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STATE OF ALABAMA

2020 STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS

EMBARGOED UNTIL THE GOVERNOR'S DELIVERY

Lieutenant Governor Ainsworth, Pro Tempore Marsh, Speaker McCutcheon, Speaker Pro Tempore Gaston, members of the Alabama Legislature, Chief Justice Parker, justices of the Alabama Supreme Court, distinguished guests – and my fellow Alabamians:

Thank you for allowing me to address you — and the 4.8 million other citizens for whom we all work — with an update on this place we know and love, our Sweet Home, Alabama!

As you can see, I'm working with one arm – not tied behind my back - just tied up! But, as I always say, there's no step too high for a high stepper! *I'll be fine.*

Last month, I had the pleasure of joining you — and many others from around the state — in participating in Alabama's Bicentennial Celebration.

Thanks to you, we not only marked our first 200 years in fine fashion, but, together, we began writing the first chapter of our next century. And with the continued involvement of all our people — and with God's continued blessings — there is every reason to believe that our third century will be our best yet!

Governor Thomas Kilby, Alabama's 36th governor, stepped onto this very spot — in this historic chamber — one hundred years ago to speak to the people of our state about what Alabama's second century might look like.

Like me, Governor Kilby had served as Alabama's Lieutenant Governor prior to being elected governor. He would go on to increase funding for public education and public health, invest in new roads and bridges, while also devoting more attention and additional dollars to law enforcement and yes, even to build a new prison.

Governor Kilby understood that government action can oftentimes become the engine for economic expansion and that education is the key to both economic and social success.

As the old saying goes, "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Members of the Legislature, on this first day of the 2020 legislative session, we can be confident with our plans to build on our past as we step boldly into a new century for our great state. Our 3rd century begins with a strong, robust economy and a renewed commitment to look for new opportunities to answer old challenges, many of which have been around for decades.

Shortly after becoming your governor in April 2017, I realized that our great state had ignored too many problems for far too long. We had put Band-Aids and duct tape on old ideas, old roads and bridges, and tired old prisons long enough.

While these challenges can seem daunting, we know that one person can make a difference if you remain true to your core values. A challenge is an unmet opportunity. For me, those are to always tell the truth, to level with the people of Alabama and always shoot straight, and to not be afraid to take on difficult challenges.

I believed then — as today — that Alabamians were ready to do big things!

Each one of you – in one way or another – confirmed these beliefs with what, together, we achieved during our first Legislative Session of the Quadrennium last year.

And for that reason — and a whole lot more — I am proud and extremely pleased to report to you tonight that the State of our State is strong and growing.

Early on, I made one of the most important decisions I would make as your governor, and that was to begin regular meetings with the Bipartisan Leadership of both the House and Senate.

Look, no one here will be shocked to learn that our two political parties don't always see eye-to-eye.

But unlike what we've seen nationally, I knew that no one party has a monopoly on good ideas. And I felt — and time has proven me correct — that these bipartisan meetings would help us come up with bipartisan solutions on everything from infrastructure funding to hopefully improving our state's education system.

Success breeds success. And there is no better time to think big – and be bold – than now! Our future generations depend on us to do so.

A prime example of the benefit of working together was Rebuild Alabama.

Many pundits – and longtime observers of the Legislature – noted that the first session of the Quadrennium last spring was one of the most productive in decades.

To that end, I want to sincerely thank each of you for helping us address one problem that other legislatures and governors before us put off for 27 years... dealing openly and honestly with our aging, crumbling infrastructure.

In recent weeks and months, we have announced the state's portion of \$122 million worth of road and bridge projects in more than 48 of Alabama's 67 counties. And this is just six months after the new revenue began coming in.

And as I promised the people of Alabama on the day I signed this bill into law, Rebuild Alabama will only be spent on building roads and bridges. And, in fact, we added strong accountability measures to make certain of this.

It was the first of many bipartisan efforts that we accomplished last year. And the good news is Alabama still has one of the lowest gas prices of any state in the nation!

