

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

DON SIEGELMAN
GOVERNOR



STATE OF ALABAMA

STATE CAPITOL
600 DEXTER AVENUE, ROOM N-104
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36130

(334) 242-7100
FAX: (334) 242-0937

Governor Don Siegelman
Remarks as Prepared for Joint Address on Government Accountability
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*Governor may deviate from text.

My fellow Alabamians, I love Alabama. I love the people of Alabama. I love fixing problems. I remember when I was a kid, watching my Dad fix things. In fact, that's probably why I ran for Governor, to fix problems. I just didn't realize that there were so many problems that needed fixing.

Alabama government is broken, and it has been broken for over a hundred years. We've seen the results this year, across our state and in our schools. Yes, Alabama government is broken, but together, you and I are going to fix it.

To the leaders of the House and Senate, my friends in this historic chamber, my fellow Alabamians, that fight begins tonight.

It is time. In fact it is past time, that the leaders of this state come together and finally do something that we have failed to do for over a hundred years.

Reform our government.

Reform our constitution.

And change the way we invest in education.

But before we can do any of this, we need to bring accountability to our state government, and we need to do it right now.

I have already instituted basic accountability reforms to restore your faith and trust in your government. And tonight, I am asking your state lawmakers to join me in this fight and make my government accountability initiatives the law of Alabama.

My friends, since 1901, the people of Alabama have grown to distrust their government. Indeed, it's become something of a birthright in this state. And frankly, since that time, our state leaders haven't done much to change their minds.

Well, we have to change their minds.

Because without their trust, we cannot make the fundamental changes Alabama so desperately needs. Without their faith, we cannot reform our constitution. Without their commitment, we cannot change the way we invest in our schools.

We can't wait any longer. We have to start tonight. The children of Alabama need us now.

Over the next few days, you have an opportunity to help restore the people's faith in their government, so that we can move forward to make the changes that Alabama has waited on for so long. Ladies and gentlemen, the people of Alabama have asked us to work for them to fix problems, to prepare Alabama for the future.

As leaders of Alabama, we are held accountable for our decisions in managing the business of this state. Every day, the media and the people hold me accountable as they should.

Just two weeks ago, I was visiting an elementary school in Huntsville. I met three third graders who were sitting on a bench outside the principal's office. They had been in a fight. I

asked them if they were ready to shake hands and apologize. They did, we resolved the dispute, and I sent them back to class.

The headline the next day read, "Siegelman, Soft on Crime"

It's important that we be held accountable, and it's important that when problems arise, we fix them. Over the last 2 and half years, you and I have tackled some of our state's toughest challenges.

This Legislature worked with me to end decades of stonewalling to pass common-sense tort reform. Working together, we ended an 18-year-old lawsuit to move teacher testing out of the courtroom and into the classroom.

We settled Alabama's 30-year-old mental health lawsuit and finally answered Lurleen Wallace's call to care for the mentally ill in a safe and dignified manner.

This is the Legislature that worked with me to put an end to a half-century of neglect by passing Amendment One to rebuild Alabama's crumbling bridges, roads, and State Port.

But we didn't stop there. We now see a State that is attracting top aerospace and automotive companies, creating higher-paying, intellectually challenging jobs for our children;

A state where Alabama CEOs have joined with me to create a national model to improve health and early learning opportunities for all of Alabama's children;

An Alabama whose schools now set national standards in new school construction, teacher salaries, academic standards and accountability;

A state that now has the best reading program in the nation, the highest test scores and the lowest dropout rates in our history;

A state whose colleges and universities push technology and research to new, unexplored limits, and we won't stop there.

Earlier this year, this Legislature drew up and approved new House and Senate districts for the first time in modern history, and over the next few days, you have the opportunity to redraw congressional and state school board districts and keep that out of the hands of Federal judges.

Ultimately, our motivations are the same. We care about Alabama. We want all Alabama's children to have a better chance at life. We want to leave our home better than we found it.

It is a challenging journey, and the truth is, we've come a long way. But, ladies and gentlemen, you and I know, we've got a lot more work to do, because we have a hundred years of neglect to overcome. My work has just begun, and that is true for you as well.

How long must the state of Alabama lurch from one financial crisis to the next before we say together, enough is enough? How long must the state of Alabama struggle under the weight of the most ineffective, most cumbersome constitution in the world... a constitution whose sole purpose is to hold us hostage, hold us down, and hold us back?

We need a new constitution, and yes Governor Brewer and Dr. Cortis, we need a new constitution only if it is written and ratified by the people of Alabama.

Not even 15 years after the document was first written, Governor Emmet O'Neal was calling for its reform. He looked at the 1901 constitution and said, "No real or permanent progress is possible in Alabama, until the present fundamental law is thoroughly revised and adapted to meet present conditions."

Earlier this year, for the 14th time since 1949, a national economic downturn and Alabama's 1901 constitution have forced painful cuts in Alabama's education- cuts that jeopardize all the progress that we have made: 14 years of cutting education.

In 1950, 1957 and again in 1958, our constitution forced Big Jim Folsom to make cuts in education. Governor Folsom called for constitutional reform and fought the big mules, and his fight made him an icon.

