

*Remarks for the
Youth ChalleNGe Program Graduation
June 15, 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 for its best citizen soldiers.

I am proud to be here today, to be part of another graduation ceremony for the Youth Challenge Program. This is not my first time to attend one of these graduations, and I assure you it will not be my last.

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.

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.

Following the events of September 11, America's military, law enforcement and emergency services were taken to a higher state of alert. I believe it's safe to say that all of us were a little more alert, a little more uncertain about the world around us.

The soldiers of the Mississippi National Guard responded to the events of that fateful day last year. They continue to serve today – both here at home and overseas – in the war against those who would harm our nation and our people.

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 have 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.

We're 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.

The poet e.e. cummings once wrote, “it takes courage to grow up and be who you really are.” We know who you are; we know the potential and promise within each of you. Find that courage within yourself and reveal to the rest of the world who you really are.

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.