One of my top priorities for this upcoming session is tackling another problem that others have either chosen to ignore or been unable to solve.

Both my strong faith in the Lord – and a heartfelt concern for basic human rights – gives me a sense of urgency to address our longstanding challenges within our criminal justice system. Ladies and gentlemen, we simply cannot afford to wait any longer to tackle this problem... and failure is not an option.

Thanks to the support of the Alabama Legislature, we made good progress during the last session to address the issue of understaffing. I'm pleased to report that our recruiting and retention efforts are improving and moving in the right direction.

Over the past seven months, the Criminal Justice Study Group I appointed last year analyzed many of the crucial components necessary to address the needs to rehabilitate those within our prison system.

I am exceptionally proud of the hard work – and tireless efforts – of Justice Champ Lyons and Senators Chambliss, Ward and Singleton and Representatives Rowe, Hill, and England – for their willingness to put any preconceptions aside, leave politics at the door and work together for what is truly in the best interests of our state.

I look forward to working with the Legislature - and others - on bills specifically designed to address some of these issues.

Currently, work is well underway in addressing our antiquated and crumbling prison infrastructure. In the past few weeks, I visited Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore and Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka to see these issues firsthand.

Some of our worst, most over-crowded facilities – one of which was built more than 90 years ago — were never designed for the number of violent offenders we have today.

That is why I tasked Commissioner Dunn to spearhead the efforts to build three new prisons that will transition our facilities from warehousing inmates to rehabilitating people.

Ladies and gentlemen, Alabama has no choice but to reinvent our corrections system by replacing outdated and unsafe facilities that pose a great risk to public safety – and inhibit development of programs for inmate rehabilitation.

You've heard me say this before, this is an Alabama problem that must have an Alabama solution. I look forward to working with each of you.

To aid with successful reentry, the Community College System provides educational, technical and workforce training.

Ingram State, where I also visited recently, is the only postsecondary institution in the country that exclusively serves the incarcerated population.

Y'all, this partnership is changing lives. Just ask Brandie McCain.

In just one year, Brandie had completed the coursework needed for three logistics certificates at Ingram State. She was among the first group of Ingram students to earn a nationally recognized credential in logistics.

Brandie worked with Ingram's job placement team to locate a job where she could use her newly acquired skills. With their assistance, she landed a job at Wright Way Staffing in Fairfield, where she quickly moved up the ranks to become an office administrator and staff recruiter.

In her new role as an employer, Brandie is giving back by looking to hire other qualified Ingram State graduates. Brandie, please stand.

Members of the Alabama Legislature, please join me in welcoming Brandie McCain and applauding her incredible achievement!

As important as it is to fix our prisons, an even better investment, long-term, is building a world-class public education system.

In a few minutes, I'm going to outline my plans for how we will continue making investments toward this goal. But first, I want to, once again, level with you, the Members of the Legislature, and perhaps more importantly, with the people of Alabama.

During last year's session, the Legislature gave the voters of Alabama an opportunity to help move our education system in a bold, new direction, by having an opportunity to vote on AMENDMENT ONE, which will be on the March 3rd primary ballot.

Unfortunately, we've gotten all-too-complacent to being at or near the bottom of national education rankings.

Ask yourself this question: Is there any high school in Alabama, much less any college or university, that would continue to keep a head coach who produced teams that were consistently dead last? Would Auburn or Alabama?

Sadly, too many of our third graders are not proficient in reading. In fact, according to the Nation's Report Card, we are 49th in the nation in reading and we are 52nd in the nation in math! And it only gets worse as they get older... too many of our high school graduates simply aren't ready for college or a career.

Let me be abundantly clear... this isn't the fault of our hard-working teachers, principals or local superintendents...Folks, it starts at the top.

Alabama is one of only six states that still has an elected state school board and this board has selected 5 State Superintendents in the past 5 years.

Very simply, Amendment One will create term limits for the State Board and no member will serve more than two six-year terms, thus bringing fresh new ideas to the commission every few years.

