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April 10, 2010

On McDonnell's Confederate Mistake

By **David Paul Kuhn**

Bob McDonnell ran the most impressive campaign of 2009. His tone was pragmatic, his disposition affable. He focused on the economy and spoke little of his social conservative values. Speeches carried messages of change. "Yes we can," rallied one supporter at the close of the campaign.

McDonnell won Virginia's governorship with the support of two-thirds of independents. David Brooks described McDonnell's victory as "probably the model for the future of the Republican Party." In January, Republicans chose McDonnell to offer the party's response to President Obama's State of the Union address (an honor accorded to rising stars).

McDonnell has now stained that star. Future discussions of vice presidential or presidential prospects will, inevitably, lead back to the events of this past week.

Early in the week, McDonnell declared April Confederate History Month. The proclamation recognized the "sacrifices of the Confederate leaders, soldiers and citizens during the period of the Civil War."

It did not mention slavery.

McDonnell explained the immense omission to The Washington Post: "There were any number of aspects to that conflict between the states. Obviously, it involved slavery. It involved other issues. But I focused on the ones I thought were most significant for Virginia."

One fifth of Virginians are black. To them, and many others, slavery is at least one of the "most significant" Civil War issues. The first black governor in the nation, Virginia's own Douglas Wilder, is the grandson of slaves. First Lady Michelle Obama is also a descendant of slaves.

McDonnell's description of slavery as one of "any number of aspects to that conflict" was equally disconcerting. History is clear on the matter. No slavery, no secession. No secession, no Civil War. And lest we forget, this war caused the deaths of more American soldiers than all other U.S. wars combined.

Uprouar followed. Even the conservative Richmond Times-Dispatch, which had endorsed him, took McDonnell to task.

McDonnell soon realized the gravity of his decision. By midweek, he apologized and belatedly noted that the "abomination of slavery divided our nation, deprived people of their God-given inalienable rights, and led to the Civil War." The proclamation was amended to include, "It is important for all Virginians to understand that the institution of slavery led to this war and was an evil..."

The mea culpa mattered. The amendment mitigates some of the damage done. But questions linger. How did McDonnell not foresee the offense he would cause? How did he not realize the glaring omission would earn national headlines? And why, in the first place, did he revive this divisive issue?

In 1997, Virginia GOP Gov. George Allen took heat for signing a similar resolution. Allen's proclamation also omitted slavery. The next governor, Republican Jim Gilmore, added slavery to the proclamation. Subsequent governors, Democrats Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, discontinued the proclamation altogether.

McDonnell not only chose to reinstitute the proclamation, he also chose to leave out Gilmore's critical addition. That choice cannot be easily reconciled with the another choice, in his inaugural address, to speak to the "injustice of slavery."

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Politics is an unforgiving profession. Big mistakes, especially on the most sensitive subjects, do stick.

In 2008, Obama's "bitter" gaffe tied together smaller incidents. It created a narrative. And that narrative anchored Obama to an enduring stereotype -- the disconnected liberal elitist. That perception might have cost Obama the election, had the market not crashed.

McDonnell's decision also provides for a narrative and enhances a stereotype. McDonnell caused a stir in 2002 as a member of the Virginia House of Delegates. He pushed a state flag salute that was written and used by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The salute's language was fairly innocuous. McDonnell said he did not know its history. The state's General Assembly had adopted the salute in 1954, the same year the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation. But the House of Delegates had no tradition of reciting the salute. Virginia's black legislators, among others, refused to recite it.

Small, often explicable, anecdotes matter when they relate to larger incidents. Some may recall the thread between the "bitter" remark and Obama's arugula gaffe. McDonnell's Confederate mistake moves him nearer to the right's worst stereotype -- the racially insensitive conservative (or worse).

It's a problem that should concern conservatives. Conservatives today are constantly forced to live down unsubstantiated charges of racism. Their opposition to the president is often wrongly framed as a matter of race. And it's not only liberals levying this charge. Throughout the 2008 campaign, many prominent pundits explained Obama's difficulties with white voters through a racial lens -- even though white Democratic presidential candidates had the same problems before him.

But the partisan context matters. Just as when liberals overplay the race card it hurts liberalism, conservative Southerners who ignore or downplay racial sensitivities sully conservatism.

We have, of course, been here before. A decade ago, the nation was debating whether the Confederate flag should fly over South Carolina's state capitol. At the time, by a margin of 49 to 41 percent, Americans thought the flag should be "removed" because "it is a symbol of racism and slavery and is offensive to blacks," according to the NBC/Wall Street Journal poll.

Understandably, southern whites bristle at simplistic descriptions of the Civil War. All Union soldiers depicted as heroes fighting for black liberty. All Confederate soldiers depicted as villains fighting to keep blacks as slaves.

Few southern whites were slave owners. The North was also rife with racism and sometimes race violence, as during the New York draft riots.

The South still holds tighter to this war. It was fought in their backyards. Americans often reference Vietnam as the first war they lost. That's not true for southerners.

Many white southerners express a desire to honor that loss. They wish to honor the innumerable brave Confederate soldiers who died for their region or fellow. But history carries countless graves of soldiers who died honorably but ultimately served a dishonorable, sometimes evil, institution or cause.

The Confederacy cannot be divorced from its consequence. If the South won, blacks would have remained enslaved as "property." Because the Union won, blacks were liberated as people and Americans.

Next year marks the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. The issue is not "if" we should remember the Confederacy. It's "how" we remember it. For its history is American history.

But if there is to be a Confederate History Month, and it is to honor history, it must honor the whole history. And Virginia's governor should particularly know that. The Confederate capital was in Virginia. About one third of Virginia's population was enslaved at the time of the Civil war. Virginia had the largest black population of any slave state. And as the Times-Dispatch put it, "Southern heritage includes not only those who supported the Confederacy but those who welcomed the Union armies as liberators."

David Paul Kuhn is the Chief Political Correspondent for RealClearPolitics and the author of [The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma](#). He can be reached at david@realclearpolitics.com and his writing followed via [RSS](#).

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