

STATE OF THE STATE
Ronnie Musgrove, Governor
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MEDIA COPY

Governor Tuck. Mr. Speaker. Members of the Mississippi Legislature. Chief Justice Praether and Justices of the Supreme Court. Elected Officials. Agency Directors. Distinguished Guests. My fellow Mississippians.

I am struck by the historical significance of this moment. On January 4th, this House of Representatives cast an historic vote. The galleries were full, over-flowing. Mississippians from across the state stood in the rotunda or collected in committee meeting rooms.

They watched and listened as this House of Representatives elected Mississippi's 62nd governor for the beginning of this new century, this new millennium. Now, today, some 37 days later, I stand before you—the members of this body and the members of the Mississippi Senate who worked at the other end of this building on that historic day in January.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Mississippi legislature, it is my distinct privilege to stand before both bodies, united this day for one purpose.

I am charged with delivering a message outlining the state of the state—where we are in Mississippi, my assessment of where we should be and where we can be if we commit ourselves to a shared vision of the future.

I firmly believe the state of our state is better than it has been in decades if not ever.

But the road ahead is long and the labor is hard if we are to lift our people to the heights of prosperity, health and security they so deserve.

Today I want to talk with you about creating a future of opportunity by promoting an agenda tailor-made for these times, hand-crafted for our people.

Members of the legislature, Speaker Ford, Governor Tuck: we do serve in fortunate times. Our state is experiencing tremendous growth as evidenced by the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, the significant increase in personal income levels, the astounding number of small businesses created in Mississippi, and national recognition of Mississippi's potential for economic growth. We are finally leading the nation in a number of key areas, and we can be proud of that.

But we can not turn our backs or hide our eyes from the problems that Mississippi families are facing every single day. Now is not the time for rest. We must press on. We must continue the work of legislatures past and offer unprecedented leadership from the executive branch.

Think for a moment where we were just four years ago and where we are today. With capable, concerned legislative leadership we set priorities and we stuck to them.

Priorities that are expanding educational opportunities at all levels, priorities that are creating healthier communities, priorities that will allow us to move to the next level of economic success for all our people.

Together we can begin to capitalize on the momentum that has carried us this far and the optimism of our people to take Mississippi beyond what seemed impossible only a few years ago.

We do that by setting an agenda for opportunity. We must take calculated risks when the rewards are great.

We must set unprecedented goals and at every opportunity reach for unparalleled progress. Our state deserves progress. Our people demand results. And, together we can achieve our goals.

We are challenging Mississippians, and Mississippians are answering that challenge. We're challenging ourselves, and we're going to challenge you, members of the Legislature because we know that you will answer the challenge. But we're going to do more than send you a laundry list, a hodge-podge of ideas. We're going to move beyond a recipe for rhetoric to a plan for progress, and we're going to be here working with you day in and day out to make positive things happen for Mississippi.

The doors of the Governor's Office are open, and they're going to stay open. We are here to conduct the business of leading this state and working with the Legislature to the benefit of every single Mississippian.

My question is simple: will you work with me for the benefit of all Mississippians?

Mr. Speaker, Governor Tuck, members of the legislature and other elected officials. We must set aside the differences that have divided the executive and legislative branches of government. We must build a bridge of communication and cooperation and we must dare to cross that bridge together. Because on the other side lies what serves the best interest of our people, not just what serves the best interest of our politics.

Yes, we have a vision. There is an agenda. We can and we must look for creative, innovative solutions to our biggest challenges, accepting no excuses, offering only solutions. We can and we must think bigger and plan farther than we ever have before.

EDUCATION

In education, we have laid a strong foundation. We will see the Mississippi Adequate Education Program reach its full implementation by the year 2002.

On that foundation, we must continue to strengthen our schools.

Think for a moment about the transformation occurring in DeSoto County Schools.

Last month brothers Bob Pittman, native Mississippian and founder of America On Line, and Tom Pittman, publisher of the DeSoto Times, working together with the Maddox Foundation and university and state leaders, paved the way to put a computer in every class room in DeSoto County, the second largest school district in the state.

