

ADDRESS OF

L. DOUGLAS WILDER, GOVERNOR

**TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA
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**EXCERPTS FROM REMARKS AT
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STATE CAPITOL
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA
JANUARY 12, 1994
BY
GOVERNOR L DOUGLAS WILDER**

Mr. Speaker, Mr President, members of the General Assembly, members of the Supreme Court of Virginia, distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am proud, for a final time, to report to you on the State of our Commonwealth.

When I first spoke to you in 1990, Virginia faced an uncertain future. Economic troubles loomed and threats to our way of life lingered. Not only did we lack a plan to face these problems, many refused to believe that they existed. And after I spoke, some people said I had no vision. I had a vision . . . but mine was one of reality and not of making promises that could not be kept.

I don't question those who doubted our gloomy forecasts. Blind optimism and procrastination were characteristic of the 80s. Many believed the "good times" would last forever. Some of my fondest wishes for my first year in office had to be put aside in order to face the fiscal crisis that was before us.

But we did face them, and we did it together. I know it wasn't easy for many of you to put aside your priorities or promises to create the reserve fund that I requested of you. And yet you did that and moreover, subsequently by amending our State Constitution, established a permanent reserve fund to assist us in future years should we face another crisis.

Some people have asked me whether I would have preferred to be governor at another time in history. But I am proud to have served the people of Virginia at this point in time. I have used every opportunity I have to do what I could, and wasted none to move Virginia forward.

Adversity can be our greatest blessing. It makes us realize that our greatest responsibility is to understand our priorities. To me, running a Virginia government that represented ALL the people was a great joy.

I've been fortunate to know the honor and privilege of being the Governor of Virginia. I say this not as a result of personal achievement but rather to acknowledge and to express my gratitude.

Nothing worthwhile in life comes easy and this has been no exception. Many people, long before I ever dreamed of becoming anything, dreamed for me and had a vision of the high possibility of the individual.

They were of many races, religions and creeds, and they believed that anything was possible if adherence to perseverance were held.

I have lived to see great progress made and am hopeful for the future. One of the main reasons I entered into the political arena was to show that "Of the people, By the people, and For the people" meant ALL THE PEOPLE.

There have always been obstructionists and there always will be. And quite frequently, they are the last to view themselves as such.

There are also the timorous and the fainthearted who desire so much to be liked and accepted that the last principle that they recognized was the person that they had in high school.

And then there are the music makers. O'Shaughnessy spoke of them long ago; The "movers and shakers for the whole world". They are those who dare to be different and run counter to the wisdom of conventional thinking.

We must always remember the people we serve and that calls upon us to look out for all Virginians' interests. And it isn't popular to take on special interests, lobbyists, and even legislators, when their actions, sometimes, are not in the best interests of all of the people.

Some have called it picking fights but I have always fought for the things in which I believed -- from Korea to Virginia -- and I make no apology for that. Politics may be the game of being popular, but governance is the act of standing up for what is right and taking responsibility for the consequences.

It wasn't exactly a popularity mission when I signed the Executive Order imposing sanctions on South Africa, but few would disagree that such world-wide actions had the force and effect of bringing about an end to the abominable practice of apartheid and created an atmosphere where people of good will could agree upon a set of principles to provide for governance in that country by the inclusion of all of its people.

I know I did not endear myself to this body when I vetoed the re-districting bill which you sent to me for my signature. I could not sign a bill which I felt did not reflect a fair apportionment of African-Americans.

I was pleased that you subsequently approved the amendments which I sent down which were approved by the Justice Department and upheld by our courts. I have always felt that such opportunity would add to our diversity and make for a more representative body.

As a further result, the first African-American Congressman from Virginia since reconstruction was elected and I think that is also a positive addition to our Congressional Delegation.

There were not too many kudos abounding when the Executive Order banning the display of the Confederate Flag by the Virginia Air National Guard was issued -- quite the contrary.

But, again, I felt that Virginia's National Guard should represent all of Virginia's people, and though there are proper forums and places for such displays, this was not one of them. I will always remember the Richmond Free Press and the Richmond Times-Dispatch for their strong and reasoned positions on this issue. I am grateful for that.

