

FLOOR STATEMENT
Monday, January 16, 2023
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Senator Jennifer L. McClellan, *Chair*
Virginia Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission

Madame President and colleagues:

Yesterday, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would have turned 94 years old.

Today, on the holiday that bears his name, and to honor his memory and legacy, Americans are encouraged to engage in a day of service.

Today also is a day when we remember Dr. King's profound messages of love, of peace, of freedom and equality. It is fitting that we remember and repeat his words and keep them in our minds and close to our hearts, today and every day.

The Virginia Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission is charged with the task of honoring Dr. King's life and legacy and continuing his work. As chair of the commission, the enormity of that task is never far from my mind, nor is the question of how we can work toward his vision of a Beloved Community.

The dream of the Beloved Community, in which peace, justice, and love prevail over hatred and division, is uncontroversial. I believe that every one of us wants to live in that world.

I would ask though, that today when we remember Dr. King's legacy of love and peace, we also remember this: that during his life, he was subject to fierce opposition. He was threatened and he was imprisoned. He was surveilled by the FBI. At the age of 29, he was stabbed at a book signing and nearly died. At the age of 39, he was killed by an assassin's bullet. Through it all and until his death, he remained unfailingly dedicated and courageous.

His messages of love and peace are full of hope, and they inspire us. Like most of us do, Dr. King wanted an end to racism, an end to war, and an end to poverty. He had an uncommonly eloquent way of expressing it. But beyond wanting it, through his words, actions, and leadership he showed that discomfort, disruption, resistance, self-liberation, and a full overturning of the status quo were necessary to get there. During his lifetime, this made him a radical figure. This would still make him a radical figure today.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington and his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Everyone remembers and quotes the end of the speech. But too many ignore the

rest of it. Dr. King talked about more than just treating people the same regardless of color. He talked about redressing inequity in our nation, making the reality of our nation match the promise of its founding principles, the fierce urgency of now to do so, and of the dangerous repercussions of doing nothing.

Dr. King framed his speech in the historic context—one century after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which served as “a great beacon light of hope” to millions of enslaved people who had been “seared in the flames of withering injustice.”

Yet 100 years after the hope and promise of that document, Black Americans still had not achieved full freedom and equality, but instead were “sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination,” living “on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity,” languishing “in the corners of American society . . . an exile in his own land.”

The purpose of the March on Washington was “to dramatize a shameful condition”—the chasm between the promise of equality and liberty in our nation’s founding documents and the emancipation proclamation and the reality for Black Americans in 1963.

To put a finer point on it, King declared the purpose of the March was “to cash a check.”

He reminded us that, “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men,”—and I would add today, women—would be guaranteed the “unalienable Rights” of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. ”

The March was to call out America for defaulting on this promissory note.

And to answer the question of so many of the day “when will you be satisfied?”—as though if he made sufficient progress in gaining new civil rights, it would be time to rest after a battle well fought.

If Dr. King were with us today, he would not be satisfied. He would not be satisfied that racism and the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow still haunt our nation.

He would not be satisfied while consumerism and materialism remain woven into the fabric of our society.

He would not be satisfied in a world where nations are quick to take military action and human lives are treated as dispensable.

He would not be satisfied when there is no time to mourn the victims of one mass shooting before more lives are taken in the next.

He would not be satisfied while a climate crisis looms and governments delay meaningful action.

“No, no, we are not satisfied,” Dr. King said in his speech. “And we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

As we remember his life today, let us also remember that when he spoke of his dream, he also admonished us that “Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.”

Let us remember that Dr. King struggled. Let us remember that Dr. King changed the world. And let us remember that still, Dr. King was not satisfied.

Next month also marks the 55th anniversary of the Koerner Commission report examining the causes of the 1967 race riots in the United States and providing recommendations for the future.

The report’s recommendations included creating new jobs, constructing new housing, and putting an end to de facto segregation in order to wipe out the destructive ghetto environment. And the creation of government programs to provide needed services, to hire more diverse and sensitive police forces and, most notably, to invest billions in housing programs aimed at breaking up residential segregation.

Dr. King called the report a "physician's warning of approaching death, with a prescription for life. ” Indeed, the report echoed the framework Dr. King laid out in his final book “Where Do We Go From Here.”

But nobody listened.

To the contrary, the backlash to the Report and the civil rights gains made by African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s was immediate, culminating in the racially exploitative “Southern Strategy” that elected Richard Nixon in 1968.

This backlash was reminiscent of the Jim Crow laws enacted at the turn of the 20th Century that struck at the social, economic, and political gains former slaves made during Reconstruction.

Over the past few years we’ve seen other backlashes to the gains made by African Americans, women, and other historically marginalized groups over the past 50 years, culminating in the election of Barack Obama—and the election of Donald Trump and the re-emergence of explicit white supremacy, as seen at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 and the January 6th Insurrection.

And we saw it in response to generational changes made in the wake of George Floyd’s murder culminating in calls to ban critical race theory and coordinated campaign to intimidate teachers and school board members who seek to teach a complete, accurate history of our nation.

Yet now is not the time to hide from our history. Now is not a time to retreat, but to rededicate ourselves to building the Beloved Community.

For 60 years later, we still seek to redeem the promissory note of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution for all Americans and make the Dream a Reality.

This year's theme for today as established by the King Center in Atlanta is "It starts with me: Cultivating a Beloved Community Mindset to Transform Unjust Systems".

It starts with me.

It starts with you.

This theme is appropriate, for we cannot leave it to our institutions—government, higher education, the business community, and others.

For our institutions are made up of people.

And people believe, act, and establish priorities based on what they know, experience, and understand.

So I challenge you to honor Dr. King today and everyday by continuing his work and ask yourself, "What am I doing to achieve Dr. King's dream of a Beloved Community?"

"How am I using my voice and platform to move the institutions to which I belong to achieve the Beloved Community?"

Because Dr. King knew he wouldn't see it in his lifetime. But we can strive to see it within ours.

Madame President, I move that when the Senate adjourns today, it does so in memory and honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.