During my campaign, I dared Mississippians to imagine computers at the fingertips of every Mississippi school child. And many said it couldn't be done. Would they now tell Tom Pittman, Bob Pittman, Robin Costa, the teachers and the students in the DeSoto County schools that it couldn't be done? No. Because it can, and we will. And, we're one step closer.

Thanks to the commitment of Bob and Tom Pittman the Maddox Foundation and the State of Mississippi, in the year 2002, we will have Internet-accessible computers in every classroom in every school in every district in every county in the State of Mississippi.

Working together, public and private, business and university, we will bring the educational opportunities of the World Wide Web to Mississippi's children.

Tom Pittman and Robin Costa, please stand and let us thank you for your commitment to Mississippi, today and tomorrow.

Thank you, Tom and Robin.

Our very future sits today in classrooms across this state listening to Mississippi's teachers. Those teachers need our support. Those teachers deserve recognition for their efforts; they deserve a fair and living wage for their labors of the heart and mind. We must take teacher pay in Mississippi to the Southeastern average.

We can reach that goal in four years by investing \$22 million dollars the first year and staggering increases over the next three years. We can do this and protect the fiscal integrity of our budget. With 5% growth in any given year, we can afford to pay our teachers what they deserve. As head of the executive branch, I will reprioritize the budget in any year when our economic growth is less than 5%.

And we will continue to find incentives for excellence in the classroom.

Rewarding teachers for meeting National Board Certification standards has been a priority for years, and that's paying off for our teachers and students. This year, Mississippi ranked third among all 50 states for the number of teachers achieving this prestigious certification. Today, we want to say a special thank you to the over 200 teachers who achieved this recognition, especially those who have joined us today:

1. Lori Flood, McLeod Elementary School, Jackson, MS
2. Gerry Britt, Brandon High School, Brandon, MS
3. Gwendolyn Gardner, Walton Elementary, Jackson, MS
4. Sharon Webber, Power APAC, Jackson, MS
5. Gail Hammond, Northwest Rankin Middle School, Brandon, MS

and all the others who have joined us today.

There's one more thing you should know. Not only did we do very well this year, Mississippi now ranks third in the nation overall. Only two states have more National Board Certified teachers than Mississippi. Our teachers are committed to excellence, and we are committed to supporting public education in the state of Mississippi.

Thank you all for your commitment to Mississippi's children and our state's future. We commend you for your accomplishments at the national level and every day in the classrooms across Mississippi.

Computers on every desk, teacher salaries at the southeastern average. These are only the beginning of what can be done to build the strongest public schools in the nation. How important is the leadership of every school to the students' success? How important is it to make sure politics doesn't bleed into the classroom?

If it's important to keep politics out of the classroom, isn't it just as important to take politics out of the leadership of our schools district?

What would happen if we were to take partisan politics out of running our schools, and finish the work of making all Mississippi school superintendents appointed? Can we elect Mississippi's school boards and appoint Mississippi's superintendents? I believe we can. I believe we should. I believe we must.

We're challenging superintendents, principals and teachers to reach new heights of accountability. We're talking about accountability by individual school rather than by school district. Other states are following Mississippi's example when it comes to demanding performance. But we haven't forgotten about the students.

Over the next few years, we will be looking at new ways to hold our students accountable and creative ways to encourage them to become even more active participants in their own education. Within the next few weeks we'll be starting a Reading Incentive program through the Governor's office.

Today I would issue the challenge to every school child in every county. Get a library card and use it. Find your public library and make friends with the librarian. We want to see every child from the First through the Twelfth Grades reading at or above grade level. We want those children on the Governor's Reading Honor Roll. Most of all, we want Mississippi's children reading.

Melanie and I know that it takes more than money to teach a child to read. It takes imagination and commitment. This is just one way the Governor's office is going to work hand in hand with the First Lady's efforts to promote reading across our state.

