

FLOOR STATEMENT
January 15, 2021
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



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

Mr. President and colleagues:

Today, January 15th, we remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on what would have been his 92nd birthday.

Each year, we reflect on his life, the example that he set for us, and his dream of a Beloved Community, in which love and trust prevail over fear and hatred. While we have come closer to achieving that dream, we still have a long way to go.

Dr. King lived in a time of war, segregation and racial inequity, unrest, and violence. This violence ultimately took his life at the age of 39. He knew that he would not see the Beloved Community in his lifetime, but he had an unshakeable faith that we—our communities, our nation, and our world—would achieve it. In his last public address on April 3, 1968, he said, "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."

We find ourselves again, as he did in 1968, in a time of racial inequity, unrest, and even violence. And his words and guidance are as relevant today as they were then. Now, more than half a century after his death, we find ourselves in a world that seems no less divided, and we can't help but ask, how and when will we find it? And we still ask the question he pondered in the final year of his life: "Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community." You've heard me echo that question on this floor and in our communities since at least 2018, when as we commemorated the 50th Anniversary of Dr. King's Death, the King Commission explored that very question across the Commonwealth through a series of community conversations in those parts of Virginia that Dr. King visited.

In Dr. King's time he talked about the "fierce urgency of now."

The urgency of creating the Beloved Community has become even more starkly apparent today.

For some, it is already too late.

Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Marcus-David Peters did not live to see the Beloved Community, nor did any of the victims of violence and brutality whose lives we mourn. The hundreds of thousands of people who have died of COVID-19, disproportionately Black and Brown Americans, did not live to see the Beloved Community. Or the countless other Black and Brown Americans who died due to other health disparities even before this pandemic.

And just last week, on January 6, we witnessed a dark day in the nation's history, one that grew from seeds of mistrust and division sown over many years, and stoked by increasingly hateful, violent, and paranoid rhetoric over the past four years, in which insurrectionists sought to take by force what they could not win at the ballot, some specifically calling for civil war and looking to harm the Vice President of the United States and leaders in Congress.

The events of January 6th stand in direct opposition to Dr. King's dream.

It is in this world that we reach for the Beloved Community again. In this world, irreversibly changed from the world of a year ago, the Beloved Community feels more distant than ever; but it is also this changed world that has uncovered and exposed the work that is ahead of us: the wounds that remain from 402 years of history, the persistent existence and prevalence of white supremacy, and the injustice and inequity that is woven into the fabric of our society and did not magically disappear when the laws and policies that set it in motion were changed.

We've seen all of this laid bare.

And frankly, there have been times, especially this summer, when I have really wondered if it was even possible to reach the Beloved Community, or whether chaos would consume us as people and a country. There were times this summer when I felt the very depths of despair, anger, and hopelessness threaten to consume everything as we grapple with the convergence of four crises: a health pandemic, an economic crisis, a reckoning with racial injustice, and a crisis of faith in our very democracy.

Yet, Mr. President, through it all, I still find hope.

I find hope in the glimpses of the Beloved Community that we see now, as medical workers make personal sacrifices day after day to tend to the sick, and as teachers reinvent their roles to keep students safe and engaged outside of the classroom. We find hope as we remove the monuments that glorified a past that accepted and allowed slavery and begin to tell the complete story of our past: the good, the bad, and the ugly. And we find hope as communities and institutions open their eyes to the racism that continues to exist within them and unequivocally denounce it.

Dr. King saw that the roots of injustice run deep and affect us all, but he saw that, in the same way, the capacity that we have to love others uplifts us all.

And as we have seen events unfold over the past four years, and especially since this summer, I have grown increasingly awed by Dr. King's capacity for love and to maintain hope in the face of hatred, despair, and violence. But he never gave up. As he said, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

And he understood that "love is ultimately the only answer to humankind's problems."

But he was not just focused on love as an emotion, but love as an action. Love that compelled him, and should compel us, to confront injustice everywhere.

He wrote in his Letter from Birmingham Jail in 1963:

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Now we see this injustice more plainly than ever, and we see that we cannot sit idly by. If we are going to build the Beloved Community, we must each do our part.

Dr. King's message is one of selfless and unflinching love, and it is this love that we must carry with us as we build our Beloved Community, whether we get there ourselves, or whether we, like Dr. King, light the path for others to find the way.

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