

*Remarks for the
Magnolia/South Pike Chamber of Commerce
October 25, 2001*

Thank you for the invitation to be here with you tonight. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about the great things happening in Mississippi, and there's a lot for us to proud of.

I recently spoke to a "Profiles in Leadership" dinner in Cleveland. I spoke about the definition of a leader as a "visionary with a poorly developed sense of fear and no concept of the odds against her."

Tonight, I'm proud to be here with all of you – each of you visionaries who has paid no attention to the odds and has worked hard to realize your goals.

Not listening to the naysayers, and focusing on getting things done – that's what we've been doing here in Mississippi lately.

Let me begin with a few words about where we are as a state and a nation, in light of the events of recent weeks. Our world has changed forever, and we have to adapt to a new way of thinking.

We aren't taking things for granted like we've done in the past, and we're a little more cautious about certain things.

But, we're also a little more proud of our great nation, as seen by the flags that fly everywhere you go. And, we're a little more concerned about our fellow man, and what can be done to help those in need.

I am proud of the work that this state has done since September 11 in responding to the changes. We answered the call of President Bush when he asked for National Guard support at the airports, and we are answering the call of the President right now as National Guard personnel are brought up for active duty.

When America calls on Mississippi, we answer quickly.

We have also taken the lead in responding to the fear of anthrax exposure, following the incidents in Florida, New York and Washington. Every state agency with a role to play in this area, from the health department to the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, got together last week.

After eight hours of meeting, they had put together a protocol for law enforcement and emergency agencies to follow for handling anthrax threats.

Information from the health department has been distributed to the media for the people. The attorney general has made it known that all threats will be investigated and, if necessary, prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Every state agency pulled together and put a plan in place. In fact, the FBI agent who attended that meeting complimented us, saying the Mississippi was taking the lead in getting its agencies lined up and working together.

I'm proud of that work, and you should be too.

Outside of the threats that have come into our lives as a people and nation in recent weeks, we are still doing great things here at home.

We've made great strides in educating our children. We've made a commitment to paying our teachers like the professionals they are, a commitment that will raise our state from 49th to 19th in the nation over the next few years in terms of average teacher salary.

I'm proud that Mississippi is being seen as a leader in education by other states. In fact, the day after the July special session, The New York Times published an editorial praising the work we had done together.

Mississippi, according to The Times, had – with its scarce resources and small economy – put together the type of package that continues to elude New York.

I don't know about you, but I think it's about time Mississippi set the standard in educational progress in our country. And, we're doing it in other areas of education as well.

Through a unique partnership between the state and private industry, we are working toward our goal of placing an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state. By the end of next year, Mississippi will be the first state in the nation to reach this milestone.

The “Computers in the Classroom” initiative, working with the new commitment to teachers, will prepare the children of this great region and the entire state for the marketplace of the 21st century – a marketplace that will be borderless, wireless and global.

This year, we will be installing 19 computers in schools across Pike County.

That is how we’re meeting the promise of Pike County, and the state of Mississippi.

We are looking at new ways to address the health care issues affecting so many Mississippians, and especially those in the more rural areas. For too long, we have led the country in those areas where we want to be in last place – first in diabetes, first in heart disease, first in population underserved by primary care physicians.

Now, we have an opportunity to change those rankings; we don't have to continue leading in the "worst firsts."

Here's how we do it: we use a portion of the historic tobacco settlement to make a dramatic difference in the lives of the people of this state. We can remove the obstacles that have held us back, and commit ourselves to a better future.

Let's take a portion of those dollars and use them for what they were earmarked for – the health care needs of the people of Mississippi.

Let's use those dollars to maximize available federal matching funds. In other words, give us a quarter and we'll turn it into a dollar.

Let's then use those dollars for things like expanding screenings for cancer and heart disease; putting more nurses in schools to help our children; and easing the health insurance burden on state and school employees by eliminating deductibles for doctor visits and reducing dependent costs.

Let's expand and improve screenings and treatment for breast and cervical cancer.

Let's make it easier for working parents to provide for the health care needs of themselves and their children.

You've heard the phrase, "pay me now or pay me later." That's what we're talking about here. We can spend money on the front end on preventive measures, or we can spend more money later on dealing with the effects of untreated illnesses.

I met with the State Board of Health last week, and they have endorsed this proposal. They understand what we're trying to do, and it is important to know that the medical community is behind this effort.

A few weeks ago, I was in Knoxville for the Tennessee-LSU football game with my kids. As we looked out over the crowd, my 16-year-old son Jordan commented that there must be 10,000 different ways to wear orange.

I've thought about that statement recently in a different light. I believe there must be 10,000 different ways for us to do business in Mississippi.

We can't just keep doing things the same way, every day, every time. Our security rests in our ability to change, and I want us to be secure.

I want us to be proactive instead of reactive.

I want us to continue setting standards for other states to emulate. I want us to build a healthier economy, a healthier population, and a healthier educational system – and you are the ones to help make it happen.

Thank you for what you have done so far, and I look forward to what we can accomplish in the days to come.