Under Governor Persons in 1951, our constitution again forced cuts in education. Under Governor Patterson in 1959, 1960 and in 1961, our constitution hurt our children again, more cuts in education. Under Fob James in 1979, 1980, and 1981, our constitution cut education again.

And then in 1986, under Governor George Wallace, more cuts. His solution? A fight to raise sin taxes. Under Guy Hunt in 1991 and 1992, still more cuts in education.

And in 2001, the same old, hurtful story.

How many more years are we willing to accept this?

How many more children are we willing to lose?

How many more schools, colleges and universities are we willing to let suffer?

Our constitution and our tax structure tie school funding to an unstable, unreliable source of revenue. That doesn't make sense. We must change it.

Let's think about why our 1901 constitution makes it so hard for our system to work. It's because the people who wrote it didn't want government to work. They wanted leaders to fail. They wanted special interests to rule the day and to rule the state.

They wanted to centralize power. Over 700 amendments to our constitution prove that point. It makes no sense for you, the people of Alabama, to have to come to Montgomery and beg your lawmaker or some special interest in order to improve your local schools.

It wasn't right in 1901, and it certainly isn't right today, because when we shortchange our schools, we shortchange our children and we shortchange their future.

But before we talk about reform on the funding side, there must be more reform on the spending side. We must continue to improve accountability and efficiencies in government and in our school systems.

I have taken steps to make government more accountable. I've instituted the tightest controls over tax dollars in our state's history. With the support of state employees, I've controlled waste, saved money, and stopped non-essential spending.

We now budget based upon real need through performance-based budgeting – the most significant budget change in over a hundred years. I recently ended Alabama's age-old practice that allowed lawmakers to hand out checks.

We have made progress. These changes will help, but it's simply not enough.

As long as we continue to see the same headlines year after year, a million dollars wasted here, two million wasted there, you are never going to trust your government to make the fundamental changes our state so desperately needs.

It is time to earn your trust. We have to give you confidence that your government can work, that it can change things, that it can improve your schools.

For years, we have blamed our faults on the people in charge- and we haven't always been wrong. But even with the best and brightest minds, and the most well-intentioned people, the system still fails us.

We must make government more accountable. We must continue to make basic reforms to regain the people's trust, so we can move forward together to reform our constitution and change the way we invest in education.

As governor, I have used the power of my office to demand higher standards for my administration, but to ensure that these changes apply to future governors and future administrations, I will need your help. Tonight, I will ask your legislators to make my government accountability initiatives the law of Alabama.

In June, I signed an executive order requiring full disclosure of any family or political ties to any state contract or grant. Join my fight, make this the law of Alabama.

Last week by executive order, I implemented some of the toughest, most responsible competitive bid requirements in the nation. Under my watch, the people of Alabama will get the best value for their tax dollars. Join my fight, make this the law of Alabama.

I have issued an executive order to require all of my agency heads to attend a review of the state's ethics laws every other year. The people of Alabama need to know that their leaders are held accountable and that they can be trusted, not only during my time in office, but in the future as well. Join my fight, make this the law of Alabama.

And I am asking you to help me modernize the way we build roads in Alabama. With a business-minded commission running the department of transportation, the people of Alabama can rest assured that every road and every bridge is built in the best long-term economic interests of this state, not only during my time in office, but in the future as well. Join my fight, make this the law of Alabama.

And, let me be clear: On my watch, there will be no more hidden projects taking money from our schools and our children. If it's not supporting our priorities, helping schools, fighting crime, supporting our seniors or children, it won't be in the budget.

I'm signing an executive order to end the practice of pork-pass-through. As long as I'm governor, it will not happen. We cannot allow money to be spent on projects that put politics above school children. Join my fight, make this the law of Alabama.

My government accountability initiatives will help regain the trust of our people so that we can move forward to reform our constitution and change the way we invest in education. But, making these changes will not be easy. If it were easy, then Governor Emmett O'Neal would've done it in 1915. If it were easy, then Big Jim Folsom would've done it in the 40s or 50s. If it were easy, then Governor Brewer would've done it in the 60s or 70s.

I will need your help. My friends, we will take on the selfish special interests who always fight to hold us back. We will reform a system that now hamstring our ability to invest in our children.

I call upon you now, as I've called upon you before. This is an obligation our generation has to our children and our grandchildren. This is our time, and we must seize it. We must take on this fight.

Alabama government has been broken for over a hundred years. Help me make our government more accountable, and after we have regained your trust, help Alabama with constitutional reform and help me change the way we invest in education.

We must demand a solution for our children. If we don't stand up for our children, their voices will not be heard. This is a defining moment in the history of our state. Years from now, when our children and grandchildren confront us, and they will, as the next generation of leadership, they will judge you and me by this:

Did you fight for us?

Did you fight the special interests?

Did you fight for our schools?

How would you answer your young children today and how will you answer your grown children tomorrow? Your spirit, your heart, and your dedication is needed now.

I trust you will answer my call as you have done before. Together, we will either get credit for Alabama's future, or we will get the blame. The choice is yours.

I have made my choice. I am going to fight.