

**ADDRESS OF
GOVERNOR RALPH S. NORTHAM**

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Good evening. Madam Speaker Filler-Corn, Madam President Lucas, Lieutenant Governor Fairfax, ladies and gentlemen—thank you for inviting me to speak with you tonight.

To my wife Pam, to Attorney General Herring, Justices of the Supreme Court, members of the State Corporation Commission, and my Cabinet and staff, thank you for your service to our Commonwealth.

We do this every year. This speech is one of our rituals as Virginians, when elected leaders come together, from different branches of government, from different political parties, representing every part of Virginia, and every person who calls our Commonwealth home. It's part of who we are and what we do, and it's important to maintain this tradition, even in this most unusual year.

But many things are different this year, of course. Normally, more than 200 people are in this room. Tonight there are fewer than 20.

Another thing that's different is a part of the ritual that I will miss. In a normal year, when I say something my friends like, they stand up and cheer. That's a nice feeling! And at the same time, the other side of the room sits quietly. But I know you're secretly cheering in your hearts!

Here's some good news: Tonight, you don't have to be quiet. If you're watching from home, when I say something you like, feel free to stand up and cheer me on—no one has to know!

During these challenging times, kindness and calmness must prevail. So many things are different, in all parts of our lives right now. The changes are always on our minds and in our hearts. We miss what was comfortable, and we don't like uncertainty. We don't like being apart, and we long for the day when we can come together again. We are social people, and we are meant to be together. The separation and the absence remind us of what has been lost. It's a heavy burden to carry.

More than 5,000 Virginians have died from COVID-19, including Senator Ben Chafin, from Russell County in Southwest Virginia. He was my friend, and I miss him. Whether on the Senate floor or in my office, his presence always brightened my day.

The stories around his initials, A B C, always were entertaining. I hope that fond memories of Ben will help his family through these difficult times. I ask you to join me in a moment of silence to honor Ben, and everyone who has lost their lives to COVID-19.

We've all experienced loss this year, and it has made us all stop, and ask ourselves some basic questions: What's really important? What do I believe in? Am I taking actions that reflect my values? These are some of the most fundamental questions of life.

We need to ask these questions as a Commonwealth too, and that's what I want to talk to you about tonight. We need to talk about who we are as a state, what we believe in, and the actions we're taking to live out our values.

I want you to know that my heart is filled with optimism and hope when I think about this. Because while we have just come through a tough year that brought everyone pain and sacrifice, I've seen something remarkable.

Over and over again, I have seen you taking care of one another. I've seen neighbors helping neighbors. People like Anthony Gaskin, a UPS driver in Chester. He has been delivering packages for 16 years, delivering more than 180 packages a day—always with a smile. Patti Friedman lives on his route, and she organized her neighbors to thank Anthony.

So one day, as Anthony drove down the street, he saw his route lined with people to thank him with signs and cheers. Patti said she did it "to show gratitude and appreciation for simple acts of kindness on his part." When Anthony saw the response, he got emotional. He said, "I was in shock. My heart was overjoyed. In the world, regardless of what's going on ... people still genuinely care."

Or Emily, who is a nurse who lives in Southwest Virginia, who spoke to us about caring for patients in their dying hours. How painful it is to care for them and how dangerous this virus is. She had the courage to share her story and empathy to care for people who are sick. There are thousands more like her who are health care heroes across our Commonwealth.

Or Katie Gaylord, a school counselor in Williamsburg, who created a T-shirt that said, "Virginia is for Kindness." She did it to raise money for the local food bank. When people asked why, she said, "when we help someone ... you feel more connected to each other, and I think we feel less afraid."

Or our National Guard members, who have their own jobs and lives, but have spent months working to help with our pandemic response, helping with testing and—soon—vaccinations.

Here's my favorite example: the Virginia State Troopers who protected the Capitol of the United States during the insurrection last week. When the Mayor of Washington, D.C. and the leaders of Congress said to me, "send help fast"—these men and women dropped everything and raced to defend our country's temple of democracy. Our Guard members went there too.

While others hesitated, Virginians were first on the scene. It made me proud to see that line of State Police cars racing across the 14th Street Bridge. Senator Tim Kaine told me that when all 100 senators were evacuated to a secure location during the insurrection, they saw TV footage of Virginia troopers entering the Capitol, and they cheered them on, knowing help was on the way.