While many people have many different reasons for seeking public office, I have always felt that representative office meant that which it tautologically implied, to represent others.

To be selected by one's peers is a high calling. For nigh unto twenty five continuous years, I have tried to be representative and wherever that was not the case, it would be attributable to human frailty.

This public service accounts for over one half of my adult life. And I am not here intending to chronicle that period, but to savor it.

Leaving the executive office causes me to think of those who have shared the responsibility of governing with me. I think of all of the people we have been able to touch in some way, to make a difference in their lives.

I'll remember the youngsters like Jennifer O'Connor of Portsmouth and Antonio Washington of Norfolk, and all the other young men and women we took fishing in Kiptopeke State Park. For many, it was their very first time to fish. And, I'm certain they will think of the pleasure and fun of enjoying that park for many years to come. Our work in passing the capital bonds package for state parks ensured that children will enjoy Virginia's treasures for generations to come.

I also remember the hundreds of young men and women like David McGee of Roanoke, who picked up important employment skills and a steady job from our Opportunity Knocks program. Virginians from single-parent families and high-crime neighborhoods today receive job training while performing valuable community services to the Commonwealth.

I'll think of people like Steve Bahrns of Woodbridge, whose commute into Washington, D.C will be shortened because of major transportation improvements we initiated during my term. Commuters will see new and widened roads and rail networks over the next few years because of the hundreds of millions of dollars in additional funds we now have -- from the road bonds we sold, the efficiencies we made, and the federal funds we now receive as a result of our aggressive Washington lobbying efforts.

And the working people of Virginia who now speed through lines at the Department of Motor Vehicles with greater efficiency -- or who don't have to wait in line at all, thanks to our renewal by mail program

And the parents of school-aged children, like Deborah Arnold of Virginia Beach, who can today take up to eight hours of paid leave a year from her state government job to assist in educational programs anywhere in the state. Thanks to the concerns of Ms. Arnold, that program has been extended to day care services as well. And whether you are a parent or not, the employee can still participate

I will also remember John and Susan Miuccio of Sterling and their family, and all the other families who took advantage of our Home Entry Loan Program. Mr. Miuccio wrote to me two years ago, saying "because of the program you created, we can buy our home now . . . it is truly a dream come true." These kinds of reviews have been the most satisfying for me to receive these past four years.

I'll also think of the schoolchildren who feel a little safer in their schools because we prohibited juveniles from having guns and established better cooperation between schools and law enforcement agencies.

And I will never forget the families of Isham Draughn and Jose Cavazos, whose mourning of the tragic deaths in their families was honored by us last year in our approval and enactment of a comprehensive anti-crime legislative package, the cornerstone of which was the one-gun a month handgun sales limit

I'll also remember those whose lives were ravaged by the windstorm in Lynchburg and tornados in Petersburg. The federal government has declined to fully assist those cities so, as promised, we must act. Accordingly, I have authorized the immediate release of funds from balances in the current budget, giving each city roughly one-half million dollars in disaster assistance.

I will remember the hundreds of African-Americans, Hispanics, other minorities and women who never previously had the opportunity to achieve positions of power in state government, who for the past four years have shown the value of diversity.

And I will always appreciate the sacrifices of state employees, college students and their parents, and the thousands of other Virginians who endured these difficult times. Some of our choices were painful, but we did our best to ask a little from everyone, and not too much from anyone.

Still, many people suffered in the most recent recession, and many more will continue to feel pain throughout the decade. Just today, Babcock & Wilcox announced that they will have to layoff 46 of their employees in Lynchburg because of the cancellation of several government contracts. For the shipbuilders and military contractors who will face job losses in the years ahead, and for the young people who must adapt to numerous career changes in their lifetimes, we must redouble our efforts.

Making a better life for all Virginians requires us to do all we can to bring jobs to Virginia. During this administration, we created more than 55,000 new jobs and attracted an infusion of billions of new dollars into our state's economy . . . all of this despite defense cuts, base closures, and other effects of the recession.

