

**REMARKS TO THE  
VIRGINIA SESQUICENTENNIAL OF THE  
AMERICAN CIVIL WAR COMMISSION**

**Richmond, Va.  
September 12, 2006**

**By**

**James I. Robertson, Jr.**

It is a distinct honor to be a member of this body. I truly appreciate the invitation to make these opening remarks, just as I look forward proudly to working with each of you in marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War.

How appropriate, and how traditional, it is that we are the nation's first Civil War sesquicentennial commission. After all, Virginia is the Mother State. America began with the Old Dominion. Its sons—Patrick Henry, George Mason, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Marshall—led the new nation forward. No state did more, or contributed more toward the formation of the United States.

Yet only seventy-five years into the national experiment, Virginia found itself literally caught in the middle of an approaching war between North and South. In January, 1861, as one Southern state after another leaving the Union, Illinois Sen. Stephen A. Douglas reassured his countrymen. "All depends on the action of Virginia," Douglas said. "Save Virginia, and we save the Union."

Virginia could not be saved. Decades of attacks from abolitionists, stronger economic ties with Southern states, verbal assaults on state sovereignty in the face of Virginia's deep-rooted belief in self-government, an 1859 terrorist attack at Harpers Ferry, the triumph a year later of a political party seemingly pledged to overturn the Southern way of life, followed by the bombardment of Fort Sumter and Abraham Lincoln's call for troops to coerce the Southern states back into an undesired union—these factors underlay the entire secession movement.

The Old Dominion was the most reluctant state to leave the Union simply because it had been the most prominent state in creating that nation. Like the other ten states that formed a confederacy, Virginia had a secession convention. Unlike those other ten states, Virginia's convention voted down secession, not once but twice. However, Lincoln's mobilization of soldiers to march across Virginia's land proved to be the final straw.

Without Virginia, the Southern Confederacy could not have hoped to win its independence. The Commonwealth had so much prestige that its presence was

considered absolutely essential for Southern success. Start with geography. Virginia was the largest of the seceded states. Its square mileage was equal to that of New England; its counties stretched northwestward to the Ohio River. The shape of the state was like a spear pointing at the heart of the North. On the other hand, Virginia's position made it the most exposed member of the Confederacy.

Virginia was the most populous state in the South, with more white inhabitants, more slaves, and more men of military age than any other Confederate state. Virginia was also the wealthiest Confederate region. Its industrial capacity was greater than that of the seven original Confederate states combined.

A third of all Confederate goods came from Virginia. Twenty percent of the South's railroads snaked through the Old Dominion. During the Civil War, the state's factories would turn out more cotton goods, more woolen goods, more agricultural implements, more military armament, than any other Southern state. Its iron production was three times larger than that of second-place Tennessee. Virginia's lead mines were invaluable, its salt works essential. The state's coal mines kept the Confederate Navy afloat.

Norfolk was the largest seaport in the South. Richmond was the only industrial complex in the entire Confederacy. It was also the capital of a vital state as well as the heart of a nation. The Southern nation lived as long as Richmond breathed. As a result, sixty percent of the hundreds of Civil War battles occurred in this one state.

No other member of the Confederate States of America matched the quality of the Commonwealth's military leadership. One of every four Southern generals was from Virginia. They include Robert E. Lee, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, A. P. Hill, Jeb Stuart, Jubal Early, Turner Ashby, and the Garnett brothers. In number, Virginians dominated the ranks of the South's premier army. Many units in that Army of Northern Virginia—the Stonewall Brigade, Hill's Light Division, the Richmond Howitzers, the Liberty Hall Volunteers—became immortal through service and sacrifice. Even the youthful Corps of Cadets at the Virginia Military Institute had an unforgettable moment in action.

Civil War battlefields are sacred because their soil has been consecrated by the blood of patriots. Look at the number of hallowed fields that stand as humbling monuments: First Manassas, Williamsburg, and Seven Pines ... Winchester, Port Republic, and Cedar Mountain ... Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville ... the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor ... the Crater, Reams' Station, and Hatcher's Run ... Opequon Creek, Fisher's Hill, and Cedar Creek ... Five Forks, Sailor's Creek, and Appomattox ...

They are all here, in our state. The sites annually attract enormous sums of tourists' dollars; but more importantly, those fields are silent reminders of what our ancestors paid to get us where we are today. To ignore that, and them, would be sacrilegious.

Virginia during the Civil War had two other sad distinctions: it had the highest number of prisoner-of-war compounds, and it contained the largest concentration of military hospitals. Three of every five Confederate soldiers who fell injured or sick during the four years of war passed through one of Richmond's twenty-eight hospitals.

The approaching Sesquicentennial offers a splendid opportunity to explore Virginia's home front during the war years. Local history is the seed from which a nation's annals blossom. Every city and county in the Commonwealth could be asked to search anew for letters, diaries, and other writings. A major boon to history and historians would result if every community would transcribe and annotate the 1860 census returns for its area. Col. Edwin Dooley, now retired from the Virginia Military Institute, did such a compilation for Rockbridge County. It is an historical goldmine for data on those living in the upper end of the Shenandoah Valley at the time of civil war.

I earnestly hope that we will be a hands-on commission in encouraging local participation by sesquicentennial committees.

During 1861-1865, Virginia suffered more damage than any comparable area of the Western Hemisphere has ever known. Over 800 businesses and homes in Richmond went up in flames during a two-day period; Norfolk and Petersburg were reduced to shells; every town of note from Danville and Lexington to Winchester and Alexandria felt the destructive hand of war.

It was here in Virginia that the real Civil War began. It was here in Virginia that the real Civil War ended. Manassas was the fire-bell; Appomattox, the death-knoll. By Easter Sunday, April 15, 1865, the proud Old Dominion lay in ruins: so many of its sons dead or crippled, its society shattered, its economy non-existent, its hopes destroyed.

That the Commonwealth rose slowly but proudly from the ashes is its greatest triumph. Today, sprinkled across our state, are statues, monuments, roadside markers, museums, and several national cemeteries. They all stand as silent sentries to those who loved their country more than they loved life itself.

We must remember, because we cannot forget. And we must remember with a deep sense of reverence. The Sesquicentennial should not be an occasion to re-fight battles, second-guess generals, reopen wounds, or argue anew over principles long resolved by time and events. Nor is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War an occasion for celebration. Rather, it is the opportunity for commemoration: a solemn reflection of what two generations of Americans bequeathed to us through their suffering.

On the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, one of the most distinguished British historians of that era commented: "Far and wide between the mountains and the sea stretches the fair land of Virginia, for which Lee and Jackson and their soldiers, one equal temper of heroic hearts, fought so well and unavailingly. Yet Virginia's brows are bound with glory, the legacy of her lost children; and her spotless name, uplifted by their victories and manhood, is high among the nations. Surely [Virginia] must rest content, knowing that

so long as men turn to the records of history will their deeds live, giving to all time one of the noblest examples of unyielding courage and devotion the world has ever seen.”

Let us as a commission go forth to do our work, and let us do it comprehensively, honestly, and fairly. The high reputation of the Commonwealth, and the ultimate judgment of history, depends on it.