

FLOOR STATEMENT
January 15, 2018
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday



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

Mr. President and colleagues, today the Virginia Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Commission, of which I am proud to serve as Chair, joins the nation in celebrating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the eighty-ninth anniversary of his birth. The King Commission 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.

Events of 2017 have left us with a sharper awareness of the work that remains to be done to achieve Dr. King's "Beloved Community," a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. As described by the King Center in Atlanta:

In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

On August 11th and 12th, 2017, this dream felt painfully distant when a display of hatred in Charlottesville resulted in the senseless deaths of Heather Heyer and Virginia State Police Pilot Lt. H. Jay Cullen and Trooper-Pilot Berke M.M. Bates.

Fifty-five years ago, Dr. King visited Charlottesville in one of dozens of visits he made to Virginia to speak to nearly 900 students, faculty and community members at Old Cabell Hall at the invitation of the University of Virginia's student chapter of the Virginia Council on Human Relations. In his speech, Dr. King said, "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good."

A few years later, in 1967, Dr. King spoke to the 11th Annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference Convention in Atlanta, Georgia on the topic "Where Do We Go From Here." His speech echoed the themes of his book by the same name published in the same year. 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. He concludes 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 to the Negro in his struggle for justice in this country” because “darkness cannot put out darkness; only light can do that.”

And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. For I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love. And the beautiful thing is that we aren't moving wrong when we do it, because John was right, God is love. He who hates does not know God, but he who loves has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.

Dr. King spoke these words in the last year of his life. Today we celebrate Dr. King's birth, but this year we remember and mourn his death. It was 50 years ago on April 4, 1968, that Dr. King was assassinated on the balcony of his motel room in Memphis, Tennessee, as he fought for economic justice and sought to improve the lives and working conditions of sanitation workers who were on strike.

Today, a half-century later, we still ask Dr. King's question, "Where do we go from here?" In 2018, the King Commission, as part of its King in Virginia project, will travel to each of the locations in Virginia that Dr. King visited. The project involves researching, documenting, and examining the significant amount of time Dr. King spent in Virginia and his lasting influence in the Commonwealth, where he protested the closing of public schools, encouraged African American voter registration and political involvement, guided civil demonstrations, and preached his message of love and nonviolence. Through community roundtables in each of these locations—Charlottesville, Danville, Farmville, Hampton, Hopewell, Lynchburg, Newport News, Norfolk, Petersburg, Richmond, Suffolk, and Williamsburg—we will look at Dr. King's dream in Virginia's communities in 2018 and ask again, "Where do we go from here?"

In recognition of the progress that has already been made and the countless others who fought for the same dream of freedom, both before and after Dr. King's time, the King Commission is also constructing the Emancipation Proclamation and Freedom Monument, to be unveiled on Brown's Island in Richmond in 2019, dedicated to the contributions of African American Virginians in the ongoing fight for freedom and civil rights.

Dr. King foresaw hardships to come and the adversity that we still endure today when he said, "Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future." It is as important now as it was fifty years ago to remember that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Dr. King delivered his last public address on April 3, 1968, in Memphis the day before he died. His final words to the nation made clear his unshakeable faith 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." Mr. President, I move that when the Senate adjourns today, it does so in memory and honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.