Won't you help me thank Melanie for her commitment to Mississippi as she takes on the duties and responsibilities of being our state's First Lady?

We learn to read; we read to learn and we learn the rest of our lives at home and on the job. The foundation for success has been laid in education, and we're committed to taking Mississippi's schools, community colleges and universities to the next level of excellence.

It seems to me that respect for authority has waned over time. Whether we're talking about law enforcement officers, parents, teachers, or adults in general, it's time to remind our children and society what courtesy and conduct mean. Good manners are free, and they pay great dividends. Respect engenders respect. Courtesy engenders courtesy.

Let's re-enforce what many parents across this state are teaching their children at home by requiring students to address their teachers, principals, coaches and other school officials with the respectful phrases we used growing up. What's wrong with saying 'yes'sir' and no'sir?' I urge you to pass a law requiring Mississippi students to show respect to every educator while at school.

HEALTH

We have also strengthened the safety net of health care for our people over the past few years. Mississippi is once again and with pride leading the nation. We were the first to establish a Health Care Trust Fund dedicated to health care, and we are making health insurance available for the first time to thousands of children of working families across Mississippi through the Children's Health Insurance Program. We brought together doctors, hospitals and paramedics to create a voluntary statewide Trauma Care Network.

While significant, there is much more to be done.

How many older Mississippians are struggling to pay their prescription drug bills every month? Can we just stand by and pretend we don't see this happening?

This is not one of those problems that we can put into pretty soundbites and forget about tomorrow. This is real. This is happening to our parents and grandparents, and they are looking to us to do something.

We don't have time to wait on Washington to figure out how to help Mississippi's seniors. We will work together to find a creative solution to this complicated problem, sooner rather than later. We're not here to turn a profit for the pharmaceutical companies. We're here to do what's in the best interest of our people.

Getting a handle on the escalating costs of prescription medications is the beginning. With your help we will find a way, and we will be back asking you to enact the remedy.

There's another health care crisis plaguing our state. County by county, community by community, primary care providers are becoming more and more scarce. We must act if we are to stop this exodus. We must act if we are to keep primary care close to home for Mississippians. If we can identify and enact solutions to teacher shortages, surely we can find a way to craft a solution to this shortage as well.

Once again, this is not one of those 'made for television' issues. This is real life. This is the mother whose child wakes with a fever and the nearest doctor is an hour drive away. This is your neighbor and my neighbor, your community and my community, and we can work together to bring doctors back to rural Mississippi. Technology and innovation are making the practice of medicine more and more about living longer, more productive lives. Mississippians in every county deserve to have access to those life-saving, life-enhancing skills. We will find a way.

As an aside, let me just simply say that Washington may be pulling up stakes and heading for the big cities when it comes to funding for hospitals, but we're sticking by our small towns, our rural communities, and our hospitals. And we won't let Washington forget we're here. We won't let Washington forget about Mississippi's hospitals and the people they serve.

Are we where we should be with the Children's Health Insurance Program? The short answer is no. Too many eligible families don't know they're eligible. Too many children are not yet enrolled.

You did your job, and now it's time for the executive branch of government to do its job. We must set our sights on identifying and enrolling every CHIPS-eligible child in Mississippi with the same dispatch and thoroughness we would devote to a very serious public health threat. Estimates indicate 85,000 Mississippi children are eligible. With leadership, we can find and enroll those children. We can help those families provide insurance for our children, and we will not be told that it can't be done.

That's why tomorrow I will be announcing my interim choice to lead the Division of Medicaid. We will be looking for new ways to get the word out, and our First Lady will be getting involved with Public Service Announcements. I will be calling on other agency directors like Dr. Bettye Ward Fletcher at the Department of Human Services to join us in this effort.

We should also act to protect the rights of patients and doctors by strengthening the law already on the books. With all due respect to Congress, we have waited long enough for the long-sought after and long-promised Patient Bill of Rights. Mississippians want, need and deserve a guarantee that their doctors will have the power to make medical decisions—not the insurance companies.