Equally important, the newly constituted board will reflect the racial, gender and geographic diversity to reflect the make-up of students in our public school system.

There's no other way to say it but our current system isn't working.

For us to prepare today's students for tomorrow's opportunities, it is time we get serious:
It's time for creativity.
It's time for accountability.
It's time for stability.

It's time to vote YES for Amendment One on March 3rd!

Despite our challenges in education, there has been much progress in some areas that are worth noting.

Since becoming your Governor in April 2017, the early results from our 'Strong Start, Strong Finish' initiative give us every reason to be extremely optimistic.

When fully implemented, our students who get the best start possible, early on, are all but guaranteed that they have endless opportunities when pursuing their dreams post high school.

We all know that a world-class workforce begins with a world-class education system.

And the path that leads to that starts with a solid foundation constructed during the first 5 years of life.

Just think... 95% of a child's brain develops from birth to age 5.

My education budget that I am proposing will provide an additional \$25 million dollars to expand our nationally-recognized First Class Pre-K program. This significant increase will expand the program by another 193 classrooms.

The bottom line is simple... Providing the tools for a great start in life will yield dividends for generations to come. Join me in applauding Secretary Jeana Ross and her team at the nationally-recognized Department of Early Childhood Education for having the nation's best Pre-K program year after year.

Speaking of investing in our future, tonight I am proposing a \$1 billion-dollar public school and college authority for K-12 education, as well as for our two- and four-year colleges and universities.

This money will be distributed on a formula basis to allow for much-needed capital improvements across the state. Equally important, this bond will not include any legislative earmarks for pet projects.

It has been almost 14 years since Alabama made an investment of this size by providing direct help to our schools. And whether it is for new construction, safety improvements or technology upgrades, this billion-dollar investment is coming at the right time and for the right reasons. I urge the members of the Legislature to help us make this investment a top priority for Alabama's future. Our children are counting on us.

As I said before, the challenges we face with our public schools can't be blamed on the teachers, the administrators or the students. Our teachers are vitally important to our student's future; I am living proof of this.

Growing up in Camden, my first-grade teacher was Mrs. Elise Hickey and she was a favorite. She left a lasting impact on my life by creating within me a passion for reading. It was because of her that led me to believe that if a child can learn to read, they can learn to do anything.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mrs. Hickey is one of the reasons I stand here as Governor!

Teachers in our state deserve to be compensated for their hard work. They instill a love of learning in our students and help them dream to become the next generation of doctors, economic developers, and small business owners.

That is why I am proposing a three percent pay raise for all teachers: pre-k through community college.

While no state in the nation has had more success in recent years attracting new investment and new industry, Alabama must redouble our efforts to ensure that we will have the most-sought after and qualified workforce in the country.

We have set an ambitious — but needed goal — of 500,000 employees with post-secondary credentials by 2025 that will stretch across all aspects of our education and workforce system. Our future depends on it.

Last year, an unemployed Army veteran, John Carroll, came to the Decatur Career Center hoping to turn his life around. He was going through some personal troubles and was out of work.

That's when Carl Flemons, a veteran's representative at the Department of Labor, stepped in.

Carl helped John work on his résumé, helped him apply for jobs, and most importantly, helped him restore confidence in his skills and abilities. With the Career Center's help, John landed a job at a local door manufacturing company.

Within a few months, thanks to his hard work and determination, he turned that opportunity into another job with LG Electronics as a safety coordinator. John is still employed there today even though a few months ago, he was facing considerable barriers to employment. Both John and Carl are with us this evening and we welcome you to your State Capitol!

Carl, your example of going above and beyond is representative of so many of our dedicated state employees. For that reason, and many others, I am also calling on our Legislature to provide a two percent increase for all state employees. This is the third straight year our state employees will see an increase in their paychecks.

Whether it is the State Trooper patrolling our highways or a social worker rescuing an abused child, we can be proud to have so many dedicated men and women who are giving their best to the people of Alabama.

