy habit to pick up.

I'm confident we will meet the challenges to the work we're doing. We're going to meet them head-on and turn them into opportunities – but accomplishing that will take an effort that begins in the communities and runs to the highest levels.

Working together, we can do so much more. It is important for communities and neighborhoods to become involved in public safety, to serve as unofficial back-up to your work.

We can show our appreciation for the work you do by our own efforts in helping out.

We can take back the neighborhoods that are on the brink. We can start neighborhood watches and community policing. We can do the things that help make your job just a little bit easier.

One interesting thing about your work – at the end of the day, there's no tangible product.

There's no way to measure what you've done in the day, other than to see kids playing outside; people wearing their seatbelts; families walking through their neighborhoods in the evening.

We don't see the dark streets you patrol at night.
We don't know about the thoughts that run
through your mind as you go into a dangerous
situation with your gun drawn. We don't know
the feelings in your heart at the end of a long and
difficult shift.

We do know that every man and woman who
wears a badge and takes an oath "to serve and
protect" has qualities that help them rise above
the rest.

In closing, let me simply say this: You are our heroes. You are people of honor – in your instinct and in your actions. You are the best in your world, and more than good enough for any other world.

You are the people who keep us safe – and we thank you for it. May God bless you and your families, our state and our nation.