

## Restoration of Rights Event Remarks

04-22-16

Good morning.

On a rainy January 11, 2014, I stood near here on Capitol Square and promised to work tirelessly to ensure that all of our citizens have the opportunity for success in the new Virginia economy.

And I promised that our Commonwealth would never stand still on the road to greater equality for all our people.

That promise has driven every action that we have taken during this administration, from this year's record investment in education to the nearly 155,000 jobs that have been created since we took office.

And that promise lies at the heart of my commitment to protect Virginians' right to vote.

I believe our Commonwealth cannot achieve its full potential until all men and women act on this fundamental right and participate in decisions about their children's schools, their taxes and every other aspect of their lives.

Unfortunately, Virginia has a long and sad history of actively suppressing the voices of many thousands of men and women at the ballot box.

Not long after President Abraham Lincoln celebrated emancipation with former slaves gathered here on Capitol Square, Virginia initiated a campaign of intimidation, corruption and violence aimed at separating African-Americans from their constitutional right to vote.

Those efforts culminated in the state constitutional convention that met at the Capitol in 1901 and 1902.

Here in this very building, leaders crafted a constitution that advanced three pillars of voter suppression: a poll tax, literacy and knowledge tests, and broader restrictions on individuals with felony convictions.

Of the 147,000 African Americans of voting age in 1900, only 21,000 were on voter registration lists by the end of 1902.

In his classic study of Southern Politics, political scientist V.O. Key noted that Virginia governors were chosen in primaries with the support of only 6 to 8 percent of the adult population.

He wrote, “By contrast, Mississippi is a hotbed of democracy.”

The 1965 Voting Rights Act assured all Americans and all Virginians of the opportunity to vote.

It ultimately led to the inauguration of this nation’s first African-American governor, L. Douglas Wilder.

But one of the legal pillars upholding racial discrimination at the polls still stands as a barrier to many thousands of our citizens.

Virginia continues to enforce one of the most restrictive laws in the country regarding the restoration of voting and civil rights for individuals who have been convicted of felonies but who complete their sentences and probation or parole.

And, as has been true throughout our history, that barrier is highest for our African-American citizens.

It has been estimated that 1 in 5 black adults in Virginia has lost the right to vote – nearly 7 percent of our total adult population.

We have chipped away at this barrier by simplifying the restoration process.

- We reduced the waiting period for more serious offenders from 5 years to 3.
- We classified all drug-related convictions as non-violent.
- We shortened the application for more serious offenders from 13 pages to 1 page.
- We removed a requirement that individuals pay their court costs before they can have their rights restored.
- And we established a process so that a notation will be included in an individual's criminal record designating that his or her rights have been restored.

We also continued a reform begun under the previous administration to restore the rights of non-violent offenders at the time they complete their sentences, without having to submit an application.

The members of my team who work with these individuals to help restore their rights are truly doing the Lord's work – and they certainly deserve a round of applause.

I am proud to tell you that in a little more than two years, we have restored the rights of more than **18,000** individuals -- more than the past 7 governors combined over their full four-year terms.

I proud of that accomplishment.

But I have struggled with the question of whether Virginia can fully embrace Lincoln's call at Gettysburg for a government of the people, by the people and for the people when we continue to cut so many of them off from full citizenship.

This is the essence of our democracy, and any effort to dilute this fundamental principle diminishes the rights of us all.

So after much deliberation, I have arrived at the only logical answer to this question.

I believe it is time to cast off Virginia's troubling history of injustice and embrace an honest, clean process for restoring the rights of these men and women.

And so today -- I will sign an order restoring the civil and voting rights of **EVERY** individual who has completed his or her sentence as of this day, April 22, 2016.

When I sign the order in a few moments, 206,000 Virginians who have served their time and completed supervised probation or parole will immediately regain the right to vote, run for office and serve on a jury.

They will have the right to play an active role in the future of the Commonwealth and country they call home.

And we are not going to stop there.

I have instructed the Secretary of the Commonwealth to identify the individuals who complete their sentences every month so that we can continuously restore their rights.

We will ensure that every Virginian with the freedom to live in our communities also has the right and responsibility to participate in the democratic process.

With this action, we will send a message to these 206,000 individuals, and to the world, that Virginia will no longer build walls and barriers to the ballot box – we will break them down.

We will send a message that ours is a Commonwealth devoted to equal opportunity – in our economy, in our education system and in our elections.

And we will send a message that Virginia is a place where people who make mistakes and serve their time are welcomed back as full members of our society, not second class citizens who must jump through onerous hoops to make their voices heard.

This is a day for celebration.

But I want to be clear: There may be some individuals who will try to demagogue this issue and make reckless accusations.

Our action today does not pardon or change the sentence for any man or woman affected by this grant.

These individuals have completed their sentences.

They have atoned for their actions.

They live, work and raise families in communities across our Commonwealth.

They will continue to contribute to our communities, but now with the full rights of citizenship.

I ask those who may question my action: Give me one reason these individuals should continue to be refused access to the ballot box. Give me one reason why it benefits society to leave hundreds of thousands of people trapped in second-class status.

There certainly is no legal or moral basis for doing so.

I recognize the significance of the action I am taking today, and I made certain that I am on solid legal and constitutional ground.

I have consulted with Attorney General Mark Herring and with the foremost constitutional authority in Virginia, Professor A.E. Dick Howard, who led the most recent constitutional revision in 1971.

I take this action with the certainty that it is valid, that it is fair and that it is just.

Now, I want to make one final point.

This restoration is a first step toward access to the ballot for hundreds of thousands of Virginians.

But it is not the final step.

These men and women must still register to vote.

And once they have done that – they must actually turn out and vote.

I believe most of them will do so.

I have personally restored the rights of a number of individuals who wept as they told me that they could now vote for the first time in their lives.

I have no idea how those men and women voted .

But I do know that when they cast that ballot, they made an investment in the community where they lived and took another step away from a difficult past toward a brighter future.

At his first presidential inauguration, Thomas Jefferson said, “A jealous care of the right of election by the people ... I deem [one of] the essential principles of our Government.”

We benefit from a more just and accountable government when we put our trust in all of our citizens to choose their leaders.

It's taken Virginia many centuries to learn that lesson.

But today we celebrate its truth, and we are proud to welcome our fellow Virginians back to full citizenship in our Commonwealth.