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Office of the Governor

BOB RILEY

Governor



Press Office

STATE OF ALABAMA

GOVERNOR RILEY'S STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS

Governor Bob Riley

February 01, 2005

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Lieutenant Governor Baxley, Speaker Hammett, Senator Barron, Representative Newton, Members of the Legislature, distinguished guests, fellow Alabamians:

Before I deliver the State of the State Address, I want to recognize my wife Patsy for all she's done for me, our family and the people of this state. We're all fortunate, especially me, to have her as our First Lady.

I would also like for each of us to take a moment and reflect on just how fortunate we are to gather here tonight in freedom. Half a world away nations that once lived under oppression and tyranny are now budding democracies due in large part to America's leadership and the sacrifices of our military. Allow me to take a moment to recognize some of those heroes who are with us tonight. Sitting with Patsy is Lieutenant Colonel Scott Gedling and Command Sergeant Major Ray Green, representing the National Guard's 711th Signal Battalion, just home from Iraq. And seated in the balcony are members of the Alabama National Guard who represent the more than 10,000 Alabama troops who

have been deployed in this War on Terror. Welcome home and job well done.

Tonight it's my privilege to report the State of our State is better today than it was two years ago. It is better today than it was last year. And if we have the courage to make the right - but tough - choices during this legislative session, I promise you: the State of our State next year will be even better, even stronger and even more promising than ever before.

Tonight, Alabama's on the move and we're headed in the right direction. Now that's not to say we don't face difficult challenges ahead. We certainly do.

But we must confront our challenges with hard work, creativity and, hopefully, bipartisan effectiveness. We will not rest on our successes of the past two years, though they are many.

We've accomplished so much in a short time - by focusing on what's important, by working together and by putting the people of Alabama first.

Two years ago at this time, I laid out several ambitious goals for Alabama: better jobs with higher wages, better schools, a more ethical and honest government, and a more fiscally responsible approach to spending the taxpayers' money.

You, the Legislature, joined me. Together we acted. And we have made a difference.

Now we have results to talk about, not excuses.

We made the tough choices necessary to balance our budgets. We cut spending in virtually every agency, every department and every program by over \$500 million.

We cut the size of the state workforce to its lowest level in four years and reduced total salary costs for the first time in seven years. We closed unneeded state facilities and consolidated others. We made government more open and more ethical.

And we brought sound business practices to state government. We introduced SMART budgeting, a fundamental reform that allows taxpayers to see exactly where their money is being spent. With SMART Budgeting we ensure government is as cost-conscious as the taxpayers who support it. For the first time in the state's history we joined together - across the aisle - to address skyrocketing health care costs for state employees. That

bipartisan legislation is expected to save at least \$300 million over the next five years. This trend, ladies and gentlemen, must continue.

While seizing the chance to reform state government we also strengthened our commitment to education. In 2003 we inherited an education deficit. Today it is a record surplus. And more of our budget dollars are going into the classrooms - where learning takes place - rather than being absorbed by bureaucracy. We fulfilled a commitment I made last year to invest a record amount in our Alabama Reading Initiative so our children in kindergarten through third grade will be among the nation's best readers. And we restored funding for textbooks so our students have something to read.

And as we strive to prepare our children for the jobs of tomorrow, Alabama's economy is in the best shape in years. In the past two years Alabama's economy has created more than 42,000 new jobs. 77,000 more Alabamians are working today than one year ago.

Our unemployment rate has dropped 9 percent. More than 500 companies during this time either came to Alabama or expanded their existing industries here. And in 2004 - for the first time in 3 years - we had a net gain of jobs.

An economy that was weak and bleeding jobs just two years ago is now recognized as one of the strongest in America. We rank fourth among the 50 states in employment growth, fourth in average annual pay growth and first in the variety of industry located in our state. For the second consecutive year, we're named "State of the Year" by Southern Business and Development magazine. This publication covers 17 southern states. To be number one in this region is a great achievement for Alabama. Together, these states comprise the fourth largest economy in the world. On the economic front, the South leads the nation and Alabama leads the South.

