

*Remarks for the
MEC Annual Conference
May 21, 2002*

Thank you, Reuben. I have had the pleasure of speaking at this conference for the past two years, and I appreciate the opportunity to be with you again this year.

Everyone in this room today plays a role in the business of Mississippi, and I appreciate the aggressive and effective manner in which you take on that role. I share that role with you – and it's a role I take seriously as well.

It's been said that "business is a combination of war and sport." The investment, the commitment and the experience we bring to doing business in Mississippi determine whether we win or lose.

Nearly two years ago, the State of Mississippi went after one of the biggest projects around – and we brought it home. What did we get? Nissan. What did we use to get it? The Advantage Mississippi Initiative.

Mentioned as one of the top ten economic development projects in the nation, the Nissan project alone is creating 4,000 direct new jobs and investing nearly \$1 billion in our state. The spin-off Tier 1 suppliers, like M-Tek, Unipres, and Calsonic Kansei, represent another billion dollars and more than 20,000 new jobs.

Our work to bring in more large projects hasn't slowed. The Hyundai project was a tremendous opportunity for the state, and in the end we got closer to it than 46 other states. The very fact that Mississippi was one of the four finalists for Hyundai's first North American plant speaks volumes about what we're doing here.

There are other successful stories to share – not as large as Nissan, perhaps, but equally important to the man or woman who gets a job or keeps a job because we were able to recruit or retain a business.

There's Alcoa in DeSoto County. The company had made the decision to close their facility there, but we were able to work with them to not only keep it open but double the size of the facility and the workforce.

When Whirlpool was looking to consolidate some of their operations, they didn't close their facility in Oxford. Instead, they closed plants in Canada and increased the number of jobs at their Mississippi plant.

These are companies that want to do business in Mississippi, and we're happy to help them.

Last Friday, I returned home from a business development mission to Japan. During our time there, we met with representatives from Nissan and some of the Tier 1 suppliers now setting up shop in Mississippi.

We met with members of different trade organizations, local businessmen and the foreign press. Everyone we met with had a positive viewpoint of Mississippi.

We talked about the Advantage Mississippi Initiative. We talked about the quality of our workforce and the availability of skilled workers. We talked about what we're doing in education to strengthen our economic growth even further.

These are the issues they wanted to hear about in Japan.

Mississippi is a good place to do business. The national recession has presented challenges, but we have worked hard to overcome them.

We are committed to creating quality, high-paying jobs for the people of this state. We are committed to recruiting and retaining strong businesses for this state.

We have the workforce. The recent Pathfinder study found that a new employer in the central area of the state would be able to hire from a pool of more than 68,000 *underemployed* workers.

This doesn't take into account the people who are currently unemployed and would jump at the chance for a good job.

Let's look at some more things happening in Mississippi. In the past two years, we've created more than 21,000 new jobs and more than \$6 billion has been invested in our state and our people.

During a national recession, we've been able to do some great things, and we've been able to do them because we are committed to building this state.

First and foremost, we cannot back off on our investments and efforts to grow Mississippi. During the 2002 legislative session, the Mississippi Development Authority was facing cuts of up to 28 percent, but we fought for the MDA, and in the end, we reached common ground on the funding commitment for economic development.

If we don't invest in the primary economic development agency in the state now, we shouldn't expect to see strong results later. It's that simple.

There have also been stories in the paper recently that show Mississippi is working, and working hard.

We led the nation in existing home sales during the first quarter of 2002, with more than 60,000 homes sold. The nearly 30 percent increase is attributed to, the number of people coming to new jobs in Mississippi, the number of people who are able to afford new homes, and lower interest rates.

We led the nation in exports during the first half of 2001, with our exports up 30 percent. This increase is due to more than the usual agricultural products Mississippi is known for.

We're building and shipping offshore oil rigs, machinery, paper, plastics and, of course, furniture. Last year, furniture makers in the state exported to 78 countries. Our exports totaled more than \$3.5 billion, and over 60,000 jobs in the state are related to exports.

Let me say that the focus of this year's meeting on the furniture industry is proper and timely.

This is an industry that builds 54,000 pieces of furniture each day. It's an industry that has made Mississippi the upholstery capitol of the world and, as I mentioned before, ships its products to 78 countries around the world.

This industry is one we can look to with pride and with the knowledge that their work keeps Mississippi competitive and on the leading edge.

I appreciate the work of people like Mickey Holliman and what he has to offer as we grow Mississippi.

The Magnolia State is competing well in the global marketplace, and we're getting ready to take our game to the next level.

At the beginning of May, we formally opened the Mississippi World Trade Center – one of the objectives of the Advantage Mississippi Initiative.

With the opening of the center, opportunities for economic expansion for our state will be increased. Our World Trade Center will bring global attention to our state and offer further evidence that Mississippi can compete with anyone, anytime, anywhere.

We want business in Mississippi, and we're bringing business to Mississippi. Regardless of the inappropriate and irresponsible action taken by the U.S. Chamber, we're moving on with our work.

What they did with their call for a boycott and purchases of full page ads was no more than political blackmail. I want to ask, how many of you have ever supported a boycott? You know no one ever wins in a boycott.

I also want to thank the MEC for its strong response to this issue as well. As the voice for business in Mississippi, the MEC is respected for its positions.

Certainly, there is room for changes to the civil justice system in the state. And, as I have said time and again, when the legislative leadership can demonstrate they have an agreement on legislation that can make it past the committee process and onto the floor, I will call a special session.

I want to commend the legislative leadership for appointing committees to look at the issues of civil justice reform. We pledge our support to work with them toward a reasonable solution. It's time to move ahead.

I have met with doctors across the state, and they have told me their number one concern is the rising cost of medical malpractice insurance. My office has been working to address the issues of cost and availability.

We are looking at some innovative ideas that will offer our health care providers stable and affordable insurance. This is about more than just civil justice reform; it is about ensuring access to quality health care for the people of Mississippi.

This plan will be finalized soon, and I will be calling a special session this summer to address this important health care issue.

We will continue to work for the jobs and the business. The people of Mississippi deserve no less.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today.