

VMI Two Years After Ralph Northam's October 17, 2020 Letter

The Roanoke Star-News

For those who've forgotten when Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its "close cousin," Diversity-Inclusion-Equity (DIE) were still relatively unknown, it was early 2019 when Virginia's previous governor, Ralph Northam, came within a political heartbeat of being forced from office when his blackface scandal hit the papers. As a younger man, the former Virginia Military Institute (VMI) Honor Court President had participated in blackface buffoonery. When the news broke, had Northam acknowledged his insensitive behavior from decades earlier – which he appeared to do briefly – and made clear he had matured since then, the trouble might have passed. But, instead, Northam reversed his original explanation, making things worse. By the beginning of February, there were Democrats calling for a Democratic governor to resign. Not an everyday occurrence.

Two scenarios are likely. Either Northam self-initiated a rebranding of his persona, one that perceived white men to be inherently racist and oppressors, and he adopted the divisive CRT-DIE agenda that Virginians and citizens elsewhere have observed in recent years; or, he was instructed by Virginia Democrats that if he wanted to keep his job he must adopt their similar program. Perhaps elements of both occurred. In any case, Northam weathered the storm. In June 2019, however, even the *Washington Post* acknowledged, "Northam still can't explain the photo."

No matter. Northam was busy building his bona fides on race. In September 2019, the now-resurgent governor established the first State cabinet-level position in the nation devoted to diversity, hiring one who was described by a friendly outlet to be

“working furiously to interrupt” so-called “structural racism” – a favored, deceptive phrase of those who, in reality, are committed to exacerbating if not creating divisions within society for their own advancement (amply demonstrated by the plush homes of Black Lives Matter Global Foundation leaders). In essence, the schisms of an earlier age based upon economic class have been replaced with color. At the same time, the phrase, “systemic racism,” used synonymously with structural racism – which has to do with racism embedded or enculturated in a system, structure, or institution – was *perverted*, or inverted, to mean “historic” or “occasional” racism. In some cases, a single racist act could be falsely labeled “systemic racism,” as VMI has witnessed. But at the time, few noticed such abuse of the English language. The cultural dividers – following the philosophy of twentieth-century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci – however, understand that he who controls the language controls the culture.

That was the post-blackface lead-in to 2020. That year, the tragic death of George Floyd facilitated BLM-stoked, nationwide turmoil marked by lawlessness, violence, and at least 30 fatalities, 1,500 law enforcement officer injuries, and \$2 billion of destruction. As some have observed, the thin veneer of civilization was revealed to be at grave risk. At the same time, several VMI alumni-initiated attacks against their alma mater, claiming that a culture of structural or systemic racism existed there. Unwittingly, the attacks fit neatly with the efforts of those inciting the riots and vandalism. Monuments were coming down and the virtue-signaling VMI alumni called for the statue honoring the God-fearing and militarily unsurpassed Stonewall Jackson to be brought down as well. In their universe of unreality, not even Jackson passed The Purity Test. The same critics found a friendly reception with some news outlets, particularly the *WaPo*. (Eminent conservative economist Walter E. Williams offered a corrective to their charges in his column, “Historical ignorance and Confederate generals,” *Anniston Star News*, July 23, 2020. In another column, published November 5, 2020, he wrote, “Many Black problems are exacerbated by guilt-ridden white people.”)

Over the summer of 2020, VMI's highly respected superintendent, General J.H. Binford Peay III, took steps to address alumni concerns, to include broadening the aperture of attention granted to VMI's nineteenth-century legacy to directing the implementation of a new, required American civics course as well as other courses in African, African American, and ethnic studies. Those were logical reforms, scheduled for early implementation. They were also totally unacceptable to those who, like Mao's revolutionaries of the mid-late 1960s, were devoted to destroying those cultural pillars considered "old" – including laws, customs, and traditions.

Peay's measures also were totally unacceptable to Governor Northam who, on October 19, 2020, signed one of the more irresponsible letters from a State chief executive in years, at the same time directing an investigation of racism at VMI. Because the letter's specifics have been dealt with previously, I'll address only one unsubstantiated charge here, concerning "horrifying new revelations of threats [plural] about lynching. . . ." This was Northam's main accusation, in which he appeared to draw from Ian Shapira's *Washington Post* article published two days earlier. Shapira's incessant attacks upon VMI since 2020 have revealed much more about himself than about the matters he purports to cover. In any case, my own data search on the lynching topic revealed not a series of incidents, nor even more than one incident.

There was, however, a single instance – which was one too many. I've dealt with this elsewhere ("Was There a Real Lynching Threat at VMI?" *The Abbeville Institute*, Jan. 3, 2022), but suffice to say that the incident, in August 2018, was one in which both parties, the upper-class cadet and the Rat, were at fault. The VMI 3rd classman, who was attempting to implement "cadre" training of the Rats during their first week at VMI, grew frustrated with a recalcitrant Rat. As I wrote, his "choice of the word 'lynch' was a poor one. It was also about the furthest thing imaginable from a legitimate threat of any sort." It was, in VMI terms, a "pop off" error in judgment during a stressful moment. Every former VMI cadre corporal recalls some similar moment. Moreover, when a VMI official spoke with me about my assessment of the

incident, he did not dispute my analysis but wanted VMI to move on to more pressing concerns.

