

Senator Elizabeth Warren
Remarks at the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate
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****As Prepared for Delivery****

Thank you. I'm grateful to be here at the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate. This place is a fitting tribute to our champion, Ted Kennedy. A man of courage, compassion, and commitment, who taught us what public service is all about. Not a day goes by that we don't miss his passion, his enthusiasm, and – most of all – his dedication to all of our working families.

As the Senior Senator from Massachusetts, I have the great honor of sitting at Senator Kennedy's desk – right over there. The original, back in Washington, is a little more dented and scratched, but it has something very special in the drawer. Ted Kennedy carved his name in it. When I sit at my desk, sometimes when I'm waiting to speak or to vote, I open the drawer and run my thumb across his name. It reminds me of the high expectations of the people of Massachusetts, and I try, every day, to live up to the legacy he left behind.

Senator Kennedy took office just over fifty years ago, in the midst of one of the great moral and political debates in American history – the debate over the Civil Rights Act. In his first speech on the floor of the Senate, just four months after his brother's assassination, he stood up to support equal rights for all Americans. He ended that speech with a powerful personal message about what the civil rights struggle meant to the late President Kennedy:

His heart and soul are in this bill. If his life and death had a meaning, it was that we should not hate but love one another; we should use our powers not to create conditions of oppression that lead to violence, but conditions of freedom that lead to peace.

“We should use our powers not to create conditions of oppression that lead to violence, but conditions of freedom that lead to peace.” That's what I'd like to talk about today.

A half-century ago, when Senator Kennedy spoke of the Civil Rights Act, entrenched, racist power did everything it could to sustain oppression of African-Americans, and violence was its first tool. Lynchings, terrorism, intimidation. The 16th Street Baptist Church. Medgar Evers. Emmett Till. When Alabama Governor George Wallace stood before the nation and declared during his 1963 inaugural address that he would defend “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,” he made clear that the state would stand with those who used violence.

But violence was not the only tool. African Americans were effectively stripped of citizenship when they were denied the right to vote. The tools varied—literacy tests, poll taxes, moral character tests, grandfather clauses—but the results were the same. They were denied basic rights of citizenship and the chance to participate in self-government.

The third tool of oppression was to deliberately deny millions of African Americans economic opportunities solely because of the color of their skin.

I have often spoken about how America built a great middle class. Coming out of the Great Depression, from the 1930s to the late 1970s, as GDP went up, wages went up for most Americans. But there's a dark underbelly to that story. While median family income in America was growing – for both white and African-American families – African-American incomes were only a fraction of white incomes. In the mid-1950s, the median income for African-American families was just a little more than half the income of white families.

And the problem went beyond just income. Look at housing: For most middle class families in America, buying a home is the number one way to build wealth. It's a retirement plan—pay off the house and live on Social Security. An investment option—mortgage the house to start a business. It's a way to help the kids get through college, a safety net if someone gets really sick, and, if all goes well and Grandma and Grandpa can hang on to the house until they die, it's a way to give the next generation a boost—extra money to move the family up the ladder.

For much of the 20th Century, that's how it worked for generation after generation of white Americans – but not black Americans. Entire legal structures were created to prevent African Americans from building economic security through home ownership. Legally-enforced segregation. Restrictive deeds. Redlining. Land contracts. Coming out of the Great Depression, America built a middle class, but systematic discrimination kept most African-American families from being part of it.

State-sanctioned discrimination wasn't limited to homeownership. The government enforced discrimination in public accommodations, discrimination in schools, discrimination in credit—it was a long and spiteful list.

Economic justice is not – and has never been – sufficient to ensure racial justice. Owning a home won't stop someone from burning a cross on the front lawn. Admission to a school won't prevent a beating on the sidewalk outside. But when Dr. King led hundreds of thousands of people to march on Washington, he talked about an end to violence, access to voting AND economic opportunity. As Dr. King once wrote, “the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice.”

The tools of oppression were woven together, and the civil rights struggle was fought against that oppression wherever it was found – against violence, against the denial of voting rights, and against economic injustice.

The battles were bitter and sometimes deadly. Firehoses turned on peaceful protestors. Police officers setting their dogs to attack black students. Bloody Sunday at the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

But the civil rights movement pushed this country in a new direction.

- The federal government cracked down on state-sponsored violence. Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson all called out the National Guard, and, in doing so,

declared that everyone had a right to equal protection under the law, guaranteed by the Constitution. Congress protected the rights of all citizens to vote with the Voting Rights Act.

