

“Thank you, Lieutenant Governor Hosemann and Speaker Gunn.

To members of the legislature and other public servants who would normally be here, I wish that we could be together today. We all know that normal has not been in the cards in 2020 or 2021 so far. But I know that you will be able to thoughtfully carry out your work even despite the challenges before us. I’m grateful for your service and I’m even more grateful for your friendship.

I’m very proud to be joined by my beautiful wife, who has been the steady hand I’ve needed during this tumultuous year. Elee, thank you for being a friend, a great Mom to our daughters, and a true partner in this work.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am here to say that our state is unconquerable. We have taken every hit that can be thrown. We’ve been tested by every force of nature, disease, and human frailty. It is already a miracle that our state is still standing, but we are not simply standing. We are marching forward.

In this year of crisis and confusion, there has been a solid foundation. It is the Mississippi spirit that binds all of us together. This is not a state of people who have cowered in the face of adversity.

We’ve got grit, and pride, and faith. We know how to overcome our differences and work together. We know how to do hard things. We know how to treat one another.

As we saw on Easter Sunday, this is a state of people who won’t let a tornado leave the ground before arriving with chainsaws to clear their neighbors’ land. As we saw after Zeta, it is a state of people who won’t let the waves of a hurricane rush back to the sea before ensuring their neighbor has food and warmth. We are a state of people who step up, time and again, and have exceeded all expectations this year.

Tennessee Williams was a world-renowned playwright, and a son of Lowndes County, Mississippi. He once wrote that “The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks.” What he meant was that decency, kindness, empathy, and goodness always win, even when facing hardened opposition. That has happened here, in our state, in our time. We’ve seen courage and compassion beat the forces of chaos and destruction in Mississippi. The victory isn’t final, but we can see it here every day.

That victory is visible in the long hours of nurses, teachers, and first responders. It is visible in the lives saved by ordinary heroes administering care--physical, emotional, and spiritual--on a daily basis in our state.

It is because of those people that Mississippi was able to move forward when the rest of the world came to a halt. In Mississippi, we never stopped working. We never shut down our farms and we never shut down our factories. What we did slow down for safety, we opened up as quickly and as widely as we possibly could.

We’ve been cautious, never panicked. We’ve been safe, but not stubborn. Life cannot be lived in perpetual idleness and isolation. We realized that, and we’ve adapted our plans throughout the year--responding swiftly when the spread was most severe and opening up whenever it is possible.

And that has made a tremendous difference. Despite the once in a century pandemic, Mississippi’s economy actually grew year over year. Think about that. We were the third-best state in the country for job recovery. We had more tourism spending return than any other state in the country--we were number one!

That’s not just because of an open economy. It’s because Mississippians

don't want welfare, they want to work. They recognize the pride and dignity that comes with it, and they've been eager to return when given the opportunity.

It is also why, as we look forward, we cannot be content with where we are. We can never simply say "that's good enough."

I don't want to compete with the Mississippi of the last fifty years. I don't want to compete with Mississippi of the last decade. I don't want to compete with Mississippi of last year. I want to compete with the best--Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas. Because I know we can compete, and I know we can win.

We can get in the ring with anybody, and we can leave with more jobs and higher wages. Mississippians can bring more skill and dedication to any project than anyone else, anywhere in the world. We work harder than anyone. Why shouldn't we get the best jobs, the best expansions, and best headquarters? I believe we can. And as Mississippi's own, the great Dizzy Dean, once said: "If you can do it, it ain't braggin'."

This is a time of global upheaval, uncertainty, and chaos. And it is in those times that fortunes are made. We need to make Mississippi's fortune today--this is the moment in our history to do it. We've chosen a new banner, we've improved our education, and we've shown the world that we're open for business. Now we need to go out and win high-paying jobs for the people of our state.

I believe that in order to fully capture the potential of this historic moment, we must think big. We need a bold move. This is the time for an action that will turn heads all across the country and get money and people flowing in. And I believe that move is the elimination of the income tax. It is a reward for our hard workers, and an incentive for others to invest here, to grow here, and to live here.

We can transform our economy. We can do it in a smart way, recognizing that it will take a few years to phase in. But we can change a generation of lives here, by attracting the jobs and wages we deserve. I am ready to work with legislators on this, and I know that there is an appetite for this type of boldness.

There are still many who say that we can't lower taxes because it puts new government spending at risk. And I understand that it is often good politics to act like something from the government is a gift. The far left has played that tune for generations.

But we have to be clear: the government does not have anything that it does not first take from a taxpayer. And the people of this state understand that. We have to respect the workers of Mississippi enough to recognize when we can show restraint and stop taking from them. Allow you to spend your money that you make, and it will grow our economy beyond belief.