When viewed together, two developments, 1), Northam's response to his personal political crisis – creating in record time a powerful, unprecedented, new cabinet position and hiring a diversity czar to implement a divisive agenda, then attacking his alma mater with unsubstantiated charges; and, 2), the craven behavior of VMI's Board of Visitors (BoV) in response to the gross accusations, sadly, harkens of what Alexander Solzhenitsyn alluded to at Harvard University in 1978. The renowned Soviet dissident and writer who earned the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970 told the Harvard commencement audience:

A decline in courage may be the most striking feature which an outside observer notices in the West in our days. The Western world has lost its civil courage, both as a whole and separately, in each country, each government, each political party, and, of course, in the United Nations. Such a decline in courage is particularly noticeable among the ruling groups and the intellectual elite. . . . Of course, there are many courageous individuals, but they have no determining influence on public life.

A little “civil courage,” as Solzhenitsyn called it – on Governor Northam’s part, manfully confessing his past wrongdoing and without equivocation or a changing story; or, on the BoV’s part, defending the school from unsupported accusations and demanding evidence before taking strong action – could have made a big difference.

I hold no animus toward Ralph Northam. We served together on the VMI Honor Court of 1979-80. It was a busy year for honor violations, and no less than ten cases went to trial, including one just before graduation. In every case, the only question concerned the evidence for whether the accused cadet had actually done what he was charged with doing. What I do have animus toward, however, is one using his former position on the Honor Court to gain favor with a constituency – and then acting in a manner that runs counter to the principles of personal honor taught at VMI. This

very thing Ralph Northam did with his letter to VMI. Further, it was printed on the governor's "Commonwealth of Virginia" stationery, and it highlighted his status on the signature block as "Former President of VMI Honor Court." Most important, his charges were false; in VMI terms, it was a "False Official Statement." VMI graduates know the gravity of those three words.

It was noteworthy that, in June 2021 when the DIE-touting Barnes and Thornburg firm released its report of the Northam-directed investigation of VMI, no part of Northam's "culture of ongoing structural racism" and his other accusations were substantiated. Not one. Rather, the report's major complaint concerned the *inequality of the numbers* of black and white cadets in several key categories, including Honor Court dismissals. Prolific author and conservative economics professor Thomas Sowell has long pointed out that "many inequalities of result are due to inequalities of causes." Sowell also observes that sameness of outcome – the purported intent of the so-called "equity" in the DIE mantra – runs contrary to human experience; and that only one with a view of the cosmos could possibly achieve it, were it deemed desirable to do so. Further, in the February 27, 2022, issue of *Virginia Business*, the new VMI superintendent, Maj. Gen. Cedric Wins, was quoted, ". . . that charges of 'institutional racism' at VMI are not supported by the facts." His statement was in view of the fact that individual or *occasional* cases of racism have occurred at VMI – as they will, not only at VMI but at every other school, office, city, hamlet, palace or hovel in a fallen world where all have sinned. The superintendent's communications office confirmed to me the accuracy of Wins's quote and its proper context.

Space permits mentioning only three harmful consequences unleashed by the combination of Northam's letter, the compromised racism investigation, and the VMI BoV/superintendent's implementation of increasingly divisive, anti-meritocratic measures:

- Commemorations/Memorials actions:

-In December 2020, in response to a vote by the BoV, Jackson's statue was removed from its place in front of VMI's Old Barracks;

-In May 2021, the BoV voted to remove the name of "Stonewall Jackson" from the Old Barracks arch and the memorial hall that bore his name;

Various other items on VMI's post have undergone or are planned for "Contextualizing information."

The underlying assumption is that the current generation, including VMI officials, are the Morally Pure ones, in contrast to those misguided beings who preceded them. Does a more arrogant and historically uninformed position exist? They have placed themselves squarely in the ideological camp of French revolutionaries in Robespierre's day and Maoist revolutionaries of the 1960s. As Israel's David wrote, ". . . in Thy sight no man living is righteous."

- DIE-related "training" and cadet activities:

-VMI now conducts DIE-based classroom exercises focused on color, economic background, and other distinctions having nothing to do with a cadet's character. The school's leadership emphasizes that the cadets are not required to "participate" in these exercises, but merely to attend them. Some exercises – amazingly – are not unlike those from Maoist China, which I've previously addressed ("Kissing Cousins: China's Maoists, Virginia's Racists," *Roanoke Star-Sentinel*, June 29, 2022).

