

GOVERNOR GEORGE ALLEN

**STATE OF THE
COMMONWEALTH ADDRESS**

**TO THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND
THE PEOPLE OF VIRGINIA**



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Office of the Governor

George Allen
Governor

REMARKS BY GOVERNOR GEORGE ALLEN *STATE OF THE COMMONWEALTH ADDRESS*

TO THE

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STATE CAPITOL
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

JANUARY 8, 1997

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Mr. President Pro Tem, members of the General Assembly, my fellow Virginians: Good evening.

Nearly four centuries ago, a band of courageous souls boarded three small ships in England and began a perilous venture that brought them to Jamestown. It was not all full sails and smooth seas for those Virginia adventurers. They risked their very lives for a dream which they dared to act upon, and which has since blossomed into the greatest achievement in human freedom, self-government and enterprise in the history of mankind. We Virginians are heirs to that legacy of leadership.

Today -- from high academic standards to criminal justice reform, from economic development and job creation to welfare reform -- we, in Virginia, are again a beacon for a new generation of Americans.

This evening, we meet to assess the state of our Commonwealth. I am extremely pleased to report that Virginia is strong, vibrant, thriving and leading the nation!

More importantly, Virginians look to the future with optimism and confidence. They believe that their children and grandchildren will enjoy a Virginia that is freer, safer, cleaner and full of more promise than even the Virginia we've known in our lives.

All Virginians can take satisfaction in knowing that we are in the midst of a renaissance of expanding opportunity and prosperity.

And yet, we know this is not a time just to drift along; rather it is a time to summon our strength and build upon the sturdy foundation we have constructed for the future.

Over the past three years, when Virginians demanded dramatic change, We met the challenges. It has not always been a smooth voyage as we set out to adapt, innovate and improve. We've risen above partisan differences and regional jealousies. And we've worked constructively for Virginians questing to be the best.

We again dared to be trailblazers.

Ladies and gentlemen, I see the future through the eyes of my two wonderful children, Tyler and Forrest. Like most parents, Susan and I want our children to go into the world capable to meet all challenges, to have good character and to enjoy healthy, productive and fulfilling lives.

This is my motivation. And caring about the future of *all* our children should be the vision that unites us as Virginians.

IMPROVING EDUCATION IN VIRGINIA

We begin with education.

Two years ago, we embarked on an essential new course for our public schools. We have developed clear, rigorous academic standards in the four major disciplines of English, math, science and history. We have established accountability through testing in the third, fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades to measure student progress based upon our high academic standards. And last year, you approved my recommendation for the largest increase in funding for education in our Commonwealth's history -- more than \$1 billion. But, for the first time, instead of only throwing more tax dollars at education, we linked that increased investment with academic reforms and the accountability that comes with measurable results.

Our Virginia Standards of Learning have received praise from quarters as diverse as the chairman of IBM and the president of the American Federation of Teachers. Other states are embracing them as model academic standards.

While many across the nation talk about the need for higher academic standards, we in Virginia are acting and leading to prepare our school children to succeed.

This year, because of our strong, growing economy and resulting tax revenues, we have opportunities to continue Virginia's educational improvements.

I propose that we provide additional funding to acquire quality instructional materials -- including textbooks -- which correlate to our new Standards of Learning. Moreover, I hope you will support my proposals for remedial summer school programs, and additional resources to reduce class sizes in kindergarten through third grade.

In particular, this session I'm asking you to approve a new diagnostic examination. It will identify first-grade students who have difficulty learning to read, so we can provide intensive remedial help.

Much persuasive evidence indicates that reading skills and learning patterns are developed in early grades. I can tell you that's true from my experiences. My early remediation initiative will provide students with an additional two and one-half hours of instructional time per week. And to ensure that each of these children has enhanced individual attention, the ratio will be one teacher for every five students.

If we can detect reading problems and intervene early, we have a real chance to impact positively the entire course of many children's education and give them an opportunity to succeed in school and throughout life.

With our new academic standards and accountability in place, I want to make early reading skills a top priority in Virginia's public schools.