An important part of our economic development efforts were reaching out to emerging markets in China, Latin America and Africa, as well as renewing old friendships across the globe. The recent signing of the Israeli-Palestinian peace accord also provides Virginia the opportunity to promote peace through economic and cultural exchanges.

The fruit of international trade takes time to ripen, and I implore all Virginians to be patient and to cultivate our success. In time, Virginia will taste the success of efforts -- and will reap the rewards of being first.

I also implore you to think seriously about economic development and the choices it requires. All Virginians must be made aware of the necessary balance between growth and community cohesion. There are communities in Virginia that need as many new jobs as they can get, while there are people in other communities who believe that job growth is not as important as controlling congestion.

During the past four years, due to the recession, this was not an issue we faced very often. But it is one we are certain to revisit many times in the future. As the elected representative of all Virginians, I believed it proper to place job creation first, and unless we maintain this commitment to providing opportunity, we will see our communities decline from neglect.

We cannot allow our efforts to move Virginia forward to be hampered by endless warfare. It is time we all made a greater effort to balance our desire to maintain our quality of life while understanding that growth and change are necessary parts of our existence.

Governor-elect Allen is going to need your support in finding this balance for our Commonwealth, and on this as well as other measures, I trust you will give him your support, advice and counsel. I know that you will do this in a bipartisan spirit as you have done so with my administration.

Recognizing changing times is something we have done well these past four years, and this is no time to change our course. The budget we have proposed for the 1994-96 biennium assumes that more change lies ahead -- and our proposal outlines ways to maintain our essential services, make selective cuts in some state programs, and provide modest tax relief to businesses and individuals that we have promised a cut and they have patiently allowed us to delay them.

These tax breaks include a low-income housing credit, deductions for self-employment, a non-prescription drugs sales tax exemption, accelerated business depreciations, and tax credits for businesses engaging in job training, education, and crime prevention in impoverished areas.

We cannot afford to delay them any further -- and that is why our budget provides so at this time. It proves to the people that their patience and confidence in us has been justified.

And although my authority to promote legislation will run out in a few days, I would like to share with you my thoughts on the need for several other bills that are important for Virginia. These are changes to laws that I believe are necessary, and come from my experience as your Governor and an enforcer of our laws.

One of the most difficult duties I have had as governor has been to review capital murder cases and to determine if the death penalty should be carried out. I have taken this responsibility with all the seriousness and sobriety that it deserves, and future governors should continue to do the same.

But I do not believe that the Governor of Virginia should serve as judge, jury and fact-finder in many cases solely because our laws do not allow our legal system to properly review new evidence. Therefore, I recommend that you pass legislation in this session that would allow Virginia courts of appeal to review new evidence in capital cases involving the death penalty.

Over the past decade, Virginia has made great progress in reducing highway deaths and in lowering the incidents of drunk driving. But we should not feel complacent because of this progress, especially when we can give our law enforcers the tools to keep more Virginians alive.

So I recommend that you reach a fair compromise to lower the blood-alcohol level for DUI offenses. There are arguments to be made about what the level should, and though I have recommended .08, these minor disagreements should not keep you from taking the important step to make our roads and highways safer.

Also, I believe it is important that Virginia establish a family court system, to lessen the load of civil dockets and to ensure that Virginia's children are given the attention they deserve.

And finally, I believe it is imperative that Virginians be given the government they deserve. The time has long since passed to study ethics reform, to complain about lobbying disclosure requirements, or otherwise frustrate the public concern. Virginia needs a strong conflict-of-interests law, and you should enact one this year.

But despite the problems we have faced and those that lie ahead, I can say with pride and no reservation that Virginia stands stronger today than was the case four years ago. It is stronger because, unlike nearly every other state, we tackled our problems head on.

It is stronger because we have had the courage to take on the special interests and the so-called experts to restrict the sale of handguns to one a month

It is stronger because we have enacted real reforms to our penal system -- and the facts support our progress. I sponsored a bill when I was Lieutenant Governor which has resulted in fewer prison escapes in Virginia over the past four years than any period in modern memory. We now have one of the nation's lowest escape rates. And our parole rate for violent offenders so far this fiscal year is only five percent. Our actions may have gone unnoticed by some, but they have served to make Virginians safer.