However, before we make the mistake of patting ourselves on the back, let's remember: government does not create jobs. It only helps create the conditions that make jobs more or less likely. The real credit for our economic renewal belongs to the people of Alabama. We've made government their partner, but they are the ones who deserve the honors and the praise.

Ladies and Gentlemen, during the past two years we set the stage for the reform of government, the recovery of our economy and the renewal of Alabama's promise.

And the people we work for are beginning to notice. A survey taken recently reported that

a majority - 56 percent - of Alabamians expressed confidence that Alabama is moving in a positive direction.

But this is no time to take a break. To keep Alabama on the right track we must carry out the will of the people and continue reforming government. The fight for reform comes down to a simple goal: giving our citizens the confidence that government serves the people first and the people only.

We've done a lot already, but not enough.

So tonight I ask you to support proposals that will bring even greater accountability to state government.

I ask you to pass a ban on money transfers between PACS so there will be no more disguising who's making political contributions.

I ask you to pass limited home rule because local governments are too hamstrung by top-down state control.

I hope you will support an independent transportation commission to ensure that politics will never prevail over our transportation priorities.

And ladies and gentlemen, I ask you - once and for all - to place a permanent ban on pass-through pork.

I want you to pass education accountability reforms that require all school systems to be audited, a bill eliminating tenure for school administrators, and a bill that gives us the tools to reduce redundancy in higher education through improved accountability.

And a proposal to strengthen our open meetings law because greater public access and scrutiny is the hallmark of honest government.

When I first became your Governor, I required all Cabinet officers to sign an ethics pledge. And we adopted a strict code of ethics for everyone in my Cabinet and in the Governor's Office. I hope you - the Legislature - will join us by officially adopting your own code of ethics.

I believe this will send a powerful, tangible message that both the executive and legislative

branches are serious about living up to high ethical standards.

The character of every legislative session is established early. That's why on this very first day, I reach out my hand to all of you, without regard to party, and ask for your help in passing these accountability measures.

Both parties have released agendas that contain most of these reform ideas. So surely we can pass them this session.

I want to do this. You say you agree. So let's stop talking about it and get it done.

Accountability is the foundation upon which we build greater trust in government. However, education is the foundation upon which we build a better Alabama.

So let me announce that the education budget I'm delivering to you tonight will invest more money in our classrooms than any other time in Alabama's history.

The amount of money we spend on education is important, but not nearly as important as how the money is spent.

My budget plan will fully fund all the requests made by our K through 12 system.

It will fully fund all the requests made by the Commission on Higher Education.

And every dime of our education dollars will only go to education activities.

That means textbooks are getting a 17 percent increase and are fully funded.

The Alabama Reading Initiative is fully funded.

The Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative is fully funded.

Professional development for our teachers - fully funded.

Ladies and Gentlemen: there can be no greater investment in Alabama's future than an investment in education.

Tonight I'm announcing a new initiative that will revolutionize the way we teach our

children in Alabama forever. It's called ACCESS - Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators and Students Statewide. ACCESS is a distance learning program that uses technology to connect teachers and students across the state, and potentially anywhere in the world. The technology exists today and we should put it to work in our Alabama classrooms.

Through the use of the internet and videoconferencing, any student, anywhere in Alabama, will have the opportunity to take courses that are not currently available. Just think about it: a kid in rural Clay County or Wilcox County will have the opportunity to take advanced physics, calculus or even Chinese.

This innovative approach will benefit our teachers as well. They'll be able to use this technology to enhance classroom instruction and strengthen their professional development. And we'll begin doing all of this with my budget. It devotes \$10 million to this distance learning technology because ACCESS gives our children and teachers more opportunities than we ever thought possible.

Every child needs a good teacher. So to make sure we attract the best and brightest - and reward them - my budget will provide a much-needed and much-deserved teacher pay raise. I believe the pay raise should be as much as we can afford, but no more. So my education budget includes a pay raise of four percent.

