

*Remarks to the
Youth ChalleNGe Program Graduation
June 16, 2001*

Thank you, General Lipscomb, for the opportunity to join you again at a Youth Challenge Program graduation.

You know, I was here this past December for the graduation ceremony, and I can't tell you how impressed I was then – and still am now – with the Youth Challenge Program.

It is clear that this program lives up to its name. These students here today join the nearly 3,000 other graduates of the program who have taken on the challenge – and won.

Each of you has a different story that has brought you to this point. Each of you has a different and personal goal for your life. But, all of you share the common bond of the Youth Challenge Program.

Benjamin Franklin, in an edition of his *Poor Richard's Almanac*, once wrote – “the noblest question in the world is, ‘what good may I do in it?’”

Today I want you to think about what you've accomplished, and then ask yourself that noble question.

You have much to offer – to your families and friends, to your communities, and to your state.

I hope you will choose to stay in Mississippi, to be a part of positive change, to make a difference for those who will follow in your footsteps.

Each time I participate in a graduation ceremony, I am reminded of what tremendous promise we have for our state.

It doesn't matter where the graduation is taking place – I still look across the faces of the students and see hope, hard work and perseverance.

I see the future of our great state in the faces of those who will help shape it. I see that future clearly today.

I am dedicated to the premise that education must be our first priority in Mississippi. With so many challenges before us, we have to set priorities. We have to decide where to focus our energy.

No other issue affects our state like education. It is the bedrock of our success and the cornerstone for our growth.

When businesses like Nissan come to Mississippi to look at doing business here, they aren't just looking at what type of economic incentives we can provide, or the geographic advantages, or the transportation systems.

They are looking for an educated, skilled workforce. They want people who are ready, willing and able to work, and work hard.

They want people like you.

That's one reason why education is our priority.

That's why we're working to raise teacher pay.

That's why we're putting internet-accessible computers in every public school classroom in the state by the end of next year – and we'll be the first state in the nation to do so.

And that's why Mississippi is one of 24 states with a Youth Challenge Program – because we have to recognize that the traditional methods are not always the best methods.

We owe our youth every opportunity to succeed and to make the most of their lives. In the end – and this may sound selfish – your success becomes our success.

The difference you make as a hard-working citizen of this state grows exponentially through your efforts. The work you do has a cumulative effect. It all builds to a point where, in addition to benefiting you, it benefits others as well.

Good things are happening in Mississippi.

We're making a difference here, but I need your help to continue this work.

Let me illustrate this point. Last week, I was in New York City for the Mississippi Picnic in Central Park.

While I was there, I was interviewed by The New York Times, Business Week, Forbes, Barron's, and Fox News Network.

I met with site selection consultants for some of the largest companies in the world.

These are the movers and shakers in media and business, and as I told them the good news of what we're doing in Mississippi, they all repeated the same thing... "I didn't know that... I didn't know that."

Mississippi is doing great things. You will be a part of taking this state to the next level through your work, and I am excited about what you will do.

You've made it through the Challenge program. Now, I encourage you to continue challenging your limits. Push the envelope. Think big, believe big, act big, and the results will be big.

Abraham Lincoln once said that, “in the end, it’s not the years in your life that count; it’s the life in your years.” Make the most of your lives in the years to come.

I’m proud of you and what you’ve done; I’m proud of you and what you will do.

Congratulations to you all.

Thank you.