But sadly, many were injured because of the coup attempt, and two Virginians died. They were officers in the United States Capitol Police. Please join me in a moment of silence for Officer Brian Sicknick and Officer Howard Liebengood.

While the fact that our help was needed is terrible, I am proud we were able to help avert more tragedy. There is nothing to celebrate about the fact that our nation needed help—especially to defend our Capitol from fellow Americans—but we can all be proud that Virginia stepped up.

That's what Virginians do. That's what service means. And this is what it means to live out our values. And that's how I know—with all my heart and all my soul—that we will get through this pandemic: It's because of our limitless ability to care for one another. We are one Virginia.

These stories inspire me, and I want you to know that your government is following your lead—taking action to help people. And we're going to move even faster in this new year.

When we met a year ago, before anyone had even heard of COVID-19, we met in a spirit of celebration. We celebrated new leadership, and the first women to lead the House of Delegates and Senate of Virginia. Congratulations again to Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn and President Pro Tem Louise Lucas. What a difference their leadership has made.

Together, we embarked on a path that was more progressive and forward-looking than ever before. We took these steps because voters sent us here to take action. So we did.

We passed landmark clean energy legislation.

We passed common-sense gun safety measures.

We raised the minimum wage.

We advanced important criminal justice reforms, such as raising the felony larceny threshold, and ending the practice of taking away someone's driver's license because they couldn't pay court fees.

We took important steps forward in treating everyone with dignity and respect, becoming the first Southern state to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation, and requiring schools to develop plans for transgender students.

We repealed nearly 100 instances of racist and discriminatory language from our law books.

These actions were about living out our values. Virginia is a large and diverse state that welcomes everyone, and we took action to demonstrate that.

We ended last year's winter session on a high note, having delivered on the commitments we made to you. We were just finishing this historic session when the COVID-19 pandemic hit us. It seemed as though one minute we were living our normal lives, and the next those lives were literally turned upside down. Over the months that followed, we all took a lot of hard actions, to protect ourselves, our families, and each other.

I want to thank the General Assembly, our local elected officials across the Commonwealth, and you, Virginia—especially the nurses, doctors, first responders, and volunteers. Nothing about this has been easy.

In the ten months since then, we have learned a lot about this virus. Today, we have more tools to fight it.

We now have the best tool: vaccines. As a doctor, I can tell you the incredible effort and cooperation it took to develop these vaccines. It shows us what we can do when people work together for the common good.

The vaccines are our way out of this pandemic. The vaccines, and continuing to follow the guidelines on masks, distancing, and hand washing. Tonight, Virginia, I urge you to get vaccinated when your turn comes. I will do it, and so will my family.

This is how we get back to a new normal. This is how we reopen our schools and rebuild our economy: through the vaccine. It is the light at the end of a long and dark tunnel. And while it is a massive undertaking, and it will take some months to get to everyone, I promise: your turn is coming, and soon.

Here's where we are. According to the CDC, only nine states have given more doses than Virginia, and each of those states is larger than we are. We are currently receiving initial shipments of about 110,000 vaccine doses each week for Virginia—and we expect to be receiving more soon.

I appreciate the hospitals, the local health departments, and everyone working to get vaccines into arms as quickly as possible. I've set a goal of ramping up to 25,000 vaccinations per day as soon as possible.

Just last week, I called on our federal partners to release all the doses they have. I am pleased that the incoming Biden administration has agreed to do that, and the outgoing administration has agreed as well.

Also yesterday, they authorized states to go ahead and start vaccinating people age 65 and up. We'll be moving forward with that quickly—I'll be talking to local health directors and hospitals tomorrow about how we make this happen.

The teams are moving fast. This week some local health districts began vaccinating older people and essential workers like our teachers, our front line workers, law enforcement,

and more. Vaccinating teachers and other K-12 staff is an important step forward in getting our schools open—a goal I know we all share.

I'm counting on the people who work in our public health departments to push hard to get this done. You're not alone. We're all with you. We have partners in hospitals, businesses, colleges, and universities—everyone in Virginia is ready and willing to help.

Getting everyone vaccinated is the largest deployment of volunteers that we have ever seen, and we need you to help. The Virginia Medical Reserve Corps is already training new volunteer vaccinators. If you have medical experience, you're a retired doctor or nurse, or you just want to help with the logistics, please reach out to that program.