I further believe that Virginia teachers should not have to take hard-earned money from their paychecks to purchase liability insurance to guard against frivolous lawsuits. That's why I'm proposing funds to provide this insurance for all of Virginia's public school teachers, at no cost to local school divisions, local governments or teachers themselves.

Our dedicated teachers have enough to worry about without having to face lawsuits for their good-faith efforts to keep order in their classrooms. Therefore, I ask you to adopt statutory teacher immunity that will reduce the risk of such demoralizing lawsuits.

It is high time to look out for Virginia educators.

I trust you're ready to adopt these reasonable proposals that support our hard-working teachers.

It is also important that students have classrooms that are conducive to learning. Several local school divisions have identified the need to repair classrooms, build new schools or upgrade educational technology.

Earlier this decade, it was a common practice to divert money from the Literary Fund (School Construction Fund) which is the primary source of financing school construction for many local school divisions.

Since 1995, however, my budget recommendations have enabled over \$287 million to be provided from the School Construction Fund. This year, my budget proposals contain another increase. In fact, in the last fiscal year alone, more funds for school construction were approved than in the previous five years combined. And in this biennium, we will set a new record by providing the largest amount available for public school construction in Virginia history.

Of course, our commitment to educational quality also must include students in our community colleges, four-year colleges and universities. Here there are many tasks, but the greatest challenge today is keeping Virginia's outstanding institutions of higher learning affordable for students and especially for their parents.

Not so long ago, skyrocketing double-digit annual increases in college tuition were forcing many young people and families to mortgage their future. In fact by 1993, Virginia's tuition costs had soared by nearly 50 percent in just four years.

You have joined me in, and I thank you for, reversing these harmful policies.

- We have increased significantly tuition assistance grants for students attending Virginia's outstanding independent, private colleges.
- We have created the Virginia Prepaid Education Program so parents can lock in future tuition costs at today's prices.
- In this biennial budget alone, there is \$260 million in additional funds for higher education, a 15.3 percent increase over the last biennium.
- Most important, we have halted tuition increases altogether. Believe me, Virginia parents and students are relieved that there will be absolutely no tuition increases this year or next year!

KEEPING VIRGINIA SAFER

Along with education, state government's foremost responsibility is protecting law-abiding citizens from violence.

Three years ago, Virginia faced an epidemic of violence committed by repeat criminals who were being set free early to prey again upon innocent people. Victims, law enforcement professionals and law-abiding citizens rightfully demanded change.

We responded by putting in place a criminal sentencing system that has been recognized as a model of how to abolish parole and implement truth-in-sentencing intelligently. We had leadership on both sides of the aisle and in both chambers, from Delegates Randy Forbes and Glenn Croshaw to Senators Ken Stolle and Virgil Goode among others. Speaker Tom Moss and then-Senate Majority Leader Hunter Andrews also helped to move that legislation in a timely manner.

More recently, we transformed our juvenile justice system, so that the most vicious and dangerous juvenile criminals will be tried as adults, while the less serious young offenders will have a better opportunity for rehabilitation. Once again, we had bipartisan leadership, from Delegates Jerrauld Jones, Tom Jackson, Bill Mims and Bob McDonnell to Senators Mark Earley and Jack Reasor, and many more.

These common-sense policies are working. Today in Virginia, the violent crime rate is down over 12 percent.

Several factors have contributed to that decrease, including the significant drop in parole grant rates. Just recently, I was talking with a sheriff from Maryland who commended us for our actions. He expressed the envy of law enforcement officials in his state for Virginia's new laws. "Of course your crime rates are down," he said, "you keep violent criminals in prison, not let them loose in neighborhoods." It just makes sense. It's pretty simple, and he's right.

As we look ahead, the threat of illegal drugs continues to menace the lives of children.

Recently, Zach Boutchyard and other fifth-graders at Hartwood Elementary School in Stafford County wrote me about the value of the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program.

Zach is here with us this evening. In your letter to me, I especially liked the part where you say:

I learned about ways to say no to drugs, and to not be afraid to say no. If you don't take drugs, you will be successful in life, and you will get a good education and will be smart. But if you take drugs, you will not have a good job and you won't be successful. You will just be throwing your life away and nobody will like to be around you. . ."