- And economic opportunities opened up when Congress passed civil rights laws that protected equal access to employment, public accommodations, and housing.

In the same way that the tools of oppression were woven together, a package of civil rights laws came together to protect black people from violence, to ensure access to the ballot box, and to build economic opportunity. Or to say it another way, these laws made three powerful declarations: Black lives matter. Black citizens matter. Black families matter.

Fifty years later, we have made real progress toward creating the conditions of freedom—but we have not made ENOUGH progress.

Fifty years later, violence against African Americans has not disappeared. Consider law enforcement. The vast majority of police officers sign up so they can protect their communities. They are part of an honorable profession that takes risks every day to keep us safe. We know that. But we also know – and say – the names of those whose lives have been treated with callous indifference. Sandra Bland. Freddie Gray. Michael Brown. We've seen sickening videos of unarmed, black Americans cut down by bullets, choked to death while gasping for air – their lives ended by those who are sworn to protect them. Peaceful, unarmed protestors have been beaten. Journalists have been jailed. And, in some cities, white vigilantes with weapons freely walk the streets. And it's not just about law enforcement either. Just look to the terrorism this summer at Emanuel AME Church. We must be honest: Fifty years after John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke out, violence against African Americans has not disappeared.

And what about voting rights? Two years ago, five conservative justices on the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act, opening the floodgates ever wider for measures designed to suppress minority voting. Today, the specific tools of oppression have changed—voter ID laws, racial gerrymandering, and mass disenfranchisement through a criminal justice system that disproportionately incarcerates black citizens. The tools have changed, but black voters are still deliberately cut out of the political process.

Violence. Voting. And what about economic injustice? Research shows that the legal changes in the civil rights era created new employment and housing opportunities. In the 1960s and the 1970s, African-American men and women began to close the wage gap with white workers, giving millions of black families hope that they might build real wealth.

But then, Republicans' trickle-down economic theory arrived. Just as this country was taking the first steps toward economic justice, the Republicans pushed a theory that meant helping the richest people and the most powerful corporations get richer and more powerful. I'll just do one statistic on this: From 1980 to 2012, GDP continued to rise, but how much of the income growth went to the 90% of America – everyone outside the top 10% - black, white, Latino? None. Zero. Nothing. 100% of all the new income produced in this country over the past 30 years has gone to the top ten percent.

Today, 90% of Americans see no real wage growth. For African-Americans, who were so far behind earlier in the 20th Century, this means that since the 1980s they have been hit particularly hard. In January of this year, African-American unemployment was 10.3% - more than twice the rate of white unemployment. And, after beginning to make progress during the civil rights era to close the wealth gap between black and white families, in the 1980s the wealth gap exploded, so that from 1984 to 2009, the wealth gap between black and white families tripled.

The 2008 housing collapse destroyed trillions in family wealth across the country, but the crash hit African-Americans like a punch in the gut. Because middle class black families' wealth was disproportionately tied up in homeownership and not other forms of savings, these families were hit harder by the housing collapse. But they also got hit harder because of discriminatory lending practices—yes, discriminatory lending practices in the 21st Century. Recently several big banks and other mortgage lenders paid hundreds of millions in fines, admitting that they illegally steered black and Latino borrowers into more expensive mortgages than white borrowers who had similar credit. Tom Perez, who at the time was the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, called it a “racial surtax.” And it’s still happening – earlier this month, the National Fair Housing alliance filed a discrimination complaint against real estate agents in Mississippi after an investigation showed those agents consistently steering white buyers away from interracial neighborhoods and black buyers away from affluent ones. Another investigation showed similar results across our nation’s cities. *Housing discrimination alive and well in 2015.*

Violence, voting, economic justice.

We have made important strides forward. But we are not done yet. And now, it is *our* time.

I speak today with the full knowledge that I have not personally experienced and can never truly understand the fear, the oppression, and the pain that confronts African Americans every day. But none of us can ignore what is happening in this country. Not when our black friends, family, neighbors literally fear dying in the streets.

Listen to the brave, powerful voices of today’s new generation of civil rights leaders. Incredible voices. Listen to them say: “If I die in police custody, know that I did not commit suicide.” Watch them march through the streets, “hands up don’t shoot” – not to incite a riot, but to fight for their lives. *To fight for their lives.*

This is the reality all of us must confront, as uncomfortable and ugly as that reality may be. It comes to us to once again affirm that black lives matter, that black citizens matter, that black families matter.

