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Office of the Governor

BOB RILEY
Governor



STATE OF ALABAMA

Press Office

Inaugural Address

Governor Bob Riley

January 21, 2003

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My fellow Alabamians,

On Thursday, June 28, 1787, the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia was in turmoil, split among itself and embroiled in a bitter battle over how this new nation called America would be governed. Tensions were high on both sides. Several delegates even walked out. Then, Benjamin Franklin rose to speak in this moment of crisis and said:

"The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: 'that God governs in the affairs of men.' And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"

Today, I pose that same question to the people of Alabama: How can we possibly hope to overcome Alabama's many challenges without petitioning God for His help in the road that lies before us? If ever we needed His aid and grace, it is now.

Therefore, in my first act as Governor, I ask God for His intervention, guidance and protection in the days ahead. And I humbly ask each of you to pray for me, the constitutional officers, the Cabinet, the Legislature and this state. Pray that God will direct us as we shape our state -- our nation and our world for future generations. Pray that God will continually remind us -- that power has only one true and noble purpose -- not to bestow gain or prestige, not to grant honor or fame -- but to serve the people, and only the people.

To be elected governor of a state -- any state -- is a tremendous honor and responsibility. But, to be elected governor of the great state of Alabama is something far more special.

Not simply because Alabama has been my home since the day I was born in Ashland, a little town just north of here. Not because I was educated in Alabama's public schools. Not because I represented Alabama in the United States Congress -- and came to understand how unique we really are. No, those reasons pale in comparison to the realization that I have been elected governor of the most extraordinary state in this nation -- something we all tend to forget from time to time.

Because of the promise held between our borders, Alabama can truly be a leader among states. From the towering heights of Mount Cheaha to the gleaming shores of our beaches, the ancient caverns in Talladega County to cutting-edge technology in Huntsville and Birmingham, we have more natural beauty, more natural resources and more innovation and talent in this one state than a dozen states combined.

We have the most intelligent, hardworking men and women, who show us courage and goodness every day that they go to work, pay a bill or teach a child right from wrong. We have produced some of the greatest football teams that will ever play the game; and our citizens change America in the courtrooms, the boardrooms and the classrooms every day. We have extraordinary river systems and road systems that can bring about a real opportunity for economic prosperity and the innovation to turn dreams into reality. And we are a people who still believe in the goodness and grace of Almighty God.

The morals and values that made this the greatest nation on earth remain steadfast in the hearts of Alabamians.

Each one of us has a common bond -- a spirit of Alabama that dwells within us. It's that pride and devotion to this state that binds us together in a way people outside this state don't always understand. And just think how that spirit has benefited the world:

When, just a few blocks from where we stand today, Rosa Parks took a stand against an immoral system and sparked the civil rights movement, the spirit of Alabama was in her.

When Bear Bryant and Shug Jordan made us believe that we could be champions and then proved it to the nation, the spirit of Alabama was in them.

When young Emma Samsom caused soldiers on both sides of the Civil War to drop their weapons and applaud her courage, the spirit of Alabama was in her, when Harper Lee wrote "To Kill a Mockingbird," when Condoleezza Rice stood beside our president as our nation was attacked, when Heather Whitestone was crowned Miss America, when the Allison boys raced across those finish lines, when Helen Keller overcame tremendous odds and learned to communicate, when Rowdy Gaines, Jesse Owens and Vonetta Flowers stood on those platforms and received Olympic gold medals, the spirit of Alabama was in each of them.

And the spirit of Alabama has been in every son and daughter who showed courage in the face of fear, and paid the ultimate price that we might gather here today. In every war and in every life lost, their bravery and their blood have been a part of Alabama's legacy on battlefields all over the world. And I know that the spirit of Alabama was in one of our most heroic citizens, Johnny Mike Spann, an Alabamian and the first to give his life fighting terrorism halfway around the world.

This Spirit of Alabama must be celebrated and remembered, for it dwells within us all. It is the core of our identity -- the essence of who we are -- both individually and as a state. It flows from the heart of our people, from one generation to the next, and it's source is our Creator.

We must always remember this "Spirit of Alabama" and our citizens who achieve greatness, those who exemplify what we all strive to be and continue to prove Alabama's excellence among the nation.

As governor, I will sign an Executive Order commissioning the "Spirit of Alabama" medal, an honor that I -- and every governor that follows me -- will present to extraordinary Alabamians every year, an honor bestowed on citizens who possess the Spirit of Alabama in their hearts and have used it to change this nation and the world.

General Moore, for your courage, leadership, sacrifice and honor; Mrs. Carr, for your

commitment to bringing about change and the healing of old wounds. The group Alabama, for your exceptional talent and your continued commitment to our home state, Mr. Spann, to your son for his bravery and sacrifice in protecting this nation, each of you will be among the first to receive the "Spirit of Alabama" medal, and I am so privileged to honor you for being the very best of Alabama.