That's a message we've heard over and over again this past year, in every part of our country: I want to help, and let's get moving. People sent a clear message throughout the year: Move faster. People are no longer willing to wait for change, and they expect their public officials to act. And this year, we will continue taking actions to help people.

When my team and I wrote the budget that I proposed last month, we focused on two things: helping Virginians who are hurting because of this pandemic, and laying the groundwork to help the economy rebound.

So let's start with healthcare, and some good news. Virginia is the only state in the nation where the rate of people without insurance actually dropped from 2018 to 2019. That was the first year we had the Medicaid expansion program in place. And thank goodness we took that action. Ahead of the pandemic, we are seeing vast improvements in health metrics. Hospitals seeing fewer uninsured patients. More new mothers with health coverage in the first year after giving birth. Fewer people with medical debts or with unmet medical needs, and a reduction in health disparities.

When we expanded Medicaid three years ago, we could not have foreseen the pandemic, of course. But the pandemic has proven that was the right decision. I am so grateful that when the crisis came, this safety net was in place.

Just a few weeks ago, we marked 500,000 Virginians who are covered through the expansion program. That's half a million Virginians who would feel a lot less secure about their health during this pandemic if they were uninsured. I want to thank everyone who came together in a spirit of bipartisan cooperation to get this done. It was the right thing to do.

Now it's time to take further steps, because the pandemic has highlighted the need to modernize the way we fund public health in Virginia. Here's the issue. In Virginia, both the state and local governments have a role in operating our public health departments. That takes money, of course, but we allocate state money to cities and counties using an outdated formula, written a generation ago. Virginia's population has nearly doubled since then, and we've grown into a much more urban and suburban state.

But the funding plan has stayed the same. In 2021, we're funding public health like it's 1980. In lots of places, local communities are paying more than their fair share, because the state is paying less than it should. Counties that thrived a generation ago with the coal economy are now hurting. They're paying more to the state each year for basic health services like opioid recovery, even as their population decreases.

At the same time, urban areas such as Richmond and Petersburg are paying more too, even as their tax base has changed. This is fundamentally inequitable and wrong. The formula should have been updated all along. But it wasn't, and that has created winners and losers.

So this year, we're taking action. I want to thank Delegate Lamont Bagby for sponsoring legislation to address this. We'll make sure the localities that need more resources get them, and no one will get less. It's the right thing to do, and now is the time to act.

Our budget proposal also includes funding for doula services for pregnant women. Doulas provide non-clinical support to pregnant women through their pregnancy and after they give birth, and multiple studies show they improve health outcomes for the mother and the baby. I'm grateful to Delegates Cia Price and Lashrecse Aird for their advocacy on this issue. We know it means a better outcome for mothers and babies. And we're providing dollars to increase access to long-acting reversible contraceptives.

These actions help women control their own reproductive decisions. There is no excuse that a group of legislators, most of whom are men, should be telling women what they should and shouldn't be doing with their bodies.

But I am glad that more and more women are entering our legislature—a record number of women are serving in our General Assembly now, and I hope that number will only go up.

It's also time to help people by taking more action on affordable housing. We have made record investments in the Virginia Housing Trust Fund that helps make more affordable housing available, and the Rent and Mortgage Relief Program has put almost \$54 million into helping people make their rent and mortgage payments during the pandemic. That program has helped nearly 17,000 families so far.

We've also worked to put a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures for those having trouble paying their rent or mortgage. Now, we need to take action to do more. So we have proposed \$25 million new dollars to the trust fund. This record is more than we have ever invested in helping make sure people have stable housing, and we need to get it done this session.

We need to take action to protect jobs, especially in small businesses. We all know our small businesses need a lot of help to make it through the pandemic—the restaurants, the small gyms, the barber shops and thousands of other small businesses that are struggling to keep the doors open.

The Rebuild VA program has given nearly \$120 million in grants to more than 2,500 Virginia small businesses and nonprofits, to help them get through this. Two thirds of those grants have gone to businesses that are minority, woman, or veteran owned. More than \$40 million has gone to businesses in low-income areas. That money was exhausted fast, but the need is huge. This need won't be around forever, but for now, it's urgent.

So I'm proposing to use revenue from the so-called "gray machines" to help small businesses. These gaming machines are in convenience stores, truck stops, and restaurants across Virginia. They bring in a lot of money—upwards of \$90 to \$100 million in revenue from these taxes.

