

Seeking racial unity over slavery silence, McDonnell turns 'Confederate History Month' into 'Civil War in Virginia' remembrance



(AP)

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NORFOLK - Virginia Gov. Robert F. McDonnell announced Friday that he will declare next April "Civil War in Virginia" month, rather than "Confederate History Month," as he once again expressed regret for [a proclamation earlier this year](#) that omitted a reference to slavery's role in the war.

Speaking at a scholarly conference on slavery and race held at Norfolk State University, McDonnell called on Virginians to remember the war with a solemn spirit of racial unity.

He called April's proclamation an "error of haste and not of heart," a misstep by an administration only a few months in office.

"My major and unacceptable omission of slavery disappointed and hurt a lot of people - myself included," he said. "And it is an error that will be fixed."

McDonnell drew national criticism when, shortly after taking office, he issued the proclamation at the request of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

Even President Obama weighed in, chiding McDonnell for failing to mention the role slavery played in the state that was the capital of the Confederacy.

Within days, McDonnell apologized and [reissued the proclamation](#) with a new reference to the "abomination" of slavery.

For McDonnell, Friday's speech on race relations afforded an opportunity to try to reverse the political damage of his Confederate proclamation, but on his own terms and not as a reaction to April's media frenzy.

It could also help reestablish his reputation as a conservative who can speak to moderates, a key strategy of his 2009 campaign that took a beating during the Confederate episode.

In welcoming remarks at Friday's conference, part of Virginia's commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, McDonnell promised that next year he will issue a proclamation that acknowledges the broad sweep of the war in Virginia. He said it will be written to remember "all Virginians" - free and enslaved, and those who fought for both sides.

"One hundred and fifty years is long enough for Virginia to fight the Civil War," he said, drawing laughs and then appreciative applause from the 1,600 attendees of the seminar, titled "Race, Slavery and Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory."

An inclusive gubernatorial proclamation will ensure that "people across the world will understand that Virginia has the capacity to grow and to change and to acknowledge truth," said state Sen. Yvonne B. Miller (D-Norfolk), a member of Virginia's legislative black caucus.

McDonnell is not the first governor to stumble over the sensitivities of observing the Civil War in a state with a history of difficult racial relations. Gov. George Allen (R) sparked a similar outcry in 1997 when he issued a proclamation calling the Civil War "a four-year struggle for [Southern] independence and sovereign rights" and made no mention of slavery.

In 1998, Gov. James S. Gilmore (R) rewrote the document, adding anti-slavery language. Later, he designated April as "Virginia's Month for Remembrance of the Sacrifices and Honor of All Virginians Who Served in the Civil War."

Govs. Mark Warner and Timothy M. Kaine, both Democrats, issued no April proclamation. In 2002, Warner had declared that the exercise damaged efforts to bridge the racial divide.

Over the past five months, McDonnell has worked to repair the political damage caused by his misstep. He has held meetings with civil rights leaders and contributed \$10,000 from his inaugural fund to a civil rights museum.

Last week, he unveiled a portrait at the state Capitol of Barbara Johns, who in 1951 - when she was 16 - helped lead a walkout at her all-black school to protest poor conditions at segregated schools.

For months, McDonnell and his staff have seen Friday's conference, one of a series of annual scholarly summits on the Civil War that the state will hold through 2015, as a chance to reset the tone for [Virginia's observance of the sesquicentennial](#) of the Civil War.

"A modern Virginia has emerged from her past, strong, vibrant and diverse," he said. "Now a modern Virginia will take four years and remember that past with candor, with courage and with conciliation."

He called slavery an "evil and inhumane practice" but acknowledged that Virginia struggled to afford all its citizens equality long after slavery's abolition. He also praised the state's progress, including making L. Douglas Wilder (D) the nation's first elected black governor in 1989.

"It was great - he was knowledgeable of African American history and culture," said Rickey Willis, a Portsmouth resident who attended the conference. "There are 8 million people in Virginia. African American culture played a valuable role."

Wilder, who is close with McDonnell but had been highly critical of his Confederate proclamation, said the governor called him Friday morning to discuss the remarks, which Wilder described as "very impressive."

"The governor recognizes that we must observe real history, not revisionist history," Wilder said.

McDonnell's announcement Friday drew sharp words, however, from Brag Bowling, the former commander of the Virginia division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

"I think it's cowardly of him," Bowling said. "He didn't have the intestinal fortitude to stand up to his political enemies or the media."

Bowling accused McDonnell of selling out Virginia's Confederate descendants to make himself more palatable for a possible run for national office. "Our organization, to a man, will be opposed to this. There will be a lot of political fallout for doing this," Bowling said.

Sam Mosley, who came to the Norfolk conference from Lynchburg, where his wife serves on the board of an African American history museum, said McDonnell helped heal deep wounds with his statement. He urged McDonnell to make racial reconciliation a theme of his term.

"If he really means this, if he can sell it and if he can promote it, I believe we'll be a lot farther ahead," he said.