I shared this letter with my wife Susan because, in addition to her effective work promoting tourism and breast cancer awareness, she has been an active statewide spokesperson for D.A.R.E. As parents, Susan and I understand the importance of this program.

Zach, we thank you so much for letting us know that the message is getting through to you and, hopefully, many thousands of young people across Virginia! I know you have a great future!

We all want to protect our children's safety against the threat of illegal drugs. That's why at the Governor's Crime Forum last October, I stated that we need to support and expand promising anti-drug efforts underway in Virginia, such as the Weed and Seed program which was a success here in Richmond.

Weed and Seed is a progressive initiative designed to "weed out" drug gangs from our city streets and plant "seeds" of hope and opportunity through targeted prevention programs for law-abiding families.

Attorney General Jim Gilmore has been a trusted, experienced and effective ally on so many fronts. That's why I will be asking General Gilmore to provide his able assistance as we extend Weed and Seed to other areas in Virginia.

At the Crime Forum, I further called for much longer prison sentences for big-time drug dealers. I am pleased that the Virginia Criminal Sentencing Commission has proposed revising its guidelines to achieve this goal. I urge your support for these sensible changes.

I also have listened to law officers out there on the front lines. They need statutory changes to give prosecutors more tools in the war against drugs. I am proposing several essential improvements to help, including legislation to make it easier to try jointly drug gang members.

Trying ten members of a drug gang for the same criminal activity should not require ten separate trials. It doesn't make any sense to force key witnesses -- often facing death threats to themselves and their families -- to testify ten separate times about the exact same facts and evidence.

Federal prosecutors can try conspiratorial drug gang members in one trial. So please don't stand with the criminal apologists.

Let's give our Virginia prosecutors this same useful tool to combat drug gangs.

STRENGTHENING JOB CREATION

In addition to safer neighborhoods in which our children can live and play, it is important that their parents have good-paying jobs.

I have devoted much of my time as governor to recruiting jobs and businesses to our Commonwealth so that Virginians can lead self-reliant and fulfilling lives. A winning team has been assembled. And with the coordinated efforts of hundreds of Virginians at the state, regional and local levels, we've made tremendous progress in bringing jobs and investments to Virginia.

During the past three years, well over 600 companies have announced record-shattering investments in Virginia totalling more than \$11 billion! To put that into perspective, the previous one-year record was just over \$1 billion.

The reasons for our economic successes are many, but it all comes down to this: Along with aggressive recruiting of businesses, we've put into place positive, pro-growth tax and reasonable regulatory policies that encourage investment, reward initiative and help create more jobs.

The world knows now that Virginia is open for business!

So that our renaissance will continue to blossom across our Commonwealth, I am proposing: additional funding for Cooperative Tourism Advertising; continued funding for our successful "Virginia is Open for Agribusiness" initiative; and funding for the semiconductor endowment to support microelectronics education and research at Virginia's engineering schools.

Of course, there's the internationally recognized Seimens-Motorola semiconductor chip plant in the Richmond area. It is essential that you pass the performance grant legislation that we've negotiated to win this enormous, \$1.5 billion investment that's enhancing Virginia's new reputation as the "Silicon Dominion." Best of all, the White Oak Semiconductor project is expected to create as many as 1,500 new, high-paying jobs for Virginians. And conservative estimates are that this investment will create at least 3,000 more jobs in related enterprises.

Ladies and gentlemen, here's the most important fact: due to job creation in large, medium and small businesses, the number of Virginians working today is more than it's ever been in our Commonwealth's history -- nearly 3.2 million people.

That doesn't even include recent job announcements by: Gateway 2000 Computers in Hampton; Iceland Seafood, which is moving from Pennsylvania to Newport News; Sumitomo in Chesapeake; LCI International in Arlington; Oracle in Fairfax County; Boise Cascade Office Products in Bristol; Reynolds Wheels in Russell County; Nippon Wiper Blades in Dinwiddie County; Diebold in Danville and Staunton; and Woodstock Manufacturing, a New Jersey company, is creating 400 new jobs and making the first new manufacturing investment in Shenandoah County since 1984. And tomorrow, I will be announcing great new business through our Virginia ports.

Folks, it truly is a great time to be alive in Virginia!

