

*Remarks for the
MEC Annual Luncheon
May 21, 2003*

When I became Governor, I put every state in this country on notice: that we were coming to get their jobs, and were going to bring them to Mississippi.

The last few years have been tough ones for our country. The post-Cold War era entered a new phase when we were attacked on our own soil. The war economy, along with the national recession, has restricted some of our opportunities for growth. But challenging times often allow us to put aside our differences and work together to set priorities, for our families, for our state, and for our nation.

In Mississippi we've weathered the storm the national recession better than most. This weekend the Clarion Ledger featured a story about the states that have been forced to slash their education budgets, cut vital services to their people, and even raise taxes. But not here – we've done more with less. We've cut the fat out of state government, we've invested in education, and we've created an environment where the opportunities for bringing jobs to Mississippi have been greater than ever before.

These tough times demand that our leaders not only accept the fact – but work within the parameters -- that government can't do everything. The priorities we set must be common goals that provide the most opportunity for our people.

As ya'll know, Mississippi is home to so many great writers – writers who have captured the essence of what our lives really are, as well as what our lives could be.

Clifton Taulbert is one such writer. He remembers sitting on his grandmother's porch when he was younger, looking out across the vast expanse of green, seeing the dusty road disappearing off into the horizon – a road he thought led to nowhere. It was not until he was older that he realized that this road went everywhere.

Mississippi has a lot of dusty roads. Roads that lead everywhere, to opportunities not imagined even a decade ago.

These opportunities exist because of the choices we've made in our lives – choices that have kept us in Mississippi, working together to set priorities that provide the most opportunity for our people.

Today, working with MEC and the business community, Mississippi is a state that is competing and leading in the global marketplace, a state that is setting new standards in education and economic development.

Our Computers in the Classroom Initiative was successful because of our shared vision. Two years ago, we literally passed the hat in this very room and raised more than \$50,000 to buy computers for our schoolchildren.

Today we have more than 32,000 computers in more than 32,000 classrooms – and hundreds of thousands of students are using them to learn, explore and expand their opportunities. Thanks to our shared vision, Mississippi is the first and only state in the nation where our children have the world – and the World Wide Web – at their fingertips.

And with our shared vision, college is now the opportunity of choice for 63% of our high school graduates. I am proud to say that is higher than the national average and the southeastern average.

Education is so important, as you know, because our schools are the cornerstones of our communities, and our economy. You and I also know that every job is important -- whether it's two people using a truck or 5,000 people building a truck. Every new job makes a difference in someone's life by providing new opportunity.

As I look around this room I see so many of you who were actively involved in the effort to pass the Advantage Mississippi Initiative three years ago, and the results of that effort are clear.

Over the past three years, we've created more than 52,000 new jobs at over 2,200 new and expanded facilities around the state. Nearly \$15 billion in capital investments has been pumped into our economy. Now we have Nissan coming to Mississippi – next week the first car rolls off the assembly line right up the road in Canton.

Soon, we will have 5,300 jobs in that plant alone – and over 26,000 supply chain jobs that already employ people in 65 of our 82 counties.

Working with you to create even more opportunities for our people, this January I proposed the Rural Economic Impact Authority. Thanks to you, today \$10 million is available -- without red tape -- to assist with job creation in rural areas and worker training at our community colleges around the state.

The effect of our Rural Economic Authority has been almost immediate. A great example of that can be seen with Charles Holder of Bay Springs, who's here with us today. Charles, thank you for being here.

Charles is a known business leader, who has been active in workforce development for Mississippi. He and I talked earlier this year about how we could help his business, Hol-Mac, down in Bay Springs. We got him together with some of our folks at MDA, and soon his company will become one of the first to benefit from the Rural Economic Impact Authority.

We're bringing between 40 and 50 jobs into Bay Springs. At a time when jobs have been leaving Mississippi because of NAFTA, we're giving Charles the opportunity to bring jobs back home from Mexico. That's good for Mississippi, but it's even better for Charles Holder and 50 people in Bay Springs.

Now one year ago, at this same event, I called for changes to our state's civil justice system and said I would call a special session to address the issue of tort reform.

As you know, there are certain issues and certain debates that require the Governor to take decisive action – to call a special session of the legislature – issues like the Advantage Mississippi Initiative, paying teachers like the professionals that they are, and addressing meaningful tort reform.

After more than a decade of attempts, history had proven that civil justice reform could not be passed in a regular session. It demanded the full focus and attention of the Legislature – and that is what I gave the people of Mississippi last fall.

Together, we've made progress because of a strong partnership that has focused on opportunity. We've made progress because of action, and because of leadership. That's been good for business, and it's been good for Mississippi.

You know, sometimes its too easy for politicians to make sweet sounding promises that are really too good to be true. It's easy for them to be long on problems and short on solutions. It's easy for them to make promises that they aren't in a position to keep.

What we have done over the last few years is show what is possible when people come together to set priorities that will provide the most opportunity for our best resource – our people.

We can compete with the rest of the country for the best jobs -- we have and we will. And together we will continue building more roads that lead the world of opportunity to our doorstep.

Thank you.