Last special session we did the right thing and earmarked this money for education in the event that revenues slipped. Well, they didn't slip, and this money can once again be used for its original purpose—to help our small businesses. That could double the number of small employers who get help, and for many, that could mean surviving instead of going under.

The need is great. Rebuild VA has helped non-profits like the Blue Ridge Discovery Center in Troutdale, restaurants like the Alpine Chef Restaurant in Fredericksburg, and small businesses like the Richmond barber shop A Cut 2 Perfection. More businesses are in line for help, so we need to take action now.

We also need to take action on broadband. Broadband is as critical now as electricity was in the last century. Making sure more Virginians can get access to it has been a priority since I took office. And the pandemic has highlighted how urgent this is—for workers, for businesses, for students, for telehealth.

For the past ten months, you have been fortunate if you have a job that can be done from home, and access to a fast Internet connection to make your meetings easier and your child's virtual education possible. But if you have a job that can't be done remotely, or you live an area where Internet access is out of reach, then you've had a very different experience during this pandemic. You've put on a mask and crossed your fingers when you go to work. You've driven your child to the public library parking lot so she can get a good enough Internet signal to do her school work.

Make no mistake, this is about equity. In 2018, we estimated that 660,000 Virginians didn't have access to broadband. Since then, we've cut that number by 20 percent with projects that connected more than 130,000 homes and businesses. And we are far from finished. My budget provides \$50 million in each year to maintain our historic level of funding for broadband. We need to get it done.

We need to take action on education. I know that everyone wants to get our schools open and our students back into their desks, and to do it safely. So do I. So we are taking action. Just yesterday, I visited T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, where teachers and school staff were getting their COVID-19 vaccines. Vaccinating teachers is just one

way we're working toward the shared goal of reopening schools and making sure students are getting the support they need.

Education is the best tool we have to make our Commonwealth a better, more equitable place for everyone. Education helps start our smallest Virginians—our littlest learners—off on the right foot. It trains workers for new jobs. And when we do it right, it gives everyone access to opportunity to build the life they want.

In this pandemic, it's especially important that we continue to invest in education, so that when it's over, we're not just in a position to rebuild—we already have a strong foundation, one built not on sand, but on solid rock.

That's why we're making sure schools don't suffer harm from the challenges of this school year. That means putting \$500 million into schools to make sure they don't lose funding from drops in enrollment this year. We've proposed more than \$26 million to increase the number of school counselors. We also put additional dollars into providing more needed resources for English Language Learners.

Students need counselors now more than ever. School staff and teachers have made great sacrifices this year, and I thank them. But our children have been champions, and I want to thank them as well. They've been through a lot these past ten months. They've made sacrifices and endured a lot of change. We are all grateful.

Investing in education includes giving teachers a pay bonus. We were all proud in 2018 to give our teachers the largest single-year pay raise in 15 years. Last year, I proposed an additional three percent pay raise. That had to be cut from the budget last year. When I first proposed the bonus for teachers a few weeks ago, I said that if revenues improve enough this month, we should convert that one-time bonus into a permanent raise. Well, tonight I have good news: revenues look good, and we're going to have more money than we thought. We need to make this teacher bonus a raise, and make it more than two percent. I look forward to working with you all to get that done.

For children who have not yet entered kindergarten, I'm proposing a pilot program to provide three-year-olds access to early childhood education programs, and grants to address pay equity for early childhood educators. We want every child to enter kindergarten ready to learn, and to provide equal opportunities to underserved children. I want to thank my wife Pam, the First Lady, for her work and leadership on early childhood education.

To help people get the skills training or education they need, particularly if they're out of work because of the pandemic, my budget invests in the G3 program—Get skilled, get a job, give back. That program helps people get tuition-free job skills training in high-need fields, through our community colleges—and provides the financial aid to help them do it.

We also allocated \$30 million more for financial aid at public colleges and universities across our Commonwealth, and we'll increase Tuition Assistance Grants for students at

private institutions to \$4,000. This helps a wide range of schools, like Hampton University, Virginia Union, and Marymount University—recently designated as the first Hispanic-serving institution in Virginia.

