

FLOOR STATEMENT
January 17, 2022
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



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

Madame President and colleagues:

Today on the King Holiday, we honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who would have turned 93 years old on Saturday.

This session also marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Virginia Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission, created to honor his legacy, which I proudly chair. The Commission was created in 1992 by legislation sponsored by Delegate William P. Robinson, Jr., who would become the Commission's first chair. The Commission was created to honor the memory and legacy of Dr. King, and to continue his work through educational, historical and cultural programs, public policy analysis, and public discourse on contemporary issues, in particular racial, economic and social justice, academic scholarship, and community service.

Over the past 30 years our progress has at times been slow, but looking back, we can see its forward trajectory.

As Chair of the Commission, I have studied the vast body of work written and spoken by Dr. King over the course of his public life. I want to focus on 2 of them today.

Over the past year, I have heard many people, including our new Governor, quote Dr. King's most famous line from his I Have A Dream Speech - "I have a dream that little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

I am sad to say, it is obvious that too many people have not read the entire speech. Or the majority of speeches Dr. King gave over his lifetime.

Dr. King's speech at the March on Washington was not simply about treating people the same regardless of color.

It was about redressing over a century of inequity in our nation.

It was about making the reality of our nation match the promise of its founding principles

It was about the fierce urgency of taking action immediately - and of the dangerous repercussions of failing to do so.

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 Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity."

Dr. King pointed out that 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 PEOPLE REGARDLESS OF GENDER] 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 take action immediately.

And he outlined the work that must be done.

And great progress was made a year later with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and The Voting Rights Act of 1965.

But when Jim Crow legally ended with those victories, the work wasn’t finished.

For the rest of his life, Dr. King struggled with the question of what’s next. As he titled his final book: "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?"

Reflecting upon the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King discussed the question of what African Americans should do with their new freedoms.

He concluded that all Americans must unite in order to fight poverty and create a fairer society, with equal opportunity for all.

“Where Do We Go From Here” was essentially the same question asked a year later by the Kerner Commission, which in February 1968 issued a report examining the causes of the 1967 race riots in the United States and provided recommendations for the future.

The Report berated federal, state, and local governments for failed housing, education and social-service policies.

The report also aimed some of its sharpest criticism at the media, acknowledging that “[T]he press has too long basked in a white world looking out of it, if at all, with white men's eyes and white perspective.”

The report also noted “What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget — is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”

The report's most famous passage warned, “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”

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 1967.

But nobody listened.

To the contrary, the backlash to the Report and the civil rights gains of the 1950s and 1960s was immediate, culminating the murders of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy and 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:

The election of Barack Obama as President gave rise to birtherism and the re-emergence of white supremacy, as seen at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 and unfortunately the January 6th Insurrection.

And now we see it in response to generational changes made in the wake of the long overdue reckoning with 400 years of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow in the wake of the murders of Brianna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd.

But the impacts of slavery and Jim Crow did not go away with a magic wand when laws changed. They need action.

We have made great strides, but still have a long way to go to achieve the ideals upon which this country was founded for everyone

Since 1968, we have seen more diversity among our elected and appointed government officials, in our educational institutions, and in the private sector, from Hollywood to the C-Suite.

And yet, disparities persist in education, health, wealth, homeownership, incarceration, and even school discipline.

We live in a Commonwealth where students of color and with disabilities are disproportionately referred to law enforcement.

We live in a Commonwealth where pregnant Black and brown women are 3 times as likely to die as a result of pregnancy and childbirth as white women.

We live in a Commonwealth where too often missing a rent payment can all too easily lead down a path to eviction and homelessness, and a disproportionate number of these evictions hit Black and Brown Virginians.

We live in a Commonwealth where people of color are disproportionately represented as criminal defendants, social services recipients, children in foster care, but under-represented as judges, lawyers, caseworkers, teachers, principals, etc.

And against this backdrop, the question of where we go from here poses a new challenge, as we grapple with current events, tied to deep-seated historical injustices that have pushed us to breaking points: the wounds of the long patterns of racial violence and brutality, opened anew by the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd; the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; a worsening climate crisis; an increasingly divided political landscape.

This year, the question, "Where do we go from here?" remains a difficult one.

In the wake of the turmoil and protests of 2020, the nation was re-awakened to what Dr. King called "the fierce urgency of now." Dr. King wrote, "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time." Dr. King's call to immediate action was resonant at that time. We were hurt, and we were angry, but we were energized.

The past year has been a challenge, and our momentum requires all our effort to sustain. Much of the past year has been marked by fatigue, anxiety, and grief.

More than a year after the insurrection at the Capitol, our rifts have not been bridged.

We are entering a third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and hospitals remain overfilled, and medical workers are overstrained.

Teachers, Administrators and Parents are exhausted, but still anxious from the difficulties of keeping our children safe and learning in long-underfunded schools.

Families are grieving loved ones they've lost to the pandemic.

Where do we find the momentum to move forward, and the energy to ask, "where do we go from here," when at times it feels that we are barely treading water in the present?

We cannot let go of Dr. King's urgency, but at the same time, we can pause to look back at what we have accomplished. Because we have accomplished change, and we are better for it.

In Virginia, we increased the minimum wage and removed exemptions rooted in Jim Crow for jobs such as domestic workers, home healthcare workers, doormen and ushers - jobs that once were performed by enslaved workers and then were among the only paid jobs available to Black workers.

We went from the second hardest state in which to vote to the 12th easiest, and the first in the South to enact its own Voting Rights Act to eliminate voter discrimination, suppression and intimidation.

We have ended racially targeted arrests for possession of marijuana.

We have abolished the death penalty.

In a visible symbol of progress, the Lee Monument in Richmond has been removed, no longer celebrating the ideals of the long-dead Confederacy in the Commonwealth.

And the statue of the architect of Massive Resistance and the Southern Manifesto has been removed from the entrance to Capitol Square.

This past year was a landmark for the King Commission, which completed and unveiled the Emancipation and Freedom Monument on Brown's Island, dedicated to the abolition of slavery, and the contributions of 10 African American Virginians in the centuries-long fight for freedom and equality.

The lives of the individuals featured on the Monument remind us that moments of historic progress -- like the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation and ratification of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in the United States, and every momentous freedom we have gained since -- are built on the lives and dedicated work of individuals, whose combined efforts created a better world.

We can each, in our own way, do the same. As Dr. King described, "You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

As I think of those individuals, I am reminded of the theme of the 2022 King Holiday as designated by the King Center in Atlanta - It starts with me: shifting priorities to achieve the beloved community.

This theme highlights that it is not just our institutions that have led the progress towards The Beloved Community. That progress has been shaped by individuals who are dedicated to making the reality of our country live up to the promise of its founding documents and the pledge that we began the session with today - liberty and justice for all. And people who understood that in a government by, of and for the people, people of different races, religions, creeds, and background, the perspectives and needs of all the people must be understood and addressed.

We all have a role to play to achieve the Beloved Community. So as we honor Dr. King today, I ask you each to reflect on what you will do to help achieve the Beloved Community.

And for those who are frustrated and exhausted by the slow progress we have made since Dr. King's death, I remind you of his words that "Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

We know that we have sacrificed, we have suffered, and we have struggled. Because of it we find ourselves now closer to justice, and in that movement toward justice, we can find hope, and the courage to continue to sacrifice, to suffer, and to struggle for a better world and a Beloved Community, as Dr. King did.

I am reminded, too, of another of Dr. King's directives: "If you can't fly, then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do, **you have to keep moving forward.**" We have moved forward, but we have farther to go. Let's keep moving together.

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