Virginia is stronger because we passed a sensible capital bond package, overwhelmingly supported by the people of our Commonwealth, that will meet the capital needs of higher education, improve mental health facilities, and expand our state parks.

It is stronger because we have anticipated change and put forward a plan to convert Virginia's defense industries into manufacturing and exporting powers.

It is stronger because, for the first time, Virginia has a coordinated drug policy and a set of programs that are showing real progress towards reducing drug and alcohol dependency among our youth

It is stronger because we have taken important steps towards revitalizing our rural communities -- enacting a rural health care program that ensures access to quality care no matter where a Virginian might live

. . . And our Center on Rural Development has worked with state and local governments and provided grants for innovative programs that assist community development. Our rural policies show that it doesn't always take big spending to make a difference in our communities -- just a willingness to listen to the people and provide help where we can

We can make our urban areas in Virginia stronger by adopting some of the proposals outlined in the Urban Commission report, some of which I have included in the biennial budget I recommend that every legislator read that report. It is a plan to put more policeman on our streets, more teachers in our schools and to cut taxes to create jobs. It also shows that there are things we can do without spending much money that can make an important difference in peoples' lives.

The most important way we have made Virginia stronger is by taking steps to help people, to give them an opportunity to succeed We enacted a welfare reform program that will provide people with job skills and the jobs they need to end their dependence on government

We have worked hard to ensure that the children of divorced families are not made to suffer and that fathers and mothers who owe child support to these children pay their fair share

We have adopted programs to control the costs of health care, and have implemented a program that will mean better quality health care for poor Virginians at a lower cost.

We have created the Arthur Ashe AIDS Center, which has expanded early intervention services for HIV positive persons. This center will improve the length and quality of life for those afflicted with AIDS, and it is a fitting tribute to a true Virginia hero.

Arthur Ashe helped demonstrate to the world that Virginia is a place where anyone with determination and opportunity can achieve anything he or she sets out to do.

On that cold day in January when I swore to serve and uphold the will of the people, I could only imagine the great trust and responsibility the people had placed in me.

The office of Governor of Virginia is second in power and prestige only to that of President of the United States. It has been held by Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and John Tyler. We allow for no successive term, and our duty to the people is therefore very special.

We are entrusted with three special duties -- to protect and serve all the people of our Commonwealth, to serve as Virginia's ambassador to the nation and the world; and to provide a vision for our future, keeping in mind that Virginia is more than the people of the present and of the past, but also our promise for the future.

I came into office four years ago promising an administration committed to our Commonwealth's youth and families. We have taken a number of steps to improve the status of Virginia's most vulnerable families. I have mentioned a few of our successes tonight. But all of us know that the responsibility of public servants goes beyond what we can achieve through law or regulation.

We serve as role models, as keepers of the flame and symbols of what the people should strive for. All of us have our frailties and have suffered setbacks, and the people are usually forgiving of our human weaknesses. But we must rise above all that. When we go to a school and tell young children why they must stay away from drugs, we must have the moral authority to be trusted.

Our young people today cannot be coddled or misled. They should not confuse the message. The African-American community is beset with a lawlessness heretofore unknown. Notwithstanding any other contributing socio-economic factors, those senseless crimes are wrong, and those who insist on breaking the law will and should be strictly punished. If it takes tough measures to deal with them, then that example should be set. Excuses and condoning must stop, and it should stop now.

When we make a speech about the need to restore the sanctity of the family and to restore basic dignity and values to our communities, we must say these words from the heart. Our sincerity is important because our words are important.

Laws against drugs are important, but not as important as the lives we can touch by showing children another way. Banning the sale of certain guns is vital, but not as vital as having a trusted symbol of achievement stand before a young girl or boy and show them how rewarding a long, healthy life can be.

If over the past four years we have helped some children to have faith, to see that they can succeed, then we have done something right. If we have left more of these children with dreams and real hopes, I will exit this stage tonight with confidence in a better Virginia and a better tomorrow.

Thank you and God bless you.