

Brandon Presley “War on Corruption” speech on May 16, 2023

Transcribed by Mississippi Today

“When I walk by that sign down there on Mississippi Street, and I see that sign that says state Capitol building, state of Mississippi, unfortunately, under our current state government, it should say ‘for sale’ under that sign.

We know in our hearts, Mississippians in all 82 counties know in our hearts that what the welfare scandal has exposed over the last few years is really truly a deeper infection of corruption in state government. It’s always been there, this scandal just pulled back the Band-Aid and showed us how bad it really was.

We know clearly from what we have seen in this saga that has played out in the press that if you’re a regular person, state government doesn’t work for you. You may get invited into the Capitol, but that’s just about all you are going to get in this building.

Under Tate Reeves’ watch, \$77 million was stolen and diverted from working families to pet projects of the well connected campaign contributors and folks in high places.

If you’re Brett Favre and you need \$5 million for a volleyball court, that’s no problem, Tate’s got you covered.

If you’re Tate Reeves’ personal trainer, the guy who teaches him to do jumping jacks, then you get \$1.3 million.

This type of corruption and this good ole boy network makes me sick at my stomach. I have a deep seated resentment against how state government works for those who are in power, for those who know their way around the Capitol, those who are paid to find their way around the Capitol. But it doesn’t work for those like my family and for thousands and thousands of families in Mississippi, who can’t write a campaign check, who cant hire a lobbyist, who don’t know where the best restaurants are in Jackson while the Legislature is in session.

I was raised by a single momma in a small town in northeast Mississippi, of 1906 people I know all of them I joke and tell folks. My momma struggled to pay the bills. We would go for days on end with the power cut off, not because my momma didn’t want to work, and not because my momma didn’t work. Simply because she didn’t have the money. Some of the earliest memories I have is going behind a laundry mat on Will Robbins Highway in Nettleton and filling up three liter bottles of water. Not because we didn’t know that we had a water bill, simply because my momma couldn’t pay it.

Millions of taxpayer dollars were stolen from programs to support people just like my momma, and mommas and daddies and grandparents all across Mississippi. And they went to celebrities, a volleyball court, the governor’s personal trainer and all sorts of pet projects.

Let me make this clear: People in Mississippi know in their hearts that Tate Reeves will not fight this corrupt system. He won't fight this corrupt system because it's helped him get where he is, and he's hoping this corrupt system will help keep him in office.

Don't believe me? When a veteran prosecutor, an independent veteran prosecutor got just a little bit too close to the governor's buddies and some of his campaign contributors, he fired him, and replaced him — guess what, with a firm run by his campaign donors.

This culture of corruption benefits Tate Reeves.

It benefits lobbyists and giant corporations who fund his campaigns and that's why he's worked to protect those lobbyists by firing an independent investigator.

I'm telling every Mississippian that you cannot trust Tate Reeves to clean up corruption in state government, and I'll get about the business of cleaning it up day one.

As public service commissioner just over there in the Woolfolk Building, I saw firsthand up close and personal how big utility companies many times would put their profits above people. When I became a public service commissioner my first meeting I went into I saw that we were feeding the utility representatives donuts and coffee. Now let that set in for a minute. Feeding the very people that state government was supposed to regulate. That was wrong, and that's why I ended that practice immediately and made some of the corporate lobbyists mad.

I've stood up to giant corporations when they tried to fleece Mississippi taxpayers in footing the multi-billion dollar Kemper County power plant, despite both Democrats and Republicans and their lobbyists with big checks encouraging me to vote yes, I had the guts and the backbone to vote no, telling people in the Democratic Party and Republican Party and all the people who were cheering this boondoggle: no.

I opened up meetings at the Public Service Commission to the public. Believe it or not we were voting on billions of dollars in costs paid for by Mississippians and it was all done in secret. I wrote for the attorney general's opinion that opened those meetings up so that the public could know what was happening at the public service commission.

When I'm governor, I intend first day to declare war on corruption, period. It all starts with sanitizing a sick and infected system in this building. A system where if you know the right corners to hide around as a lobbyist you can get done what you want done. But if you're a working family, if you are a small business owner that can't afford even the gas at \$3 a gallon to get to Jackson you are shut out and you are left out.

If Mississippians could see under this dome, if they could see under this dome it would sicken them, too. But they know in their guts it's going on. They know every day they are being sold out for some special interest for some buddy's little deal, some contributor's little deal and it's never about our deal as Mississippians.