There's a large number of Mississippians who get up every day to serve their neighbors and their communities by making up the backbone of state government.

Their hard work and dedication does not go unnoticed, and we need to make sure we do everything we can to find an alternative to the current structure and management of our state employee's health insurance. Enough is enough. I urge the members of the Senate and the House of Representatives to work together and with the Governor's staff to find a way to make health insurance work for Mississippi's state employees.

Working hard on this issue will be the new leaders at the Department of Finance and Administration. Gary Anderson has left the safety of private life to tackle the challenge of state government. Gary, please stand so we can thank you for your hard work.

PUBLIC SAFETY

I would prefer stand before you today with answers to all our challenges. I would prefer to spell out for you exactly how we can address every concern facing our state...but we haven't had an awful lot of time to plan lately. And this job is bigger than me or my staff—we're going to need your help finding the answers.

You know our efforts in education and public health have us on the right course, and it's a solid course. We're also going to look closely at what must be done with Mississippi's prisons, what must be done to keep our highways and streets safe, what must be done to turn young lives away from the jails and toward prosperous, fulfilling lives.

This task is much bigger than the Governor's Office or the Legislature, and I will be calling for the assembly of a Criminal Justice Task Force to examine the many issues facing our state.

Working closely with this task force will be Mississippi's new Commissioner of Public Safety, David Huggins. Won't you stand and be recognized?

Fighting crime has gotten harder in many ways over time, but we are making tremendous strides in technology that allow us to track down criminals in ways we never dreamed. Mississippi's crime laboratory staff is asked to tackle the toughest cases, to make the surest connections between crime and criminal, and to do so in a timely manner. That's an awful lot to ask if we're not willing to fund this lab properly. I ask you to commit to fully funding Mississippi's crime lab.

Help us make Mississippi's families and businesses just that much more secure by taking criminals off the street and providing prosecutors across the state the evidence they need to make their cases.

Very few will argue that illicit drug use and drug-trafficking are linked to an incredibly high percentage of crimes committed in this state. Making the manufacture, the sale and the use of illicit drugs less attractive by instituting stiffer penalties requires our immediate attention.

The fight is on for our children. The fight is on for our neighborhoods. The fight is on for our future, and I for one am not willing to stand by while the drug dealers continue to gain ground in this state.

We need leadership at the Bureau of Narcotics. The Bureau of Narcotics should be leading this fight, and we must have leaders at the Bureau putting together a comprehensive plan for fighting drug-trafficking our state. We need leaders backing the agents who risk their lives in the field every day. I know that you join me in this fight, and I know that together through legislation and enforcement, we can curb this rising tide threatening to take our children and the life of so many communities across Mississippi.

Now while we're focusing on the end of the line, let's not forget the beginning as well. What can we do to keep our children from becoming the victims of this drug culture? What options can we give them? What better use of their time can we offer them? What help to working parents can we give during the after-school hours?

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that a child off the street is much less likely to turn to drugs, to get involved in mischief. A child with a purpose is much more likely to succeed in school and ultimately in life. After-school tutoring and mentoring programs are no longer a luxury for Mississippi children. Today, they have become a necessity, and we need to take programs like Support Our Students statewide.

Yes, there are costs. There are concerns. But finding solutions to problems, like providing transportation, have to be found. Would we rather deal with finding ways to pay for an additional bus route or finding ways to construct prison after prison where we lock away our children and our future?

There must be a balance between punishment and prevention.

When we think about the public's safety, there are some unsung heroes we often fail to recognize.

In times of trouble, natural disasters or national crises, we look to the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency and sometimes to the Mississippi National Guard for assistance. Robert Latham will be working diligently to create a state of readiness and preparation unlike any we have known before. And, we have already had occasion to test the skills of Bob Latham. So far, so good.

Young men and women will be looking to General George Walker and General Elton Berry for leadership in the new national guard of Mississippi: a national guard committed to meeting the needs of the community and the citizen soldier. They are charged with rebuilding our strength and our pride, the hallmarks of Mississippi's military commitment to our nation and our neighbors.