My fellow Alabamians, how can our hearts not swell with pride when we recall the many ways Alabama has served as a birthplace for heroes and a foundation for change? How can we doubt our collective greatness when the extraordinary accomplishments and sacrifice of our individual citizens continue to astonish the world? There is no reason the state of Alabama cannot match the successes of her citizens. But first we must believe that we can.

For too long, the people of Alabama have forgotten who we are and what makes us great. For too long, we have focused on our differences -- in our politics and backgrounds, in our race and beliefs -- rather than cherishing the unity and pride that binds us together.

For too long, we have looked past our common goal: To see Alabama become a leader among states and the envy of the nation.

Today, we face many challenges. Our education system is not the world-class system our children deserve. Our economy is showing signs of weakness and a lot of people are disillusioned and are wondering if they could lose their job. We are facing a financial crisis in state government the magnitude of which we have not witnessed since the Great Depression and our tax system continues to unfairly prey on the poorest among us.

But, I believe with all my heart, that there is no challenge too great for us to overcome, but only if the people of Alabama put aside politics, race, religion or any barrier that stands between us and our goals.

There is no longer time for statements like "if only" or "we can't." We must and we will succeed. The only question now is how and when. I believe the time is now. The challenges we face are but opportunities to remind the nation, the world -- and yes, even ourselves -- that Alabama will never shrink from a challenge. We welcome it as an opportunity, an opportunity to succeed. And make no mistake, we will succeed.

I see an Alabama full of hope, promise and opportunity. A state where our children are never forced to leave their home state for good-paying jobs; where other states look to us for guidance on creating a superior education system; where our work force is so well-

trained and so committed that industries throughout the world are knocking on our doors; where we use our innovative skills to create a new economy for the 21st century; where Alabama graces the cover of Sports Illustrated and Business Week; where government is an honest servant of the people; and where people all over the nation look to Alabama as a model of what they could one day be.

But, most importantly, I see an Alabama so ambitious, so honest and so exceptional that it is finally worthy of the people who call it home.

I have felt the winds of change blow across Alabama, and I stand here before you today embracing the call for new leadership. We have much to accomplish in the next four years, and the business of our state must now go forward with boldness. However, it is going to take all of us working together to change Alabama.

No governor and no Legislature can rise above Alabama's challenges alone. Lieutenant Governor Baxley, Senator Barron and Speaker Hammet, I need your support and the help of the Legislature to make Alabama the state our people deserve. We no longer have the luxury of playing politics on the people's time, and just imagine what we can accomplish if we no longer care who garners the credit.

We must summon the courage and character necessary to confront the tough issues we face once and for all. We have passed on long-standing problems to the next generation for the last time. As Ronald Reagan once reminded us: "Our government has no power except that granted it by the people." I am asking each of you and every member of the Legislature to join me in putting politics aside and doing what is best for the people who have entrusted us with this power -- not what is best for ourselves or our party -- and to be worthy of the people we represent.

Many have sought to divide us along both racial and economic lines, working against the better angels of our nature. Let us now make a clear and decisive break from the past, once and for all, putting aside our differences and coming together as Alabamians united in a common cause.

Now I need the help of every Alabamian. Many of you voted for me, and from the bottom of my heart, I thank you. For those of you who voted for my opponents, I now ask you to join me in changing Alabama. We have a future waiting for all of us -- one that takes no notice of past political battles, of party labels or of personal pride. Our only objective should be that we are prepared to succeed.

I need your patience for we have a long and tough road ahead. Our problems did not spring up overnight, but have grown through many seasons of neglect. They will not be solved by temporary fixes or patchwork solutions, but through fundamental change and reform.

I need your trust and understanding, for tough choices must be made. And I make you this pledge: I will always endeavor to do what I believe is in the best interest of Alabama, without regard to the political or personal consequences. I am here to serve you, not me.

Finally, I need your prayers. Like Benjamin Franklin believed so long ago and millions of us still believe today, Almighty God's hand weaves the tapestry of each life and the life of this state. I know He will mercifully guide us through the challenges set before us and rejoice as we overcome them together.

And so, today let it be known, in every city and small town, and in every Alabama home, the time for change has come. The spirit of Alabama that abides in our hearts has been rekindled once again. With God's help and faith in our people, we will transform Alabama into the state we know it can be. And from this moment on, let it be understood in no uncertain terms: This government will now serve the people of Alabama.

The Psalmist writes that "weeping may endure for an evening, but joy cometh in the morning." Let this hour be the break of this new dawn. May the words of our mouths and the actions that flow from those words serve as the first rays of light in this new dawn. And when this day is viewed through the window of history, may it be said that a new day in Alabama just began.

God bless America and God bless the great state of Alabama.

For more contact information, visit Governor Bob Riley's Web Site: <http://www.governor.alabama.gov/>

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