

REMARKS FOR THE HONORABLE L. DOUGLAS WILDER
THURSDAY, JULY 17, 2003

Thank you, it's good to be with you this evening.

I'd like to take a moment to thank the organizers of this event, the University of Virginia and the various members of my administration who've taken time out of their busy lives to say good things about us.

And to Professor Sabato –he with the crystal ball, always on call to pundits far and wide, quips at his fingertips – I'm not sure whether to thank or curse you for this opportunity.

While I am always happy to discuss the good old day of the Wilder Administration, I am hesitant to turn the page from recent past to posterity. I think the poet George Ade put it best when he wrote "After being turned down by numerous publishers, I decided to write for posterity."

From the minute I was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1985, esteemed people like Professor Sabato have been trying to write me into the history books. But I suppose that honor is preferable to having your career declared history. I've been know to opine on such a subject myself from time to time.

But I am grateful to Professor Sabato for taking me down from the bookshelves for a couple of days and reminding everyone that I didn't just win a couple statewide elections here in Virginia – once upon a time, I actually was your governor.

Being Governor of Virginia was the greatest honor of my life and I cherished every moment of it. For a lifelong Virginian, there is no higher calling than to serve as governor of our commonwealth.

The governor is truly a custodian of the people ... he or she doesn't just sign bills and cut ribbons opening highways. In Virginia, a governor is expected to be the advocate for the people – whether that means standing up the to the gun dealers and fighting for a monthly limit on gun purchases.

Or taking on the drug manufacturers and health care providers who inflate the cost of their goods and services.

Or even ... dare I say ... politely question institutions of higher learning to better account for the way they spend public money.

If a governor does not stand up for the people ... no one will. Mr. Smith may have gone to Washington, but I didn't see him hanging around the General Assembly in Richmond very often. Stand up for the public interest one too many times in the Senate or House of

Delegates and you can pretty much guarantee yourself a well-funded primary or general election opponent in the next campaign.

But as governor – especially a Virginia governor, where there is no re-election campaign – you can gently ... or sometimes not so gently ... tell the insiders, the moneyed interests and all those who stand in the way of progress to go to hell.

And if you get a reputation for being a bit feisty or headstrong in the process, all the better. A good loud bark will keep away intruders as well as the deepest bite.

Being governor is not a job for someone with a weak stomach. Issues of life and death pass over your desk every day ... horrible, haunting crime scene photos have to be weighed against DNA tests or polygraph results. I was the last line of justice in death penalty cases in Virginia for four years ... every decision that passed my desk I will have to live with the rest of my life.

And on a lighter note, every time I see Allen Iverson highlights on television, I can't help but feel a little bit responsible for giving him a second chance to turn his life around. I don't expect a cut of his vast fortune, but I'm still waiting for my pair of Allen Iverson shoes.

So many of the issues we grappled with 10-15 years ago are still the issues most important to the people of Virginia. I thought that by managing the taxpayer's money well, I would leave the state in such a strong position that issues of taxing and spending could come off the table for years to come. Virginia was being praised on magazine covers and with the credit ratings boards while every other state was scrambling to raise taxes or slash spending to keep afloat.

But politics always intrudes ... and sooner or later, Virginia will need another governor willing and able to step in and make the kinds of hard choices and take the political heat for doing so. Somewhere down the line, another governor will reap the rewards of good times ... discipline will disappear and we'll start all over again.

The big issues have not gone away. My administration did more than any before it to close the public schools spending gap between rich and poor school districts and yet we took heat for not doing enough. Today, that gap is wider than before ... but no one says a word about it.

We made major investments in transportation ... but Virginians still believe they spend far too much of their lives on the highway. I'm not sure this is an issue that can ever be addressed ... or that any transportation spending will ever be enough.

And 12 years after we tried to entice a professional sports franchise into Virginia ... we're still at it. While we're on the subject, I find it amusing that everyone who complained about having an NFL football team in Alexandria and the horrible traffic it might create ended up with a Home Depot and various other high-traffic stores built on

that same tract of land. I suppose what they truly wanted were traffic jams 365 days a year, not just 8 Sundays a year.

I bring up all of these issues not to drive down memory lane, but to remind everyone that in a democracy, issues never go away ... attention may wane, bills come and go, but the problems that people face in their everyday lives can't be solved in one fell swoop.

Being an effective governor is about using the time you have to do what you can ... to keep up the pressure, make sure people don't lose sight of things that need to be done. If you're lucky, you make some progress and pass on the torch to someone else who cares enough to keep trying. If you fail, you hope that someday someone remembers your efforts and gives it another shot.

But make no mistake, no problem just goes away. The great progress all of us have witnessed in our lifetimes in science, technology, the law, human rights – all came as a result of dogged determination and a belief that, day by day, we can and must make the world a better place.

