

**“Whose History?: Civil War 150 in Virginia, 2011-2015”
Statement of Prof. Ervin L. Jordan Jr. (University of Virginia),
Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission meeting,
Workgroup #2 (Signature Events and Activities),
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*We are not makers of history. We are made by history.
—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 1963*

Mr. Speaker Howell, Senator Chichester, fellow Commission members, ladies and gentlemen:

As a native Virginian and archivist-historian at the University of Virginia, I consider my appointment to the Commission’s advisory council a distinct opportunity and honor. My fields of expertise are Civil War history, more particularly, Confederate Virginia, as well as African-American history, and I have taught and published on these subjects. As an African-American born during the 1950s, the Civil War nevertheless became my principal historical interest during my childhood in a Norfolk inner-city housing project, and has remained so for more than forty years. My comments consist of four sections: I. The Past As Prologue, II. Complications; III. Recommendations, and IV. Anticipations.

I. The Past As Prologue

Cultural historians define nostalgia as “a wistful or excessively sentimental, sometimes abnormal yearning for a return to some past period or irrecoverable condition.” Civil War monuments and observances in the South are characterized by some as “neo-Confederate,” and this sentiment exists in Virginia where two of its cities are still known as “the capital of the Confederacy” (Richmond) and the “Last Capital of the Confederacy” (Danville). The Civil War, the war that never ended, has a continuing impact on America’s cultural landscape. Official state publications and events during its Centennial (1960-1965) often excluded or downplayed the end of slavery or United States Colored Troops; black southerners were ignored and relegated to cultural sidelines like undesirable bystanders as white southerners proudly celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of Confederate defeat.

Aware the Confederacy’s cornerstone was slavery and its constitution’s guarantees of “the right of property in negro slaves,” one black historian demanded to know why Confederates were entitled to national admiration for fighting on slavery’s behalf: “To the extent that the war failed to confer complete freedom on the Negro the war was a failure.” These and similar grievances were addressed in April 1998 when James Gilmore became the first Virginia governor to issue a Civil War History Month proclamation acknowledging “slavery as a practice that deprived African-Americans of their God-given inalienable rights, which degraded the human spirit [and] is abhorred and condemned by Virginians.”

II. Complications

On the immediate horizon are at least **four potential problems**. **First**, similar ‘competition’ from the state’s twelve national battlefields (attracting 200,000 visitors yearly) and neighboring ‘northern’ and ex-Confederate states. Of course, select strategic alliances should be considered when possible, and such between the American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar, the Library of Virginia, the Museum of the Confederacy, the Virginia Historical Society and others should not be overlooked but with a caveat: Nationally, museum visitorship is down at places as diverse as the Smithsonian (Washington), Monticello, and the Civil War Library and Museum in Philadelphia because their typical clientele is aging while places such as Disney World and Busch Gardens (Williamsburg)—if you believe their web sites—are experiencing more and younger visitors. There are an estimated 17,500 museums in the United States and “the reality is now . . . is a tough time. Tight state budgets [and] operating costs have exceeded revenue.” A varied network of influences, including acquaintances and the mass media, determine Americans’ leisure and recreational activities.

A **second** and perhaps most troubling problem concerns the specter of race. Since 1861, as far as African-Americans are concerned, the Confederacy is an evil empire, and the Old Dominion’s Massive Resistance era (1956-1970) did not help matters. Most African-Americans consider the Confederacy as racist and displays of Confederate symbols on public property and events paid for with public dollars are offensive to them as taxpayers and citizens. How will the Commission and the Sesquicentennial address these and comparable potential controversies between proponents and opponents? Perhaps soliciting and providing opportunities for participation by African-American universities and organizations is one solution for this issue. One group’s heroes are another’s villains; as examples, consider public disputes throughout the 1990s relating to the Richmond Canal Walk and the Arthur Ashe statue on Monument Avenue. At present, “nearly half of [America’s] children under [the age of] 5 belong to a racial or ethnic minority”; demographic implications for the nation and Virginia are obvious. Unless we rethink how we shape and enshrine our common heritage, expecting African-American support will make our task an unsharpened pencil—pointless.

