

McDonnell offers regrets on Confederate message



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Gov. Bob McDonnell will issue a "Civil War in Virginia" message next April, rather than a Confederate history proclamation.

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Published: September 25, 2010

Gov. Bob McDonnell said yesterday that the omission of slavery in his Confederate History Month proclamation "was an error of haste and not of heart."

He also announced that next year's proclamation will be called "Civil War in Virginia" to mark the beginning of the war's hostilities in Virginia, and "will be written for all Virginians."

"My major and unacceptable omission of slavery disappointed and hurt a lot of people, myself included," McDonnell said at Norfolk State University, at a conference of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission.

"Young people make mistakes, and I suppose sometimes young administrations do as well. Ours was an error of haste and not of heart. And it is an error that will be fixed."

The reflections came amid welcoming remarks he delivered at the conference titled "Race, Slavery and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory" in the university's L. Douglas Wilder Performing Arts Center.

McDonnell sought to atone for one of the most damaging missteps of his administration, one that harmed relationships with civil-rights groups at home and briefly dominated the political conversation nationally.

In April, McDonnell issued a "Confederate History Month" decree -- at the request of the Sons of Confederate Veterans -- without any mention of slavery. It triggered an onslaught of criticism, including from President Barack Obama, who said McDonnell made "an unacceptable omission."

McDonnell said the original proclamation was meant to promote education and tourism. He apologized for the omission and amended the proclamation to include a condemnation of "the evil and inhumane practice."

Attendees said the speech was generally well-received.

"You knew it was going to be brought up," said Kathy Connolly, a self-described Civil War buff from Virginia Beach. "It's a very difficult situation for him."

She said it was something McDonnell had to do, "and he did it well."

To George Lindsay of Portsmouth, it felt more like "an afterthought."

"I don't know how sincere he was," he said.

Next April, the governor plans to take a similar approach to that of former Gov. Jim Gilmore, a fellow Republican. Gilmore issued a proclamation called "In Remembrance of the Sacrifices and Honor of All Virginians Who Served in the Civil War" commemorating the valor of black and white Virginians who fought for either the North or South.

Gilmore -- whose predecessor as governor, Republican George Allen, caught flak for his "Confederate History and Heritage Month" proclamation -- settled on his approach after the state NAACP threatened to boycott Virginia's tourist attractions.

The past two governors, both Democrats, refused to issue a proclamation to designate Confederate History Month.

McDonnell said his more inclusive version "will encapsulate all of our history." He said "It will remember all Virginians -- free and enslaved; Union and Confederate. It will be written for all Virginians."

He added that "150 years is long enough for Virginia to fight the Civil War."