That brings me to the subject that I'm sure many of you came here wishing that I would talk about – my elections in 1985 and 1989 to the offices of Lieutenant Governor and Governor of Virginia. In that time, there was a belief among some – a belief I did not share – that my election was a signpost of inevitable progress in the United States ... that it was merely a matter of time before an African-American was elected governor in a state and that I was the one who was able to get there first.

I call this the Mt. Everest theory of politics ... that every obstacle on earth will eventually be surmounted and all it takes is one person to reach the summit before everyone is able to hire the best sherpas and reach the peak on their own.

Well, those sherpas are still around, you know. And they keep trying to sell their packaged tours of Everest to every African American politician who wishes to reach the summit ... but somehow they always seem to fall short.

Does that mean that I am some sort of miraculous superman who achieved victories that no one else could possibly imagine? No. In fact, I believe it is gravely insulting to Oscar J. Dunn, Richard Gleaves, Alonzo J. Ransier and P. B. S. Pinchback to say that no African American had been elected to these posts ... or to put an asterisk by their names and remind us of reconstruction. Funny, but I don't see any asterisks by the names of all the white governors elected during the Jim Crow era.

What happened in Virginia in 1985 and 1989 was the confluence of many events. For it to happen again here or in another state, there will need to be another confluence ... in some ways it will be easier for the next victorious candidate, in some ways harder.

To begin, I firmly believe that I would never have had a chance to win in 1989 without my victory in 1985. The Virginia people needed to know that I could be a good

Lieutenant Governor and – more importantly – that I could reflect their values before they would give me the chance to be their governor.

The greatest advantage that I had in my two statewide elections was the fact that I am and always will be a Virginian through and through. If I'm out in Smithfield or Bristol giving a speech in 1985, it's not a sure thing that the average Bubba will give me that first look ... but there's no doubt that the second look will depend on what's coming out of my mouth.

Truth is, my aspirations in life were no different from any Virginians. I wanted success for my family and me. I wanted to be able to enjoy all the best ... and as the doors are opening up, stick a doorjamb in the way.

My goal wasn't to be revolutionary – to preach to people that their values were wrong or that they should do things out of guilt or the goodness of their heart. All I asked for myself and for everybody is that anyone with ability and perseverance have the chance to walk through the door.

When I said in my inauguration speech that I was a son of Virginia, I meant it. My election was the supreme affirmation of Virginia values ... it signaled that the good life of that man on the hill who built this university could be shared by all men ... even if his deeds never lived up to his words.

There is a grave problem in American politics today that goes well beyond the fate of African Americans seeking the highest offices in the land. We've lost touch with what it means to seek a mandate of the people and to govern with the consent of the governed.

Political pundits ... and by this I mean other political pundits, professor ... feed into this problem. They put the great political consultants and strategists on a pedestal as if the American people elected James Carville and Karl Rove our last two Presidents.

Their act is as if the formula for every electoral victory has been found and that the election will be decided by which consultant mixes the right brew.

In truth, there are some people in American politics -- with the right consultants and the right polls and focus groups -- can fake their way to victory. Being the son of a famous politician helps. Having great personal wealth helps more.

But for anyone trying to jump over obstacles in this country – whether it's an obstacle of race, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation – there's no fooling the voters. You can't just pretend to think and feel and act like the people you serve, you need to embody the values of the people you wish to represent.

I was elected Lieutenant Governor and then Governor because of Virginia values. I continue to believe in the wisdom of the people and the incredible capacity of all men and women to overcome their own prejudices – whether on a flag or in their hearts – to select

the man or woman best qualified to fight for and protect their values. And to be perfectly blunt, if you do not share the values of the people you wish to represent, you really have no business running for office in a democracy.

Another problem with politics in America today is timidity. You see it all the time in campaigns for every office – someone floats his name for office and the next thing you know a party chairman or a chief of staff is in his office making promises of support four, eight, twelve years down the road. This is a special problem for African American candidates.

The timid soul always sees the obstacle and never the end zone. He wades into the water and watches waves after wave float by, looking for just the right time. But there's a problem with those who hope to ride a wave to victory – the same tide that brings you ashore can also sweep you back to sea.

That is why I always said – and will always believe – that when the thing is right, the time is right. If you float your name and suddenly the party chairman starts calling, you must be doing something right. And if you could make the powerful jump by the mere mention of your name, think how high they will leap once you get in the game.

So do I believe that we will see more African American Governors, Senators and – someday – a President? Yes, but it is not a matter of time. It is a matter of will and of persistence. It could happen just as easily in 2004 as in 2040. The longer a qualified, able man or woman waits to inherit that prize, the more daunting the task will become.

And that's because it is not a prize, it is a job. It's a job to embody and defend the values and aspirations of the people you serve. For all the men and women in this country who dream of such service, you will know when you are ready ... you will know what you need to do to attain it ... and when you get there, you will know in your heart how to do it right.

I'll be forever grateful for my opportunity. And I thank Professor Sabato and all in attendance today for giving me a few minutes to share my gratitude.

Thank you and God bless you.