Tate Reeves will not stand up and do anything about it, you know why I say that, he's done nothing about it. He's done zero about it. He's done zero. He benefits today from a system in which is not producing benefits for Mississippians but is producing benefits for his buddies.

As we declare war on corruption I'll call a special session within the regular session to put an ethics reform package on the table and we are going to see where the House and Senate members stand. We're going to see where they stand when it comes to cleaning up this system and saying no to their lobbyist buddies. We're going to make sure Mississippians come first.

Here's what will be in that package, one plank of it, that we pull together the day I walk off the inaugural stage:

Banning unlimited gifts from lobbyists to lawmakers and elected officials from the governor all the way down. If you are elected you are going to come under the ban.

We will stop the unlimited flow of special interest money to state officials and require weekly gift and lobbying disclosures. We need to know once a week who's being taken out to dinner. Who's gone on a golf trip. The public has a right to know.

Place limits on the currently unlimited flow of campaign contributions from individuals, political action committees and completely banning direct contributions from corporations.

Banning state officeholders and candidates for state office from accepting contributions while the legislature is in session. One of the reasons we can't get anything done and when I say we I'm talking about folks like myself in Mississippi who don't have a lobbyist. The reason we can't get anything done is the good old boys and good old girls in this building while the legislature is in session are more concerned about raising money for their campaign or going out on a golf trip or having some big dinner with a lobbyist than they are about our business.

Clean the system up.

This is not rocket science. It's being done in other states in the United States and we can do it here.

Stopping the revolving door – Good Lord at the number of people we see leave state service whether elected officials or high placed state employees in the executive branch or executive offices within state agencies, and the next thing you know they are back, they're back with a lobbyist badge on, taking somebody to lunch, lurking around the corner trying to peddle influence and sell out sell out the people of Mississippi.

There should be a one-year waiting period for any form of government official to lobby the state legislature, and for any lobbyist to join the state Legislature.

You're not going to clean up this system with a revolving door. You're not going to clean up this system with having somebody leave one day from government service and come back the very next day working on issues that they were working for when they were on our payroll.

And this year, we know the Public Records Act is up for rediscussion, reauthorization. No. 1 that is a sad fact that we have to come back and revisit it. The only reason these type of repealers get put in bills that are of the public interest is so they can be tinkered with to benefit campaign contributors, lobbyists and special interest money.

Over the coming weeks our campaign will discuss how we can win this war on corruption so state government works for Mississippians, not just Tate Reeves' well heeled lobbyists. How we can stop our current office holders from being bought and sold by the highest bidder for the gig.

We're going to send a message, in the tune of that old Willie Nelson song, "Shut out the lights the Party is Over." Shut out the lights, the party is over. Mississippians have seen what is going on with this system and they're sick of it.

We are going to make big campaign check writers mad, we're going to make lobbyists mad, we are going to make special interests mad because they've had their day in Mississippi long enough and we see what it's benefitted us, nothing.

We are going to move Mississippi government back on the side of working people. Working people who got up this morning in Tupelo and went to Cooper Tire, got a sausage and biscuit, running late. They can't come down here and lobby anybody, they expect their state government to be held to a high accountability.

To somebody who got up this morning in Gulfport going to work at the Huddle House, got an issue they care about, they can't write Tate Reeves a \$5,000 check, a \$10,000 check. But they need a governor on their side and not a governor that's sold out.

Tate Reeves will not tackle corruption. Let me say that again, he will not tackle corruption. He doesn't have the guts to do it. It will make too many of his buddies mad and it will upset the system that he has benefited from for the entire time he's been in state service.

We will declare war on corruption and we will win a war on corruption. Buy showing Mississippians that we can have a government that serves them and not

just the contributors. Not just the lobbyists. Not just the folks that I said earlier know all the little ante rooms and closets where you can pull out this legislator and talk to them.

This system is so sick we've had legislators go on tape saying they were proud of their committee assignments because they called it a red meat committee where you got to eat steaks and raise money. (He's referring to an interview Sen. Joel Carter did on the Coast)

I never thought we would get to a time which it was that bold to say that.

We are going to turn state government's focus back on people like my momma, and many mommas out there, many working families and small businesses.

We are going to do it by ending corruption, and we are going to force the Legislature to put their foot on historic ethics reform.

You can't hide, you can't hide in a special session with one bill on the table."