Alabama's job growth has increased revenue for education. We hope this trend will continue, and we'll work hard to make sure it does. But we must not use the additional revenues in our budget to create new spending commitments that we can't afford and send us back into proration. I - for one - am determined that Alabama will not repeat the mistakes of the past.

If all of us can agree that the first priority of an education budget should be educating our children, then surely we will not create long-term spending commitments that shortchange the tools that help our children learn. Like textbooks. Or reading programs. Or education technology.

Our teachers, our parents, and certainly our children, deserve a responsible budget this year so we avoid having to make cuts in these programs next year.

There's also more we can do to reward our teachers. My budget includes an incentive bonus for those who volunteer to teach in schools and in subject matters where there are

teacher shortages.

And why don't we do something truly extraordinary for our teachers and our children? Why don't we reward teachers who are doing a great job by linking their pay to their performance in the classroom?

When money follows results - we will get more results for our money.

Let me say to every Alabama parent: Your child deserves excellence in the classroom. The more we reward outstanding teachers, the more outstanding teachers we'll have in our schools.

Tonight I'm launching the Alabama Commission on Teacher Quality to recommend ways we can better support teachers, retain them in schools with the greatest needs and reward them for results. And I'm pleased to announce that Betsy Rogers - the 2003 National Teacher of the Year - who is with us tonight - has agreed to lead this important effort.

The challenges we face in the General Fund are completely opposite of our education fund.

Not enough revenue plus more demand for services equals hard, tough choices. There is a name for people who make hard, tough choices. We call them "leaders" - and that's what each one of us must be. So we have to do things differently. We have to make sure all education activities are paid with only education dollars - and we have to make sure General Fund dollars stay in the General Fund.

My budget does that. My budget is balanced and it contains no new taxes.

If you pass my budget we'll hire 100 more State Troopers to patrol our highways. We'll be able to fully repay the Rainy Day Fund. We will increase funding for Medicaid and maintain the level of health care services it provides. We can eliminate the backlog of state inmates in our county jails. And we'll be able to increase funding for the All Kids health insurance program by almost 25 percent. At that level we can eliminate the waiting list for children in need of health care coverage.

The agenda I've just outlined for you is wide-ranging and far-reaching. It abides by the values we Alabamians hold dear: living within our means, providing more opportunities for our children, protecting the safety of our people and working with honesty, integrity and high ethical standards.

But this agenda is not complete without a reminder that the moral values of our people must also be embraced by government, not scorned by it. Our government must always demonstrate a strong recognition of - and support for - the values of our people and the role of faith in our society.

First, I call upon you to defend the sanctity of marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Marriage is a sacred institution and its protection is essential to the continued strength of our society. Alabamians want us to protect marriage, and we should.

Second, I know there will be calls for an expansion of gambling this year. Let me be clear: I remain opposed to the expansion of gambling. And my budget does not need gambling revenues in order to be balanced.

Third, our faith, our values teach us to love life and protect it. All life - the born and unborn - is a gift from God and has worth and value. Therefore, I call upon the Legislature to pass a law acknowledging the fact that crimes of violence against pregnant women have two victims and those who commit such crimes should be punished for committing two offenses. At least 32 other states already have this law on the books. Alabama should join them.

Ladies and Gentlemen: I believe Alabama has never been stronger because our strength and greatness comes from our families, our values and our faith in God. It comes from the very character of our people. But for the people to win, politics as usual must lose.

I ask you: turn a deaf ear to the special interests. Let politics stand down for a while. Don't waste anytime thinking about future elections until we've done our jobs here.

We are one state. We share one destiny.

Alabama holds too much promise, too much potential and has too much at stake for us to dare go any other way but forward. Our future won't be determined by chance, but by the choices we make in the days and weeks ahead. And may almighty God grant us the wisdom to always make the right choices for the people of this great state.

Good night, God bless you 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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