We're also going to propose additional tuition assistance for our National Guard members. I sat down with Major General Timothy Williams last week, and told him how grateful I am for the work of the Guard. He said one thing we can do to help those Guard members is to provide more access to an affordable education. Our Guard members have been a huge support with the pandemic and now with the threats of violence in Washington, and I look forward to working with the General Assembly to get this done.

We have also proposed additional assistance for our public historically black colleges and universities, Virginia State University and Norfolk State University, which have long been underfunded.

While Virginia is not immune to the economic impacts of the pandemic, we're doing better than many states. They've had to lay off workers, cut services, and borrow money to cover operating costs. But here, our finances are solid, and the actions we have taken have kept our triple-A bond rating secure.

And while those other states are borrowing money or raiding their retirement plans, we're doing the opposite. Our budget proposes investing \$100 million in our retirement plan for public school teachers, the state employee health insurance credit program, and benefits for our first responders through the Line of Duty Act. This is sound fiscal policy, and it means more security for our public servants.

We need to take action to protect the outdoors. The pandemic has reminded us of this too. From the coast to the mountains, Virginia is simply a beautiful state, including our 40 amazing state parks. We're committed to keeping it that way, and to helping Virginians—and visitors—enjoy all the natural beauty we have to offer. That's why my budget includes \$5 million to develop more regional trails, specifically those more than 35 miles long.

Anyone who lives near the Virginia Capital Trail here in Richmond, or the Virginia Creeper Trail in Southwest Virginia, knows that they are great assets to a community. They're places for locals to walk or ride bicycles, and they attract visitors—and visitor dollars—from all over.

The pandemic has shown us how important it is to be able to get outside. More trails means more opportunity to enjoy nature. I want to thank the General Assembly's Outdoor Recreation Caucus, and Senator Emmett Hanger and Delegate David Bulova, for their work to put a spotlight on outdoors activities.

We're also putting nearly \$12 million into water quality, air quality, and land conservation initiatives at natural resources agencies. This includes DEQ staffing to make sure the permitting process is more robust and thorough. These are important investments to

ensure that we don't fall behind in protecting these critical assets, and ensuring that DEQ can continue to protect our natural areas.

And we're investing in making it easier to move around the Commonwealth. Our budget invests \$50 million in right-of-way to open up more rail service into the Roanoke area. This has been a priority for a generation. We know it's needed: in the past decade, Amtrak ridership along the U.S. 29 I-81 corridor has increased 77 percent. And the current Roanoke train is the only Amtrak service in Virginia that covers 100 percent of its operating costs through ticket sales. So we need this, and it's time we do it.

We also need to keep taking action to treat people more equitably. That starts with humility and forgiveness. Those are two words we don't hear much these days, but they matter. Humility means acknowledging that we may have done wrong ourselves sometimes. We are all human. Forgiveness is welcoming other people back after they have done wrong. We have begun that journey, and we must keep taking action.

If you break the law in Virginia, you'll be punished. But right now, part of the punishment follows you for the rest of your life—even after you've paid your debt to society. You lose your civil rights—like the right to vote—and you don't get them back unless the governor acts to give them back.

Virginia is one of just a few remaining states where, if you have a felony conviction, someone has to act to restore your civil rights to vote or run for office. It's not automatic, but it should be. I've made it a priority, restoring civil rights for more than 40,000 people, and I have pardoned more Virginians than any Governor in our Commonwealth's history. But that shouldn't be up to one person, and you shouldn't have to ask for your basic civil rights to be restored.

So I'm proposing to change Virginia's constitution to make that process automatic. If we want people to return to their communities and participate in society, we need to welcome them back fully. It's wrong to keep punishing people forever. This is the right thing to do.

It will take a constitutional amendment, and that will take two sessions, so I'm calling tonight on the folks in the General Assembly now, and the people who want to be in my position and in the General Assembly next year, to commit to doing it.

It's also time to acknowledge ways that our criminal justice system treats different people unfairly. Marijuana is a great example. We know that while White people and Black people use marijuana at similar rates, Black people are three and a half times more likely to be charged with a crime for it. And they're almost four times as likely to be convicted.

That happens because that's how the system was set up generations ago. In fact, one of the early leaders of the federal Drug Enforcement Agency was clear that marijuana laws should be written explicitly to target people of color. And so they were, and they've been targeting people for years.

It's time to join 16 other states and make marijuana legal, and end the current system rooted in inequity. We've done the research, and we can do this the right way, leading with social equity, public health, and public safety. Reforming our marijuana laws is one way to ensure that Virginia is a more just state that works better for everyone.

