

The Columbus Dispatch, Barbour defends pardon decisions, (1.19.12)

BILOXI, Miss. — Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour invoked his Christian belief in forgiveness and his childhood experiences with a convict named Leon Turner to explain why he granted clemency to 215 convicts just before he left office, including 17 murderers.

The former governor answered questions about the pardons for the first time on Friday, three days after he created a furor when he filed the pardons and sentence commutations with the secretary of state's office, then exited the political stage.

Barbour said he knew victims' families would

be upset.

But he did not know

the public would have the impression that he let 215 inmates out of prison.

Barbour wanted to stress that only 26 convicts granted clemency were still in state custody, and 13 of those were very ill. Four

of the five murderers worked as trustees in the governor's office.

“Marsha and I are evangelical Christians, Presbyterians. Christianity teaches us forgiveness and second chances. I believe in second chances. And I try hard to be forgiving.

“The historical power of clemency by the governor to pardon felons is rooted in the Christian idea of giving second chances. I’m not saying I’ll be perfect. That nobody who received clemency will ever do anything wrong. I’m not infallible, and nobody else is.”

Barbour also talked about Leon Turner, an inmate he grew to love. Barbour was 10 years old when his father died. His grandfather, who raised the Barbour boys, developed a neurological disease that cost him the use of his legs.

Because Barbour’s grandfather was a Circuit Court judge, Gov. Paul B. Johnson had an inmate, Turner, dispatched to help the family.

“When my older brothers and I were growing up, and our cousins, like federal Judge William Barbour,

Leon took care of us,” Barbour said. “He helped raise us. He was our playmate, our friend.

“My grandmother built him a house for his old age, and his wife’s old age. I watched the power of a second chance, and what it did for Leon Turner.”

He said the five inmates who served him in the governor’s mansion, four of them murderers, have played with his grandchildren and even watched them while they rode tricycles in the driveway.

Historically, he said, murderers are trustees at the mansion because, experts say, their crimes of passion are unlikely to be repeated.

“I have no question in

my mind,” he said, “that these guys are not a threat to society.”