And speaking of giving one's best, please join me in congratulating the team at the Department of Human Resources, led by our dedicated Commissioner Nancy Buckner, for leading the nation two years in a row in placing foster children in a permanent, loving home. It's one thing to talk about helping a child; it's another thing to actually do it.

Folks, I'd like to take this opportunity to recognize all the members of the Ivey Administration — let's let them know how much we appreciate their efforts and what they do *everyday* for our state.

As we all know, 2019 was an especially difficult year for those who wear a badge.

Seven members of the Alabama Law Enforcement community were killed in the line of duty.

These heroes exhibited the best virtues of our state – they were selfless, brave, dedicated and, in the end, willing to sacrifice their lives for all of us.

Representing these families, we have Mrs. Joanne Williams, the widow of Lowndes County Sheriff Big John Williams, with us tonight.

Mrs. Williams, thank you for being here.

Please join me as we observe a moment of silence to remember all those who died in the greatest act of selfless service to the people of Alabama.

And All of God's people say, "Amen!"

Obviously, one of our most basic responsibilities of government is ensuring that we have a robust sector of public safety.

I'm proud to report that under the solid leadership of Secretary Hal Taylor, the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency has increased protection on our state's roads and waterways.

For too long, we were operating on a bare-bones structure that increased delays in waiting for help on the side of the road and limited the number of highway patrol officers whose job is to keep us safe.

This has been a top focus of my administration and with your help, we have increased the number of Troopers from 365 to 435, a net increase of 19%! We have almost doubled our marine officers from 24 to 42! My budget will include additional funding to hire and train 50 additional sworn officers.

Since coming into office, I have made no secret of the fact that one of the most critical issues we face — one that will affect every single Alabamian — is the upcoming Census in March. 2020 will be a make or break year for our state.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of what a full and accurate count in the 2020 Census means for our State. These numbers have a direct impact on our state's representation in the U.S. House of Representatives as well as on the billions of dollars in federal funding...that's billions with a "b"...that affect schools, community programs, health care, and job opportunities for our state.

Thanks to the leadership of ADECA Director Kenneth Boswell and his team, we are going all out to get everyone to be all in.

It is ever so important for *every* Alabamian to join me in saying "I Count" by completing a census form!

Other important areas that are being worked on daily by my Administration:

Access to broadband; it is a top priority to continue increasing the availability of high-speed Internet throughout the state, especially in rural Alabama, through the Broadband Accessibility Fund.

While state government can't do it alone— and we are counting on the help of our partners in the private sector— my budget will continue to provide funding to connect as many people as possible during the coming years.

Currently, some 220,000 Alabamians do not have any wired Internet providers where they live. Our efforts will not end until every Alabamian has access through high speed broadband.

Much as Governor Kilby increased funding in public health one hundred years ago, my budget will make a substantial investment in the area of health care... both rural health and mental health as well.

Another sign of our commitment to improving the lives of those who live in rural Alabama is my full support for a pilot program to incentivize primary care physicians and nurse practitioners to establish services in medically underserved areas.

I am calling on the Legislature to support my rural health care initiatives which, among other things, will help improve basic primary care in many deserving communities. By encouraging these medical professionals to build a practice in these areas, we can literally transform many small towns throughout the state.

And thanks to the innovative leadership being provided by Mental Health Commissioner Lynn Beshear and her team, I am also calling on the Legislature to provide funding to build three new crisis centers in the state. When open and fully staffed, these centers will become a safe haven for people facing mental health challenges; here, they can be stabilized and treated without being sent to a jail or the hospital.

Special thanks go to House Majority Leader Ledbetter and the members from both parties and both chambers who have been working with him to lead the charge to put additional emphasis on this important area of public service.

I am also proud that our Mental Health Department is partnering with the Department of Education to ensure we are promoting "Whole Child Wellness."

The fact is...our students are with us for at least 8 hours a day and many come from a home-life that few of us can imagine. Our students are increasingly dealing with challenges and pressure for which most teachers aren't trained or prepared to deal with; these young people need our help and we are going to do our part.