The **third** possible problem is public indifference to yet another in a series of national anniversaries; I suppose I need not expound on recent examples of civic burnout or that history is about as appealing to many Americans as homework and taxes. A **fourth** problem is the forthcoming First World War centennial (2014-2018). It will overlap part of the Sesquicentennial, and I can envision the federal government’s devoting extensive resources to commemorations that will at the same time reinvigorate homeland patriotism in the Global War on Terrorism as America celebrates its first twentieth-century victory over a foreign foe.

III. Recommendations

How much history is too much? Whose history? Who decides? Few African-Americans visit Colonial Williamsburg (site of a controversial 1994 slave reenactment auction); it and Jamestown, Monticello and other historic sites share an image problem because slavery and other now politically incorrect aspects of the past cannot be presented in warm and fuzzy ways. Historical commemorations, notwithstanding good intentions, are seldom without controversies, and this proved the case earlier this year

during the Jamestown quadricentennial (1607-2007), “America’s 400th Anniversary,” an anniversary accompanied slave apology legislation by the General Assembly which sparked an unsurprisingly heated public debate.

How can the Commission avoid these and analogous problems? I offer **six (6)** recommendations: **1)** Hosting of major events at four ‘regional centers’ having Civil War relevance as tourist and educational hubs: Fredericksburg, site the United States National Slavery Museum; Fort Monroe in Hampton Roads; Richmond, former Confederate capital, and Lexington, in the historic Shenandoah Valley. These offer interstate accessibility, reputable resources in the form of institutions of higher education, and hopefully, adequate parking; **2)** Given its impending closure and hand over to the state, I suggest consideration of Fort Monroe as one of two Sesquicentennial ‘regional headquarters’ (with Richmond as the other for obvious reasons)—it possesses buildings, parking and an adequate infrastructure; **3)** Create activities appealing to retirement communities (“Senior Saturdays”), civic organizations, **4)** Promote custom-designed programs that integrate technology, artifacts and archival resources while consulting similar programs at state museums (usually these comply with the Virginia Standards of Learning/SOLs); **5)** Develop day trip events at venues with reasonably inexpensive fee structures, decent rest stops, parking and restaurants suitable for adults (including DINKs/Dual Incomes No Kids couples) and families (research suggests more often than not school-aged children determine where and how families spend their leisure time), and, **6)** Develop activities offering tangible benefits such as partial or full scholarships for schools and non-profit organizations, and, by way of corporate sponsorships, computers, ‘Virginia vacations,’ ‘Family Fridays,’ ‘History Weekends,’ hotel, shopping and theme park discounts.

One of the primary motivations of tourism is to draw repeat customers. Signature events and activities have the ostensible purpose of attracting residents and tourists but should avoid heavy-handed educationized promotion so as not to deter potential audiences. If discreetly designed such will, hopefully, occur anyway.

IV. Anticipations

Historians know that history makes nations but “a nation in denial cannot exert mature world leadership in shaping the contours of the 21st century.” Our state is rich in history but much of it is painful to many of its citizens. The commonwealth must be more forthright about its paradoxical past of two centuries of slavery followed by a century of racial apartheid, a whitewashed history that’s the same old story that’s not been told because truth always makes someone uncomfortable. History is either a tool or a weapon, a status or a process. An April 1865 Petersburg newspaper declared, “The past must take care of itself.” As a historian, I know we cannot change the past or completely agree on its interpretations. The anticipated work of this Commission represents an opportunity to further these ends. The inclusiveness of this process, the wealth of available human talent here today, is the commonwealth—and America—at its best.

I believe we can evince flexibility and commitment to the highest principles of our diverse commonwealth. The Sesquicentennial, as the story of three Civil War cultures (Union, Confederate, and African-American), is an opportunity to remedy the relationship between Virginians and their history so that they will no longer be adversarial or clouded by cultural amnesia and false memories. There can be no greater

legacy than to leave things better than we found them; Virginia's history is America's story.

THANK YOU

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