Richmond News, Crime & Politics

Times-Dispatch editorial expresses regret for Massive Resistance

Posted: Thursday, July 16, 2009 6:01 am

Sometimes the era seems ancient; sometimes it resembles yesterday. Fifty years ago Virginia had a rendezvous with destiny and came up wanting. It scorned human rights and the promise of the Declaration of Independence and instead took a course known as Massive Resistance. Tomorrow at the Capitol, the University of Virginia's Center for Politics will convene a conference on the chapter and its legacy.

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Throughout the episode, Richmond Newspapers played a central role -- but not a centering one. The hour was ignoble. Editorials in The News Leader relentlessly championed Massive Resistance and the dubious constitutional arguments justifying its unworthy cause. Although not so intimately engaged,

The Times-Dispatch was complicit. The record fills us with regret, which we have expressed before.

Massive Resistance inflicted pain then. Memories remain painful. Editorial enthusiasm for a dreadful doctrine still affects attitudes toward the newspaper. Many remember. We understand. Words have consequences. Artful paragraphs promoted ugly things. Stylish sentences salted wounds. Euphemism was profligate. As members of the Fourth Estate these pages did not keep a proper distance, either. The debate is over. It is done.

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Virginia long has prided itself on its gentility. The state's political tradition has lacked firebrands such as Gene Talmadge, Orval Faubus, George Wallace, Bull Connor, Theodore Bilbo, and James K. Vardaman. Massive Resistance shattered pretensions. Although the commonwealth's campaign to evade Brown v. Board of Education did not produce the pyrotechnics seen in other states, it was directed toward the same dead end. Pride, humanity learns ever again, is not a virtue but a sin. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Hubris prevailed. Those who railed against oppressions visited upon sovereign states by an allegedly imperial Washington relied on government's coercive might to deny the full humanity of their fellow citizens. Massive Resistance was neither a departure nor an exception but the extension of Jim Crow and the attitudes informing it. Segregation and its associated indignities were in retreat. Massive Resistance formed a last stand.

"Empathy" has been politicized and in some circles invites derision. Yet, properly understood, empathy leads away from hatred and cruelty and opens hearts to the loving-kindness men and women are intended to magnify. "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master," Abraham Lincoln said. Many simply could not see the harm they did to so many others. Jefferson trembled for his country when he reflected that God is just.

Yesteryear's words cannot be revoked. They endure on newsprint yellow and brittle, on microfilm, and in the computer files into which they have been translated. They belong to history, and history lives. It is well and good that the words be remembered, as a warning perhaps best. We will not forget.

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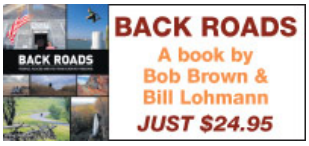

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