But what is the point of attending these exercises, other than to ensure cadets observe and internalize the contrived things that divide them from their fellow cadets – especially from their own Brother Rats. The concept behind the training runs 100% contrary to the Ratline's purpose, which is intended to break down the *initial* divisions and distinctions that must always exist when individuals come to a new school (or any institution) from distant and varied backgrounds and then build them up together. The exercises – whether cadets participate in them or not –

do, by their nature, tend toward the destruction of the brotherhood-sisterhood attachments of those who have shared the same difficult, bonding experience in their first year at VMI.

-This also runs absolutely counter to the Superintendent's "One Corps – One VMI: A Unifying Action Plan." Instead of unifying, it's divisive.

VMI is promoting the strife that comes from presuming all white cadets bear guilt because of their color, and that they need to confess or "reckon" with something from generations before they were born – a deceptive, despicable lie. The Proverbs writer says: "Through presumption comes nothing but strife. . ." If one intended to undermine VMI's unique system built upon the foundation of a Ratline that doesn't care "who your daddy or your mommy is" – or what color they are – what might one do differently than what is currently being implemented?

- Fostering disunity among alumni and besmirching their reputation:

-By allowing unsupported charges of a culture of lynching threats, racism, sexism, and other -isms at VMI to go unchallenged for two years, the adage "silence is consent" applies. To some degree, every VMI graduate has had his or her character and reputation called into question. It may be just a little. But because of the VMI leadership's lack of "civil courage" in defending their school, it is not zero.

It's noteworthy that two recent gatherings of VMI alumni have offered a view of VMI quite at odds with the Northam/CRT-DIE perspective. In April 2019, the first black cadets to attend VMI in 1968 returned as guests of the Class of 1969 to share their experiences on racial integration at the school. Of the five black cadets who matriculated in August 1968, the four still living participated in a panel discussion. Three of the four recalled that VMI's racial integration was "uneventful" or a non-event. Harry Gore, Jr., who went on to a successful U.S. Air Force career as a pilot, recalled, "They treated us the first year equally badly. And I say that in a good way. . . There was no white and black. We were just RATS going through the same

thing.” Another of the five, Dick Valentine, who graduated from VMI with an electrical engineering degree, remembered integration as a non-issue. The hard part was being a Rat. Adam Randolph acknowledged he and the other black cadets were not thinking “we were breaking color lines. . . . We were just kids going to college.” Although Randolph decided to leave VMI after his second year, even he could say, “VMI’s a great school – it’s just not for everybody.”

Phil Wilkerson, a cadet company commander in his senior year, later became the first black VMI graduate to attain the rank of colonel in the U.S. Army. He remembered the tradition of cadets saluting General Lee when they marched past the nearby Lee Chapel. “Did I like it? No. But there were more pros than cons at VMI, many more. . . . VMI, in many ways, shaped the person I became.” For generations, most VMI alumni could say the same.

The first women cadets entered VMI in 1997. Last month, VMI hosted a celebratory event, “25 years of women at VMI,” welcoming some two hundred alumnae and families for the weekend gathering. Much like the experiences of most black VMI graduates, most of the alumnae actually are grateful to VMI for what it did for them. A number of the women shared, as the VMI Alumni Agencies reported, “The transition from higher education to the workplace was easier for them than for others . . . because they’d already learned that being in new and uncomfortable situations is often necessary for growth.” Not a bad assessment for a school that’s been incessantly attacked as a racist, sexist, all-around-terrible-place.

Two years after Northam’s false official statement, the damage from his unsupported claims, especially his outrageous “threats about lynching” – as though it was part of VMI’s culture – has been incalculable. The accusations have been used to help justify the fundamental changes now in place at a longstanding, once meritocratic and unique institution of wide renown. I venture to say that a significant number of VMI alumni – many of whom have held deep affection for their school, at least after they had put VMI in their rear-view mirror – find themselves identifying with one

Class of 1973 alumnus. As he wrote in mid-2021, “. . . my wife and I moved in retirement to Crozet, which is right at an hour from Lexington. One of my reasons for settling in Crozet was to be able to make the trek to Lexington easily and often. I am rapidly seeing that I may not ever want to do that again.”

Sadly, unnecessarily – due to the failed, craven leadership of Ralph Northam and VMI itself – he is not alone.

During Finals week in 1848, each of the Institute’s 24 graduates received a class ring. It was the first year for a VMI class ring. The class chose one word, “Mizpah” in Hebrew – from the Book of Genesis – to be inscribed in Old English script on the ring’s face. Translated, it means, “May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other.” From VMI’s early years, it was a tangible sign of the brotherhood that traditionally existed among Brother Rats, which was extended to all graduates. It is that traditional, coveted VMI bond that the last two years of divisive, CRT-DIE-based ideology threatens to destroy.

Respectfully Submitted,

Forrest L. Marion, VMI 1980

Carmen D. Villani, Jr., VMI 1976

Henry J. Rogers, VMI 1979