

Governor's Column – 10/07/01

Best of America Seen in Visit to New York, Washington

Last weekend, I was one of a group of five governors and a mayor traveling to New York City and Washington, D.C. Along with Governor Don Sundquist of Tennessee, Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, Governor Paul Patton of Kentucky, Governor Parris Glendening of Maryland, and Mayor Anthony Williams of Washington, D.C., I boarded an American Airlines flight in Baltimore for New York. President George Bush had encouraged us to show the nation that terrorists could not alter our way of life.

The goal of this trip, named the “Back to Business Tour,” was to demonstrate our confidence in the safety of commercial air travel, the importance of keeping the economy strong through tourism, and our support of the people and the cities of New York and Washington.

The security in the airports was tight. As people lined up to go through the checkpoints, extra police and security personnel took a few minutes longer to inspect packages going through the x-ray machines and scan individuals with the metal-detecting wands. They were doing their job slowly and thoroughly, and no one was complaining.

As we approached New York, the missing part of the skyline was evident. The twin towers of the World Trade Center had always been a focal point when flying into New York, and it was unsettling to see the dramatic change in the skyline of lower Manhattan.

Once in the city, however, the sight of American flags hanging from balconies, windows and poles reminded me of the spirit we have seen around the world and here at home – a spirit of patriotism, of unity, and commitment to the principles on which our great country stands.

We spent time in restaurants, stores, and theater district of New York, in an effort to encourage people to get back to the normal pace of life. We also spent money on

purchasing much needed socks and t-shirts for rescue workers who haven't had the time to go home and change, much less do any laundry. We presented these purchases to New York Governor George Pataki, who made sure they made it to those in need.

We also had the opportunity to appear on the "Today" show, and let America know that it doesn't matter where you live, the events of September 11 affected us all deeply. I wanted to make the point that geography doesn't matter anymore, the jokes about Yankees and Southerners don't apply, and the rush of the big city is just as meaningful to us as the slow pace of a small town. We are all Americans, we are all in this together, and that's all that matters.

I've spoken about the message we carried to New York and Washington about tourism and building the economy back to strength. Underneath it all, though, was the desire to look those directly affected by the attacks in the eye and say, whatever you need, just let us know.

We met with the members of Ladder Company 3 on East 13th Street, a fire station that lost twelve good men on September 11. I was struck by their genuine gratitude for our brief visit and their desire to share their thoughts, even as a pile of ash-covered boots lay off to one side as a reminder of what had happened.

In Washington, we stood no more than 50 yards from the impact site at the Pentagon. As an Army officer briefed us on the details of the attack, I could not take my eyes off the building. Pictures still hung on walls in what used to be offices. Windows sagged and bulged, the glass melted and reshaped by the intense heat. The concrete walls were black with soot and ash. It was an ugly and sobering sight.

Listening to the description of the flight path of the plane and the damage to the building, I could only think of what an unreal moment it must have been. And, I thought of two Mississippians – James "Joe" Ferguson and Lieutenant Colonel Jerry "D. D." Dickerson – both from Durant, both killed at the Pentagon. Joe Ferguson was on American Flight

77; Lt. Col. Dickerson was in the building. Our thoughts and prayers are with their families.

As we left the Pentagon, we drove around to the north of the building and the familiar symbols of our country came into view – the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, the U. S. Capitol. They were bright in the afternoon sun – reminders of who we are as a nation, what we stand for, and the principles of freedom that can never be broken.