As the Members of the Legislature begin this upcoming session, let me close my remarks tonight with a reminder, a challenge and a promise.

First the reminder:

We are starting our new century enjoying the best economy our state has ever had. Ever!

Thanks to the hard work of Commerce Secretary Greg Canfield and his team — as well as Labor Secretary Fitzgerald Washington and his folks — these are unquestionably the best of times.

We have the lowest unemployment rate in our 200-year history at 2.7 percent.

More than 82,000 of our fellow citizens are working today than were working just a year ago.

At the beginning of last year, economists predicted we would gain 27,000 jobs in 2019. In true Alabama fashion, our economy beat those expectations by gaining nearly 77,000 jobs! That, too, is a record for our state!

And fewer people are living in poverty than ever before.

Y'all, these results don't just happen because we want them to. They are happening because we are working together, more united than ever before.

Even so, there are some 60,000 Alabamians seeking employment opportunities. Still others are hoping to climb the next step up the economic ladder.

I say to everyone across our state who is still climbing - we will not leave you behind.

My reminder is that every challenge is an opportunity waiting for action. And while we are enjoying the best of times — and my budgets and these requests reflect that — we must prepare for a changing environment — one beyond our control — that recognizes times won't always be this good.

To that end, here is my challenge.

For years, going back to 1999 when Governor Siegelman was promoting an Alabama lottery, we've been hearing that expanding gaming in some form, perhaps a lottery — or maybe a compact with our Native American neighbors — would solve all our problems and provide money for all sorts of good ideas.

Keep in mind, the last time the Legislature gave the voters had an opportunity to cast their vote, the so-called “education lottery” was voted down by the people of Alabama by 54 to 46 percent. It wasn't even close.

Since then we've heard promises of hundreds of millions of dollars — now we are up to a billion dollars — that would be available if the Legislature would give the people another opportunity to vote on a lottery or if I would negotiate a compact... If it were only that simple.

Many of our legislators were not even serving the last time a Governor had to declare our budgets in proration, making sweeping, across-the-board cuts. But I remember those times and let me tell you, we do not want to go back there.

That is why I will be signing an Executive Order to establish a small working group of some of Alabama's most distinguished citizens, to begin working, to gather all the facts on how much money we could really gain if some form of gaming expansion occurred. Vetting on these individuals is already underway and I will be releasing these names in the coming days.

Like you, I'm fully aware that the four states which border us all have some form of gaming.

And neither you nor I are naïve enough to believe that we're benefitting in any way when our people cross the state line to bet on a game of chance.

While I, personally, have never believed we should fund essential state services on such an unstable source of funding, I have always maintained that the people of Alabama should have the final say on whether or not we are going down this path.

So that, my friends, is what this working Group will be charged to get – the facts!

Once they have done so — I will bring these facts to the 140 members of the Legislature and the people of Alabama. And we will then, once and for all, be in a position to determine whether or not this is a path we want to pursue.

Ultimately, my pledge would be for the people of Alabama to have the final say. But first, we must get the facts and understand what they mean.

My challenge to the Legislature is: give us some time to get the facts and then, together, we will give the people of Alabama the information they need to make the most informed decision possible.

As you know, when we have achieved great success in the past, it was only accomplished through a bipartisan effort and many months of advocacy to do what is in the best interest for the people of our state.

Finally, my promise.

Throughout my service as governor, I have pledged to level with you and be a governor who doesn't shrink from responsibility just because it is hard.

I promise you this – I'm going to do all I can to help lead our state to solve tough problems and realize our untapped potential. Serving as your governor has been the utmost honor and privilege of my life.

You see, I truly believe this is our moment... as we step confidently into our third century... to do the things that need to be done, for both today and in the years to come.

And, ladies and gentlemen, I cannot do this without your help, your partnership and your support. Together, let's make this moment count.

May God continue to bless you and the great state of Alabama.