

*Remarks for the
Youth ChalleNGe Program Graduation
December 14, 2002*

General Lipscomb, thank you for your kind introduction, and thank you for the leadership you provide to the Mississippi National Guard. Because of the dedication and commitment you bring to your job, our nation looks to Mississippi when it needs the best.

I want to take a minute to talk about the National Guard – Mississippi's citizen soldiers. The men and women of the Guard give of their time and their energy to ensure the safety of our state and our nation.

They have proven themselves around the world – most recently in the war against terrorism.

They have supported the war against terrorism by guarding al-Qaeda prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; and they have supported the peace by serving in Bosnia.

I'm proud of these soldiers – and I'm proud of the commitment they've shown here at Camp Shelby with the Youth Challenge program.

When I spoke to the graduating class last June, I told them it wasn't my first time to attend one of these graduations, and it wouldn't be my last. I keep my promises.

This program does so much for Mississippi's greatest resource – and when I say our greatest resource, I'm referring to the young men and women who are sitting here today, ready to go on with their education or enter the workforce.

As Governor, I have the responsibility – and the honor – of serving as Commander-in-Chief of the Mississippi National Guard, and by extension, of the Youth Challenge Program. I do not take this responsibility lightly, but rather with the sense of history and hope for the future demanded by the job.

The Youth Challenge Program offers much to our state and our nation. First and foremost, it offers the young people here today an opportunity, a new start, a chance to redirect their lives toward positive and exciting goals.

For each of you graduating today, I want you to be keenly aware of the obligations and responsibilities you will be taking on. There is a wealth of potential in each of you – don't allow that wealth to be wasted. Mississippi deserves better. Your families deserve better. Most importantly, you deserve better.

We're working hard to build a Mississippi where you can make the most of your promise and potential. We're setting a new standard of leadership for other states to follow – from our efforts to recruit and retain good, quality jobs, to being the first state in the nation with an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom.

We're making an investment in you. If we shortchange that investment, we shortchange our future – and that's not an acceptable alternative.

You will be the standard-bearers for the next generation. I'm confident the progress will continue.

You've spent the past few months at Camp Shelby, one of the largest military training facilities in the nation. You've worked closely around the men and women of our nation's military, and seen the discipline and focus they use in their work.

Our soldiers are charged with defending a nation. Today, I charge you to help build our nation. You have the skills and the talent to do it. Make the best of your gifts.

You know, when America needs its very best, she looks to the citizen soldiers of the Mississippi National Guard. And, there's a reason for that.

Our soldiers have set a standard of excellence. They have trained, they have worked, and they have prepared for the time when they are called to action. And when called, they answered with enthusiasm and a commitment to serve.

As graduates of the Youth Challenge Program, you've also set a standard of excellence. You've trained, worked and prepared for your call to action – and that call to action is coming now.

I'm calling on you to take what you've learned over the past few months. Take the discipline, the knowledge and the sense of confidence gained at Camp Shelby and let it loose on the rest of Mississippi.

Go to school. Go to work. Give back to your communities. Be responsible citizens. Keep your minds and bodies strong. Be the leaders we know you are.

I've visited with our soldiers and watched them at work. I've seen them at Camp Shelby, I watched them train at Fort Benning, I spent time with them in the snow in Bosnia. I know they're the best of the best at what they do.

Today, I want you to begin proving to the world that you're the best of the best as well. You won't be able to build a reputation as the best if you simply talk about what you're going to do; no one will believe you.

You've got to work hard. That's how the Mississippi National Guard earned its reputation as the best – and that's how you'll earn yours.

Whatever path you choose from here, make it an honorable one. Whether you continue with your schooling, find a job, or even consider military service – keep your mind focused on doing what's right.

By doing that, you will not only honor what you have done to make it here today. You will honor all of us here with you – your families, your friends, your Governor, and the soldiers who have worked with you in the past months.

There's an old saying that if opportunity doesn't knock, build a door. You've got the skills to not only build the door, but to step through it to a bright and hopeful future.

I'm proud of you, your families are proud of you, and with good reason. You've earned that pride here today. Your job now is to keep it.

God bless you and good luck.