I also believe we need to sharpen one particular tool to get our economy rolling--our state's workforce development. We don't need Mississippians to be stuck in low-paying jobs. We want them to embark on careers with good pay and freedom. The best way to accomplish that is to help lift young Mississippians up--give them access to training that puts them in a position to succeed.

The legislature made great progress in this effort last legislative session. I'm very grateful for their work. Now, I'm calling on the legislature to continue their wise investments in this mission. It is essential. It is how we will succeed. It is how we will lift people out of poverty and into proud work. I know they share that goal.

That mission really begins years sooner, with a solid education. Mississippi has made incredible strides--number one in the nation in improvements. Now we need to, once again, set our sights even higher.

This is not good enough, we can be better.

This year, in spite of tremendous pressure, we recognized that education is essential. It cannot be accomplished at scale without the incredible efforts of in-person educators. It seems obvious in hindsight, but there were tremendous headwinds. I know that we made the right decision to open our schools and allow our children and parents access to a true education.

We need to keep working. We need to keep fighting for every child to have access to the education that they deserve. We need to ensure that parents have the choice to save their child from a district that lets them down. And we need to reward our teachers for the exceptional, life-changing work that they do.

I support a teacher pay raise. I know the Senate has already passed the Lieutenant Governor's plan, and I know that the Speaker and the House have always been supportive of raises for teachers. I'll be eager to sign any raise that the legislature can send me. Our teachers have earned it. It's the right way to invest.

There's a lot more policy and politics to be hashed out in the coming year. Some of it is even important. But I know the people of Mississippi have heard a lot from me over the last year, so I want to keep this address on point. I want the people of Mississippi to know my focus for the weeks, months, and year ahead:

First, we need to crush this virus and get back to our way of life. The virus is still here, and it cannot be solved by ignoring it. We have to defeat it, because Mississippians are done. We're done burying loved ones who were lost to this virus. We're done with stressed hospitals. We're done with the fearful talk of lockdowns and shutdowns. We're ready for community again.

We all want schools to flourish with children learning and playing carefree. We want businesses thriving, with crowds of customers joined together. We want to let down the constant guard, and be joyful together. We want to be unafraid of fellowship with our friends and our neighbors.

It is one thing to eliminate government restrictions. Most of those went away last summer. It is another to be truly free from fear, and to have no more anxiety when we come together.

It will be a great day when we can gather in stadiums, churches, restaurants and bars--shoulder to shoulder--without the quiet fear of COVID. When you can celebrate with strangers after a touchdown, sing loudly at a concert not muffled by a mask, and just live life without fear. True comradery. That day is coming. It's coming sooner than we think. There is one more hurdle to that: the rapid distribution of the Coronavirus vaccine.

I reject the false narrative that is being pushed by some which says this is our new normal. That even after vaccination, we need to continue to hide away and live in perpetual isolation and fear. That's just wrong.

This is it. This is our moment. We can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and Mississippi is sprinting towards it. Last weekend, we celebrated 100,000 vaccines delivered. That took us about six weeks. We've done another 100,000 vaccinations since then, and as we speak we are likely delivering our 200,000th vaccine! That's because we refused to accept a slow pace--we went from the worst state in the country at the beginning of the process to operating at peak capacity.

I promise that we will smash every roadblock. We will get this done as safely and quickly as we possibly can, and allow people to protect themselves from the virus. It is my most immediate priority, and I assure you it has my full attention.

I also have a personal goal. It's one that I know I will fall short of, but I'm still aiming at it daily. It is to cultivate more empathy. It's been in short supply in this world for some time now. That's been on display across our nation too. And too often that leads us to see one another as enemies. It leads to corrosion in trust. We as a people cannot allow cruelty to win. We must rise above. We must love our neighbors as ourselves.

We'll always have spirited debate and disagreement. You can fight for what you believe in, while honoring the man or woman on the other side. Above all we have to understand that every Mississippian--every American--is on the same team. We all want to be treated with grace. And we're all made in the image of a perfect God. So, my goal is to act like it.

For me, that means looking out for those who need extra help. It means being honest with people--admitting what I don't know and working to be better. It means diligently working to make Mississippi an even more welcoming, prosperous state.

I'm incredibly lucky that I'm not in it alone. None of us are. We're surrounded by a legion of fellow Mississippians. People who care about you. People who want you to succeed, because they know we will all rise together. If we can just harness that, we can accomplish anything.

I know that our state has what it takes to be exceptional. And I know that with God's continued providence and our unconquerable spirit, together, we can get there.

May God bless you, and may God bless Mississippi.”