Marijuana has become a cash crop that rivals tobacco—even here in Virginia. But as an illegal crop, it makes no money for Virginia. By legalizing and taxing it, we can use the revenue to help communities most disproportionately impacted by the inequities in our laws.

For example, just half of the potential annual revenue could pay for two years of quality Pre-K to every one of Virginia's most vulnerable three- and four-year-olds—children who deserve the best start in life.

Rooting out inequities includes expunging the records of people who were convicted of this and certain other crimes in the past. It's time to act, during this session, to have the robust debate about how to best conduct the process of expunging people's records. This will make our system more just and equal, and it needs action this session.

Forgiveness is important. But when we all agree that a crime deserves the strongest punishment we can give, it's still vital to make sure our criminal justice system operates fairly and punishes people equitably.

We know the death penalty doesn't do that. But make no mistake—if you commit the most heinous crimes, you should spend the rest of your days in prison. But here are the facts about the death penalty. Virginia has executed more people than any other state—more than 1,300 people. And here's another truth: a person is more than three times as likely to be sentenced to death when the victim is white, than when the victim is Black.

Now, some of that is because Virginia is an old state. 400 years of history. But it's also true that we're near the top of the list in the modern era too, since federal law allowed executions to resume in the 1970s, after a long moratorium.

Over that time, most countries in the world have turned away from capital punishment. So what parts of the world continue to use capital punishment? Here's a list, in order: China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, and the United States. But that's changing. In the U.S., 22 states have said, no longer will the state take a life, even when someone has killed another. There are a lot of reasons. It doesn't work as a deterrent. It's expensive. And the drug companies refuse to supply the lethal chemicals.

There's another important reason: What if the system gets it wrong? If you think it can't happen, you're wrong. It can happen, and it has happened, here in Virginia.

Remember the case of Earl Washington. In 1984, he was convicted of capital murder. He spent 18 years in prison in Virginia, including 9 ½ of them on death row. But he didn't do it.

By the early 2000s, the technology behind DNA evidence showed that he was innocent. In the time it took to get the right people to look at that evidence, this innocent man came within nine days of being executed. Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot do this. If ten days had passed, we would ask ourselves today—How did Virginia execute an innocent man? For all of these reasons, the death penalty is much less common in Virginia than before. Today, only two people are on death row. It's time to change the law, and end the death penalty in Virginia. We're taking these actions because we value people, and because we believe in treating people equitably. That matters in policy, and it matters in symbols.

No accounting of the state of our Commonwealth in 2021 would be complete without examining how we are moving away from the burden of our past. Virginia's history is deeply complicated, and progress has not come without struggle. The Lost Cause has had a long reach here. For 150 years, the Confederate insurrection against the United States has been celebrated in Virginia.

We started changing that last year—ending holidays that celebrate Confederate leaders, giving cities and counties the right to remove monuments, and changing the way that Virginia represents itself in the halls of the U.S. Capitol.

It was important progress, and throughout the year, we heard the call to move faster. The people said, it's past time for these monuments, these echoes of revisionist history, to come down.

We saw that most clearly in our capital city, and Virginia's largest monument to the Confederate insurrection will soon come down. But that's just a first step. Now, it's time to engage the community and ask, what's next?

So I have proposed a plan to help our capital city reimagine what the famous Monument Avenue should look like, as Virginia consigns the Confederate cause to the dustbin of history. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is one of the world's leading museums, and is an ideal partner in this work.

It's an important step in showing who we are and what we value. Another important step is in another part of our capital city. It's just outside the windows of this room, at the bottom of the hill, just a few blocks from where I'm standing.

Virginians operated one of the country's largest slave-trading markets there in the early days of this country. In time, it would become one of the biggest—second only to New Orleans. It was a place where Virginians would sell men, women, and children for profit.

That's an important part of our history. It's not pretty, but it's part of who we are. People need to know about it, and children need to learn about it. That's hard, because right now there are just a few small plaques around the area. It's not enough. So I have proposed to work with the city of Richmond and Mayor Levar Stoney to preserve the site known as the Devil's Half-Acre, or Lumpkin's Jail, and the African Burial Ground nearby. This project

will turn this sacred ground into a heritage site that will tell the story of slavery and the people who experienced it. I want to thank Delegate Delores McQuinn for her advocacy on behalf of this project.

