

THOUGHTS ON THE CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL COMMEMORATION

During the meetings of the Commission, we have properly spent considerable time on various tangible elements designed to help form the foundation of the Commission's purposes.

We have considered such activities and projects as rest stop displays, a traveling presentation to bring the commemoration to all corners of the Commonwealth, and a unique form of literary treasure hunt to inspire our citizens to unlock their attics, trunks, and family archives so we might gather for our heritage heretofore unknown written or transcribed documents and place them in safe, accessible repositories. Such documents would immeasurably add to our knowledge of Virginia's Civil War from the words of the participants who lived through that era.

The proposed activities and the demands on the Commission will lead to the most ambitious of historical commemorations in Virginia history. We will promote the imperative of tourism, highlight Virginia's extraordinary historical and cultural assets, and embrace the diverse resources of our museums, higher education institutions, and private archives. We will experience the incomparable historical wealth of Virginia's battlefields across the Commonwealth, many of which suffer threats from new development. We will hold out to our public tremendous opportunities in which to participate and support the activities the Commission is charged with promoting. These are the "things" that take high places in the Commission's purview.

Yet, in undertaking the Sesquicentennial Commemoration, the Commission offers much more. It presents an occasion to confront a significant set of challenges that must not only occupy our focus on such tangibles as battlefields, artifacts, and reenactments, but must also endeavor to join the past and the future of the Commonwealth's relationship with the disparate aspects of the Civil War in Virginia. Indeed, as Virginia has held much of America's high ground in representing the birthplace and the aftermath of our national struggle from 1861 to 1865, the American Civil War has continued to challenge the American people in many ways, historically, spiritually, and culturally. In doing so, this terrible conflict has spawned a wide-reaching legacy that today still divides us and makes demands upon

our country. We have yet to understand fully the powerful strains that reverberate, even now, through our continuing relationship with the Civil War and the great upheaval that it has caused unto this day and which continues to force us to reconcile ourselves to our history, whether uplifting or mean, as we seek to tie the past to our future.

The recent “apology” of the Virginia General Assembly, followed by other states with a relation to Virginia’s long history of slavery, is just one of the many threads of our past that we continue to ponder, study, and explain.

In Virginia the past is never past even as we continue to seek to refine it. There are many threads in the various relationships connecting us to our Civil War past with the intriguing and sometimes inscrutable elements that the Civil War created, and which in many forms we continue to create. These threads wind from the Revolution of 1776 to the fundamental elements of our Civil War history still not yet fully concluded. The American Civil War was about unfinished business, and in many respects it remains unfinished.

Now, the great challenges and demands that the Commission must confront, give us a tremendous opportunity to bring together a set of principles, understandings, perspectives and purposes for this Commission to embrace and thus truly create an opportunity in which past and future can co-exist, notwithstanding the interpretations that will continue to differ.

The Commission’s work is extraordinarily broad. The Advisory Committee and the Executive Committee are mindful of the fact that in many respects the history of the Civil War in Virginia is seen through many different eyes. Some look back in anger. Others look ahead to a higher purpose that this history engages in goals of great dimensions, given the almost three centuries of nurtured sentiments that continue to shape our spiritual and political relationships across the Commonwealth and indeed across the nation. Fault lines still run deep in many places and in many hearts, as Virginia continues to reckon with its growing and widening diversity.

In portraying to the world our sense of the great upheaval that punished our land through the four years of war and afterward, which obliged us to help future generations understand the tremendous forces that tore the fabric of American society and continue to leave legacies that are still not reconciled with the Commonwealth’s long and often painful history. This history

played such a major role in portraying what ultimately brought about the Civil War, much of it tied directly and massively to the role of slavery. The enormous role of slavery in the making of the Civil War split the nation in two, and in doing so, ironically brought together new viewpoints and thoughts that still guide, challenge, and indeed confront us today and down the years. On both sides, Americans reaped a whirlwind and needed to calm the furies, and build upon what Lincoln called, a “new birth of freedom dedicated to the proposition that all men are equal.”

Yet we cannot condemn the leaders of the old Virginia to have been ruthlessly unprincipled in how they made choices that drove us to war for fear that everything they held dear was fast slipping away, leading to dreadful consequences. Actually, the people of the Southern mid-19th century were drenched in principle to the point of going to war to hold onto the past no matter how much it would cost in treasure, lives, and in the decades following the war our ability to continue to stir resentments as would any outcome defined by defeat. Many in the South still look back on what we lost, rather than looking forward to what it we might gain. The forgetting has not dissipated in many minds.

Undertaking the commemoration of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War will help us come to grips with the enormity of the understandings, emotions, perspectives and purposes that surround our relationship to the war and its results, and which still divide us in many ways. We must knit together a more forgiving social framework that will better define our history and our future, and break bonds that have held us back for so many generations. Now, at this time, with the Commission as Virginia’s focal point to help guide and better understand our historical relationships in a positive way, we can begin the process of recognizing the power of this war to touch all Americans as it created such an extraordinarily painful social upheaval. From its birth in the cradle of the American Revolution to the Civil War years that bloodied the land in terrible ways, the end of this conflict has allowed us, not without toil and tears, to take new paths to the inevitable acknowledgement of civil rights here where this war began and where it ended, thus continuing to reshape and increasingly renew the American experience upright.

Yet, we are not through in grasping the meaning of this Commemoration. Though the guns have fallen silent after 146 years, the Civil War to this day, continues to make a deep, often boisterous impression on American society.

The conflicts still stir. For many the past is never past. Grudges of generations have not by any means truly dissipated. For generations, the war has continued to mold Americans' relationships to their neighbors, their government and their sense of the nation's future and of themselves. How much have we lost to the divisions of color and status! The experience of the Civil War manifests itself daily. And yet, despite the best intentions of our educational systems, we have yet fully to appreciate the importance of this conflict in the future of our nation and our expectations of it.

The advisory and executive committees have done important service to begin to articulate truly the foundations of this enormous enterprise. It is in our hands and those of our citizens and fellow-travelers to seek new high ground from which to ensure that the enormous intricacies of the war's outcomes and meanings will foster the strongest sense of a Virginia that understands the past and forges stronger bonds among Virginians in the future.

As we prepare for the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, we must ensure that when the official commemoration comes to its official end, we will have left behind a legacy that will preserve the intellectual underpinnings of the commemoration, and demonstrate that we can live together. We must strive to instill new interpretations that this war created and which will continue to influence America's course, shaping the thoughts and actions that will help guide this nation to its best and enduring result.