Once again, the task begins with safeguarding our communities from violence. We have made progress, but it is a tragedy when any American cannot trust those who have sworn to protect and serve. This pervasive and persistent distrust isn’t based on myths. It is grounded in the reality of unjustified violence.

Policing must become a truly community endeavor—not in just a few cities, but everywhere. Police forces should look like, and come from, the neighborhoods they serve. They should reach out to support and defend the community – working with people in neighborhoods before problems arise. All police forces—not just some—must be trained to de-escalate and to avoid the likelihood of violence. Body cameras can help us know what happens when someone is hurt.

We honor the bravery and sacrifice that our law enforcement officers show every day on the job – and the noble intentions of the vast majority of those who take up the difficult job of keeping us safe. But police are not occupying armies. This is America, not a war zone—and policing practices in all cities—not just some—need to reflect that.

Next, voting.

It's time to call out the recent flurry of new state law restrictions for what they are: an all-out campaign by Republicans to take away the right to vote from poor and black and Latino American citizens who probably won't vote for them. The push to restrict voting is nothing more than a naked grab to win elections that they can't win if every citizen votes.

Two years ago the Supreme Court eviscerated critical parts of the Voting Rights Act. Congress could easily fix this, and Democrats in the Senate have called for restoration of voting rights. Now it is time for Republicans to step up to support a restoration of the Voting Rights Act—or to stand before the American people and explain why they have abandoned America's most cherished liberty, the right to vote.

And while we're at it, we need to update the rules around voting. Voting should be simple. Voter registration should be automatic. Get a driver's license, get registered automatically. Nonviolent, law-abiding citizens should not lose the right to vote because of a prior conviction. Election Day should be a holiday, so no one has to choose between a paycheck and a vote. Early voting and vote by mail would give fast food and retail workers who don't get holidays day off a chance to proudly cast their votes. The hidden discrimination that comes with purging voter rolls and short-staffing polling places must stop. The right to vote remains essential to protect all other rights, and no candidate for president or for any other elected office – Republican or Democrat – should be elected if they will not pledge to support full, meaningful voting rights.

Finally, economic justice. Our task will not be complete until we ensure that every family—regardless of race—has a fighting chance to build an economic future for themselves and their families. We need less talk and more action about reducing unemployment, ending wage stagnation and closing the income gap between white and nonwhite workers.

And one more issue, dear to my heart: It's time to come down hard on predatory practices that allow financial institutions to systematically strip wealth out of communities of color. One of the ugly consequences of bank deregulation was that there was no cop on the beat when too many financial institutions figured out that they could make great money by tricking, trapping, and defrauding targeted families. Now we have a Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and we need to make sure it stays strong and independent so that it can do its job and make credit markets work for black families, Latino families, white families – all families.

Yes, there's work to do.

Back in March, I met an elderly man at the First Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. We were having coffee and donuts in the church basement before the service started. He told me that more than 50 years earlier -- in May of 1961 -- he had spent 11 hours in that same basement, along with hundreds of people, while a mob outside threatened to burn down the church because it was a sanctuary for civil rights workers. Dr. King called Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, desperately asking for help. The Attorney General promised to send the Army, but the closest military base was several hours away. So the members of the church and the civil rights workers waited in the sweltering basement, crowded together, listening to the mob outside and hoping the U.S. Army would arrive in time.

After the church service, I asked Congressman John Lewis about that night. He had been right there in that church back in 1961 while the mob gathered outside. He had been in the room during the calls to the Attorney General. I asked if he had been afraid that the Army wouldn't make it in time. He said that he was "never, ever afraid. You come to that point where you lose all sense of fear." And then he said something I'll never forget. He said that his parents didn't want him to get involved in civil rights. They didn't want him to "cause trouble." But he had done it anyway. He told me: "Sometimes it is important to cause necessary trouble."

The first civil rights battles were hard fought. But they established that Black Lives Matter. That Black Citizens Matter. That Black Families Matter. Half a century later, we have made real progress, but we have not made ENOUGH progress. As Senator Kennedy said in his first floor speech, "This is not a political issue. It is a moral issue, to be resolved through political means." So it comes to us to continue the fight, to make, as John Lewis said, the "necessary trouble" until we can truly say that in America, every citizen enjoys the conditions of freedom.

Thank you.