North of here, along the Potomac River, we will restore gravestones that were taken from Columbian Harmony Cemetery, an historic African American burial ground in D.C. People buried there included one of D.C.'s first Black policemen; many Black Union Army veterans; Elizabeth Keckley, confidante of Mary Todd Lincoln; two sons of abolitionist Frederick Douglass; and Phillip Reid, who helped create the statue of Freedom atop the U.S. Capitol dome.

In the 1960s, the cemetery was moved to make way for commercial development. The grave markers were dumped or sold for scrap stone, a dehumanizing act—and that was part of the goal. Today, they are being used as “riprap”—rocks to protect erosion on the Potomac River. It’s time to change this, and I thank Senator Richard Stuart for his leadership on this issue.

And in our nation’s Capitol, we have removed the Confederate statue that represented Virginia for more than a century. Soon, civil rights pioneer Barbara Johns—who fought to right the wrongs of racism—will represent Virginia there. That is thanks in large part to the work of Senator Louise Lucas and Delegate Jeion Ward. They told me this work was one of the most important experiences of their legislative career. Thanks are also due to Congressman Donald McEachin and Congresswoman Jennifer Wexton.

Let’s get that done this year, together. We honor Barbara Johns for her work to integrate public schools in Virginia.

But at the same time, Virginia also continues to celebrate a man who worked against integration—Democrat Harry Byrd, the architect of Massive Resistance, which closed public schools to children like Barbara Johns. It’s time to stop this celebration too, and remove this monument from Capitol Square.

One week from now, this nation will inaugurate our next President, Joe Biden.

And just one week ago, a mob of domestic terrorists stormed our nation’s capital. They were egged on by conspiracy theories and lies from a president who could not accept losing. Their goal was simple: overturn a legal and fair election. Those were scenes I don’t believe any of us ever expected to see in our lifetime. But none of that “just happened.” None of it was an accident, and nothing was spontaneous. Those who want a government that serves only themselves don’t care about democracy. And they will always come with violence to try to end it.

Tonight I say to every elected official in Virginia, you can be part of our democratic institutions, or you can use falsehoods to try to destroy them, but you can’t do both. Words have consequences. Inflammatory rhetoric is dangerous. This is not a game.

When elected leaders purposely reject facts and truth, and fan the flames of conspiracy, all in pursuit of power, they are taking dangerous steps. We have now seen where those steps can lead. God forbid we see anything worse.

We have a duty to tell the truth. Voters deserve the truth, even when it's hard to hear—not lies that will comfort them. Because as we saw last week, lies do not quell outrage. They encourage it. And that creates real damage. Americans are better than this, and I pray that we all can summon the better angels of our nature in this new year.

I also pray that we take action. People are hurting, and they sent us here to do a job. They are counting on us. We can do a great deal of good this session. I'm excited to get to work with all of you, so we can keep making progress in, and for, this Commonwealth.

A wise man once wrote, "adversity does not build character, it reveals it." The adversity of the past ten months has revealed a strong, resilient Virginia.

Virginians have lost a great deal—jobs, livelihoods, and unfortunately, loved ones. But we are still here. We are poised and ready to rebound. We have laid a strong foundation for ourselves: sustaining government services that you rely on, using federal pandemic funds to help our neighbors get through this, making targeted investments in our long-term success.

We are moving past the burden of our history, taking action to shape a Virginia that reflects who we are and what we value. We step into this new year with a lot of hope—that the vaccines will end this pandemic, that we can get back to normal life, and that we can return to a time when government was just part of the background noise of daily life, not the top headlines.

But I hope we don't just move back to those times when this crisis is over. I hope we move forward with a new understanding of what's important. Things like hugging people, sending our children off to school every day, work lunches, concerts, and all the experiences that we miss. We need to remember that we care about each other.

We have learned a lot in this past year, but the main thing is that we are all connected. What I do affects you, and what you do affects me. We are one Virginia, and we need to keep taking care of each other.

I am proud of the state of our Commonwealth, and the foundation we have built to get through this pandemic and recover in a way that is equitable and fair. And I am proud of you, Virginia. You have made this the greatest state in the greatest nation in the world. And together, we are shaping a Virginia that once again leads the nation. So now, let's get to work!

Thank you all, and may God bless our country and the Commonwealth of Virginia.