The unemployment rate is another important indicator of the economic condition of our Commonwealth.

While the national unemployment rate is five percent, I am pleased to announce that Virginia's latest monthly unemployment rate is the *lowest* it's been in seven years. It's down to 3.8 percent!

In fact, the unemployment rates in the Charlottesville, Lynchburg and Roanoke regions are the lowest they've been in 20 years!

The vitality of our economic renaissance is paying dividends in a variety of ways.

Even with the increase in benefits for unemployed workers that we enacted last year, I am pleased to announce that the average unemployment tax rate will be reduced by 37 percent over the next two years.

But there is another important step we can take to ensure Virginia's attractiveness as a business location for the remaining years of this decade and beyond. And I ask for your help on this important issue.

As several independent groups have noted, the size of Virginia's unemployment insurance trust fund is much larger than is necessary to pay benefits to -- and provide full protection for -- Virginia's workers.

Based on the current and projected condition of our economy, these experts have noted that the fund is adequate to pay four years worth of benefits. We should not be unnecessarily collecting taxes from businesses when they could better use that money to make additional investments and create more jobs. This is a real problem for many small businesses which are the engines creating the majority of new jobs every year.

I'm asking you to work with me and Senator Jack Reasor, as well as Senators Walter Stosch and Senator Chuck Colgan, to achieve a more accurate method of calculating proper funding for this trust fund. That could have the effect of further reducing unemployment insurance rates paid by businesses over the next six years. This will help strengthen our competitiveness.

Again, this can be done while continuing to provide full protection to Virginia's workers at the new benefit levels we approved last year.

Because economic success is not guaranteed, we cannot afford to relax or become lethargic. We must continue pushing forward, my friends, and keep Virginia's winning momentum going strong!

SAFEGUARDING OUR ENVIRONMENT

Economic prosperity and environmental progress can and should be compatible. And the challenge of leadership is to achieve both by using common sense, credible scientific evidence and advanced technologies to protect and enhance our natural resources.

A big step in the right direction is our forward-looking Nutrient Reduction Strategy for the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers. For the past two years, we have been working with local officials on this comprehensive plan of action that will improve one of Virginia's most vital natural resources, the Chesapeake Bay.

To help this effort succeed, I propose creating the Chesapeake Bay Tributaries Restoration Trust Fund, and I'm recommending unprecedented State funding to begin this important, multi-year effort.

Furthermore, I am recommending the creation of a voluntary, dedicated Virginia income tax check-off for the trust fund. This idea will make it easy for concerned individuals to get involved -- personally and directly -- in cleaning up the Bay.

Complementing our tributary strategy is a proposed increase in funding to help more localities across Virginia improve their wastewater and sewage treatment plants. I am also recommending an increase in state matching funds to help ensure that Virginians have clean, safe and healthy drinking water.

In past years, we've enjoyed good bipartisan support for creative initiatives to quickly clean up contaminated sites, reform and streamline the underground storage tank program, and restore accountability for tire-pile cleanups.

This year, I hope these major environmental initiatives will again benefit from support on both sides of the aisle!

REFORMING WELFARE

Yet another area in which we have succeeded is our complete overhaul of the failed welfare system.

Based upon the principles of the work ethic and individual responsibility, Virginia's landmark welfare reforms continue to produce superb results.

Since 1995, welfare caseloads are down almost 22 percent.

Child support enforcement is up 14 percent. Thousands of welfare recipients have found jobs and are now working! And we're achieving tens of millions of dollars in savings for Virginia taxpayers.

Because of this wonderful success, I have accelerated the timetable for "Workfare" so that it will be implemented statewide by October 1 of this year.

This is great news for taxpayers and for welfare recipients. Therefore, I shouldn't even need to threaten to veto any backsliding during this session.

I remember talking to one mother on welfare. She had just started working, and told me: "It is good for my children to see their mother going to work." This is something that does not show up in all of the statistics. It is an aspect of our reforms that is hard to quantify. Yet, it is good for the soul of our Commonwealth when we help children grow up knowing the importance and dignity of work!

Families today -- and future generations of Virginians -- will benefit because we dared to put our principles into action.

ENHANCING OUR CHARACTER

So let us also renew our respect and support for Virginia's families.

