

The better way to view history

[By John Long](#)

I spent last Saturday immersed in Civil War history, and enjoyed every minute of it.

The occasion was the third Signature Conference for the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the Civil War Commission. That's a mouthful, but the gist is that major universities around the state are hosting annual thematic conferences to explore Civil War history from an academic standpoint. Previous conferences highlighted America on the eve of the war and the roles of race and slavery in the conflict. This particular event was held at Virginia Tech and dealt with military strategy in the war. I'm hardly what you'd call a diehard Civil War buff; more of a passing student. But I found it an enlightening weekend.

The conference was chaired by the legendary James I. "Bud" Robertson, the face and voice of Civil War history for our generation. As a young academic, he was tapped to work on the centennial observances of the war in 1961. Fifty years later, on the eve of his retirement, he's been an indispensable part of planning Virginia's 150th commemoration. The thousand or so in attendance gave him, I believe, three standing ovations through the day.

The panelists for the day formed a veritable Who's Who of Civil War scholarship. Topics ranged from the effect that John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry played in Virginia's secession movement to the interpersonal squabbles between Jefferson Davis and Gen. Joseph Johnston.

My favorite session took a different spin, though. Leaving aside the overall strategic picture, the last three scholars presented interesting overviews of "Forgotten Elements of the Civil War." Veterinarian Dr. John Bowen discussed the overlooked role of horses in the war. Did you know the first casualty of the war was a horse at Fort Sumter and that more than a million and a half of his four-legged relatives perished in the war? Largely a forgotten story, yet neither army would have gone very far without their equine compatriots.

Then William "Jack" Davis gave an absorbing lecture on the role weather played in the war -- historians seldom mention weather, but soldiers of the day were obsessed by it. Finally, the inestimable Robertson himself closed us out with a discussion of the overlooked role of water on the war -- as transport, as strategic objectives and the simple but daunting daily challenge of finding safe drinking water.

I relay all of this not to summarize the conference, but to give a solid example of how Civil War history ought to be done. All too often, memory of and discussion about this crucial event are dominated by two opposing camps. One side will brook no criticism of the Confederacy at all, the other contends no good must ever be said of it. And the primary element in this divide is clear: slavery. One side contends that slavery had

virtually nothing to do with the war, and that it only appears so because the victors write the history books. To the other side slavery was the only issue at play and even to question this premise smacks of racism.

Contemporary politics drives the discussion -- recent commentaries on this page dealing with the war show how polarizing this issue can become. The past is never dead, said Faulkner -- it's not even past. Faulkner was a Southerner, in case you couldn't guess.

I've always tried to steer a middle ground. To deny the role of slavery in the secession movement is to ignore a lot of history. A lot. But to say that slavery alone explains absolutely everything about the war oversimplifies the depth of feeling that drove men on both sides to leave hearth and home and enlist, whether or not they'd ever given slavery a second thought.

At the Tech conference last weekend slavery was only mentioned peripherally, but none of the presenters could be classed an unflinching apologist for the Old South. Nor did any feel the need reflexively to denigrate the Confederacy. They considered the war factually and dispassionately. Scholars like Bud Robertson can find admirable traits to commend in men like Lee and Jackson -- he's been a biographer of both -- without embracing the cause they served. Perhaps neither of the extreme factions will be content in the end, but there's no arguing with such a scholar's career.

History is -- well, it's history: facts about the past filtered through the interpretation of the historian. It can be done well or done poorly. I'm glad Virginia is taking the opportunity of the Civil War's sesquicentennial to present history done well.