

FLOOR STATEMENT

April 4, 2022

*On the 54th Anniversary of the Assassination of
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*



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

Fifty-four years ago yesterday, Dr. Martin Luther King arrived in Memphis, Tennessee in support of 1,300 striking sanitation workers. He had a sore throat and it was a stormy evening. He was planning to rest that evening at the Lorraine Motel, while his friend Ralph Abernathy spoke to 3,000 supporters at the Mason Temple.

With a restless crowd, Abernathy called for King to make a surprise appearance. That appearance—extemporaneous remarks—became the famous “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech.

In that speech, before his famous conclusion, Dr. King told the crowd why he was glad to be living at that moment in time.

“The world is all messed up,” he said. “The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars.”

He went on to speak of the “masses of people” rising up throughout the world with a universal cry: “We want to be free.”

Fifty-four years later, those words ring as true today as they did in 1968. With democracy under threat at home and abroad, with climate change, racism, inequity ... we see the “trouble in the land” that Dr. King was talking about.

But I encourage you today to also heed Dr. King’s words: “only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.” At our darkest moments, we can see the shining light of people joining together to fight for freedom, democracy and equity.

Less than 24 hours after that speech, Dr. King was assassinated.

Today, as Chair of the Virginia Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission, I join the world in not just commemorating the death of Dr. King, but in celebrating the life and legacy Dr. King.

This year also marks the 30th anniversary of the King Commission, which was founded in 1992 to not only honor the memory and legacy of Dr. King, but to continue his work through educational, historical and cultural programs, public policy analysis, and public discourse on contemporary issues. Over the past 30 years our progress has at times been slow, but looking back, we can see its forward trajectory.

We also must connect Dr. King's legacy to our work today.

This afternoon, as it does every year, The National Civil Rights Museum will commemorate Dr. King's life and legacy on the spot where he last stood in 1968 on what was the balcony of Room 306 at the Lorraine Motel. On this 54th anniversary of his death, they will honor him by addressing the perpetual question, which he spent the final year of his life pondering:

"Where do we go from here?"

This was the title of a speech he gave nine months before his death at the 11th Annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. His speech echoed the themes of his book by the same name published in 1967.

One of the central themes is that of hope.

Reflecting upon the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King discusses the question of what African Americans should do with their new freedoms found in laws such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Dr. King concluded that all Americans must unite in order to fight poverty and create an equality of opportunity.

He reiterated his philosophy of nonviolent social change and the power of love over hate, saying that he still stood by nonviolence as the most potent weapon available in the

struggle for justice in this country because “darkness cannot put out darkness; only light can do that.”

This year, the question, "Where do we go from here?" seems more difficult than ever before in my lifetime to answer.

Hope at times has been hard to hold onto.

The hate that Dr. King saw has not gone away, but alternates between festering below the surface and bursting forth in the open as it did Charlottesville in August 2017.

These tensions have only been heightened during a global pandemic.

The past two years have been marked by fatigue, anxiety, grief, and anger, which sometimes threaten to overwhelm the progress we have made.

While we made great strides addressing racial injustice and inequity over the past years in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, we are now facing the same backlash my great-grandparents’ generation faced in response to the political, social, and economic gains they and formerly enslaved Americans made during Reconstruction and that Dr. King and my parents’ generation faced in response to *Brown v. Board of Education*, The Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act.

As more and more of those who endured Jim Crow are dying, we face a backlash to teaching their experiences to our children. We see the labeling of efforts to redress the impact that slavery and Jim Crow still has on too many of our communities today as “inherently divisive concepts” and “critical race theory.”

But to answer the question “where do we go from here,” we must fully acknowledge and understand how our past brought us here, which can only be done through teaching our full, accurate, and complete history—the good, the bad, and the ugly—even when (and I would say especially when) it is uncomfortable.

More than a year after the insurrection at the Capitol, our rifts have not been bridged and there are those who seek to undermine our very democracy—while those in the Ukraine are willing to give their lives to maintain their own.

As we are on the verge of confirming Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first African American Woman on the U.S. Supreme Court, my heart has broken over some of the vitriolic rhetoric used against her.

Families are grieving loved ones they've lost to the pandemic—and to gun violence.

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?

But we must continue to answer it with a “strong, demanding love.” And with hard work to build and strengthen our community.

As we reflect on the life and legacy of Dr. King, we should hold onto his unshakeable faith, as outlined in his final speech that, whatever challenges we face, we will achieve peace and justice in our future if we continue to strive for it.

“I've been to the mountaintop...and I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”

Dr. King's words, his faith in humanity, and his hopes for the future give us direction today as we continue to build our “Beloved Community.”

But as John Lewis reminded us in his final essay before he died:

Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.

As we remember Dr. King today, let's commit to picking up the mantle and doing our part to build the Beloved Community.

Let us remain vigilant against this current backlash and any yet to come.

Let's commit together to achieving the promised land that Dr. King knew he would never reach, but knew we would achieve.