The family is the bedrock upon which our free society is built. For generations, families have been the place where our children are taught the values of honesty and responsibility.

One issue which will be back before you this Session will say much about how this General Assembly regards the role of parents in families.

You will have another opportunity to ensure that parents or guardians are directly involved should their minor daughter undergo the trauma of an abortion. This truly is a sensible idea which Virginians overwhelmingly support.

The people of Virginia are patient, but on this issue their will has been too long delayed and too long denied!

Our values as a society also are reflected in the standards of conduct to which we hold government leaders.

This year, we must improve our lobbying and financial disclosure laws. Virginians have a right to know more fully the details of entertainment and gifts that government officials receive from lobbyists. Additionally, on the conflict of interest form, there must be more accurate disclosure of the amount of compensation that elected officials receive from clients whom they represent before state agencies.

As was reported recently in the newspapers, our Commonwealth has some of the weakest disclosure laws in the country.

We can certainly do better. In fact, we have an obligation to do so!

Integrity is important when dealing with trust funds as well.

Protecting the integrity of our Commonwealth's transportation revenues now -- and in the future -- must be a cornerstone of Virginia's transportation policy. Taking dedicated transportation funds for non-transportation purposes violates the public trust. It also erodes our ability to meet the Commonwealth's pressing transportation needs -- without increasing the tax burden on Virginia's families.

Through my proposed amendment to restore the \$9 million improperly shifted last year, transportation funds will be used honestly for their intended purposes, and for the purposes for which Virginians paid fees and taxes.

"COME HOME TO VIRGINIA CELEBRATION"

Finally this evening, I want to call your attention to a great milestone that is now just ten years away -- the 400th anniversary of the first landing in Virginia at Cape Henry and settlement at Jamestown.

This occasion provides an historic opportunity for a great homecoming!

After all, Jamestown is America's original hometown! It is where we first encountered each other in this hemisphere -- Native-Americans, English settlers, African-Americans -- many diverse people meeting under different circumstances... some seeking freedom, others having had their freedom tragically stolen. Our forebears surmounted adversity, struggled, survived, overcame conflict, and ultimately forged a new life of promise in Virginia's nurturing soil.

It was in Jamestown in 1619 that representative self-government was born in the New World with the convening of this General Assembly. From the humble beginnings at Jamestown grew the prosperous, high-spirited Virginia colony that supplied the nation and the world with the great architects and visionaries of freedom of thought, freedom of religion and freedom of enterprise.

Virginia was the destination of opportunity for glassmakers from Poland... steelmakers from Germany...persecuted French Huguenots...and other settlers looking for a better life from England, Scotland, and Ireland. In more recent decades, people from Cuba, India, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam and other nations have made Virginia their home.

Thomas Jefferson rightly called Virginia the “blessed mother of us all.” Everyone has a connection to Virginia -- a friend, a relative, an ancestor... a common bond based on the people and cultures that came together here.

And so tonight, I call on the people of Virginia to roll up their sleeves and get ready to host a great homecoming celebration. It will begin with the 2007 celebration at Jamestown, and continue through the 400th anniversary of self-government in 2019.

We can promote not only Virginia’s many historical attractions, but our matchless natural beauty and recreational attractions. We will call attention not only to our past deeds, but to our future possibilities--including Virginia’s place on the cutting edge of the technological revolution.

People will see why Virginia is the gateway to the 21st century just as we were a gateway to the New World.

This unifying, uplifting homecoming celebration will not only bring visitors and investments to Virginia, it will bring all Virginians closer together.

Our welcome invitation to the nation and world will be “Come home to Virginia!”

A BETTER COMMONWEALTH FOR ALL VIRGINIANS

My fellow adventurers, the world has changed for the better because of Virginia, and it is changing still.

In this Session, as we set forth to improve our schools, make our communities safer, create more jobs and a better quality of life for all Virginians, let us always remember that our Commonwealth’s future is what we dare to make it!

May we all be inspired to be forward-looking leaders of exemplary character, honorable purpose and steadfast resolve.

I hope and pray that God will continue to bless this beautiful, free and magnificent creation we love as Virginia!

Thank you all so very much.