Thank you Bob Latham, General Walker and General Berry for being here today. Won't you please stand?

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Over the years, we have set an ambitious agenda for our schools. We have set an ambitious agenda in health care. But are we ambitious enough when it comes to attracting good jobs and building a more secure future for Mississippi's working families? If there have been any doubts in the past, let me lay them to rest here and now.

We are determined to improve the quality of life for our people.

After all, isn't that what we're talking about when we say the words economic development? Don't we mean finding ways to make life better for our people? Finding ways for men and women to build families, build homes, build lives, right here in Mississippi?

This administration has accepted the challenge to do exactly that. That's why I am calling for restoring credibility to the Mississippi Home Corporation by reconstituting its board of directors and starting over.

Yes, the Mississippi Home Corporation has provided hundreds of millions of dollars for housing construction in our state, but there are problems and what we have now needs improving. Our people deserve accountability, and we demand accountability from the Mississippi Home Corporation as well. Let's take the Mississippi Home Corporation into the twenty-first century with a clean slate and a renewed sense of purpose.

We are determined to move our workforce into the twenty-first century as well with the skills and the training needed to provide a better way of life for all Mississippians. We know that technology is changing virtually daily. And, we will be challenged again and again to simply keep up. But if we offer our people an opportunity for training and re-training, Mississippi's workforce will continue to be competitive in this ever-changing marketplace. Workforce development is not optional.

Put a bill on my desk that fully funds workforce training through our community colleges and I will sign it into law. Our people are our priority.

Just last week, the Department of Economic and Community Development under new leadership, began a tour of Mississippi to solicit input from local leaders and community

representatives as they begin their efforts to reconstruct Mississippi's goals and plans for attracting and growing business and industry in our state.

J.C. Burns, Executive Director of DECD, is with us today. J.C., please stand and know how grateful we are for your efforts and your willingness to find workable answers to the difficult questions of economic growth for our state.

Our people are counting on us and we look forward to working with you.

J.C. knows there's a lot to be done. Like me, he knows we need a coherent agenda for advancing our state economically. We've relied on out-dated economic plans. We've used stale incentives, and we've wondered why better-paying jobs passed us by. We have a strong economy. We have entrepreneurs and a work-force that is getting better and better. We have the resources. We have the potential.

If we do the work, Mississippi can become America's success story.

Leadership that is willing to figure out a better way can get the work done. That's means us, you and me. Sitting around talking about how good it would be if this plant located here or that operation expanded here won't do us any good. We need to listen. We need to learn. We need to think bigger. We need to be determined and persistent. We need to plan.

And, my friends hear this – we are going to write that plan.

We are going to write the plan for economic growth that will take us to new levels of prosperity and create for our families an improved quality of life.

Now before you rush to any conclusions, I'm not writing that plan by myself....

I am pleased to have Dwight Evans, President and CEO of Mississippi Power Company, joining us today. Together, Dwight and I are going to co-chair the first ever Mississippi Partnership for Economic Development, a coalition of Mississippi's public and private

sector leadership. This is a dedicated group of Mississippi leaders giving their time and energy to the creation of a new plan for economic growth in our state.

Dwight, please stand. Thank you for taking on this somewhat daunting task.

CLOSING

With a continuing commitment to strong schools, to the public health, to safety in our neighborhoods, and a willingness to explore new options for economic growth and prosperity, the state of the state is indeed good.

The challenges are many. The answers are not always easy or clear. We must look beyond today and lift the political cloud that sometimes hangs over our day-to-day work.

By working together, we can craft policies that promote the things we value about Mississippi. By working together, we can find solutions that help our people in their neighborhoods, at their businesses, and in their homes. Never again will we believe that something can not be done. In the interests of our people, in the hope of our future, we will find a way.

I appreciate your commitment to making Mississippi a better place to live, work and raise a family.

God bless us all and God bless the great state of Mississippi.