Regret, Reconcile, Reach for Racial Equity

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In addition to many articles by reporters, *The Washington Post* published diverse guest commentary on the topics of blackface use then and now, racial heritage and stereotypes, cultural appropriation and exploration of positive next steps.

Yearbooks and student media of the past played a key role in documenting the use of blackface and other expressions of white supremacy in photographs, literary expression, cartoons and journalistic coverage. To what extent do student publications reflect the values of a community? The decisions made by today’s student media about coverage are at the core of the “What To Do?” activity.

In this resource guide teachers will find commentary from Post columnist Courtland Milloy, Maryland former U.S. Representative Donna F. Edwards, and former director of the FBI and a former deputy attorney general James Comey. They offer perspectives and background to encourage discussion of the issue and next steps.

Beyond regret and reconciliation, the greater quest is how far we will extend our reach for racial equity.
Virginians try to find ‘lesser of three evils’ as state reckons with racist past

BY STEVE HENDRIX

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PETERSBURG, Va. — Brent Phillips, a white bartender in this historically black city, spent part of a Friday happy hour working a mental abacus to decide who would — or should — be running the commonwealth where he has lived his whole life.

“Let’s see, you’ve got the governor with the blackface, he should probably just resign now,” Phillips said, counting on his fingers at the patio bar of DJ’s Rajun Cajun, a light-strung Mardi Gras outpost in this dilapidated, antebellum outpost on the Appomattox River.

“But then you have the lieutenant governor with the sexual [assault accusation] and then the attorney general with his blackface story.” Phillips, 30, trailed off, shook his head and reached for a soothing rum punch.

“You shouldn’t have to make these calculations,” he said. “In Virginia, you shouldn’t have to choose the lesser of three evils.”

It was the kind of head-scratching, finger-ticking recalculation that Virginians across the commonwealth are doing as serial scandals engulf the highest reaches of their government. In this impoverished city of 32,000, people are staring at the maelstrom surrounding all three statewide-elected officials, wondering who will emerge intact and what it all means that Virginia’s vaunted reputation for political dignity is being sucked into the shredders of late-night comedy.

Within hours, an even more serious bomb would drop, with a second woman accusing Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax of sexually assaulting her when the two were students at Duke University. Soon, despite Fairfax’s vehement denial of the allegations, Democratic officials across the state and the country were calling for his resignation.

“It’s so much chaos, I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Petersburg Mayor Samuel Parham, who worried that paralysis in the capital would stall Petersburg’s slow recovery from near bankruptcy in 2016. “It’s little cities like ours that suffer.”

But Parham, like other black residents in this crossroad of African American and Civil War history, said he was not surprised to see Jim Crow iconography popping from the scrapbook pasts of white politicians.

“This is deep-rooted in Virginia,” said Parham, 42, an African American. He added that while he wasn’t surprised that white politicians are uncovering their racist pasts, he was surprised that they are doing it now, when the country is so divided.

“I’ve been saying for a while that we need to do something,” Parham said. “We need to clean up and get rid of the legacy.”
American executive at a cleaning company beginning his second term as Petersburg’s mayor. “If there is good to come out of this tragedy, maybe it’s that when the chaos has settled, we’ll finally be able to have a conversation about Virginia’s racial divide.”

His view of the turmoil is shared by most black Virginians, 58 percent of whom want Gov. Ralph Northam (D) to remain in office, according to a Washington Post-Schar School poll. Whites are evenly divided about whether Northam should stay or step down.

The chaos that is rocking Richmond started Feb. 1, when a page surfaced from Northam’s 1984 medical school yearbook showing a figure in blackface next to someone in a Ku Klux Klan hood and robe, apparently at a party. Amid widespread calls for the governor’s resignation, the first accusation of sexual assault emerged against the official in line to replace him, Fairfax (D), who has denied the allegation. As eyes turned to the third in line, Attorney General Mark R. Herring (D), he preemptively announced that he had dressed up as a rapper, in blackface, when he was a 19-year-old college student.

The pandemonium has some in Petersburg wanting to munch popcorn — “I think it’s hilarious watching the Democrats attacking each other for a change,” a white patron leaving the Dixie Restaurant said, speaking on the condition of anonymity — and others wanting to pop Xanax.

Jasmyn Clanton studies criminal justice at Virginia State University, the historically black college that sits on a bluff above Petersburg. Walking between classes, the 21-year-old from Norfolk marveled at the rapid-fire revelations and predicted more. “It’s disturbing,” said Clanton, who had just turned in a class paper on minstrel-era symbolism in modern pop culture. “Someone put that picture [from Northam’s yearbook page] on Instagram and said, ‘This is your boss.’ You just have to go around all the time realizing that this could be your doctor, your lawyer, your teacher.”

Mekayla Lundy, 20, another criminal justice major, said she had been ready to forgive Northam until his apology for the photograph suddenly morphed into a confusing denial. The governor claimed he was not one of the people in the yearbook photo but said that he had “darkened his face” to dress as Michael Jackson on another occasion. “If you can’t admit fault, you can’t be a good leader,” Lundy said.

“Just say you’re wrong and move on,” Clanton said.

Still, despite the wave of demands for Northam to step down, neither student was ready to call for his resignation. That was a common sentiment among residents of Petersburg, Va.
Petersburg, a town that is 77 percent black and where more than 8 in 10 voters cast ballots for Northam in 2017.

Parham, who said he has not heard from residents about the controversy, said he hoped the governor would stick it out and turn the scandal into a moment of racial reckoning. “There’s so much talk about the new Virginia and the melting pot, but when you drive up and down [Interstate] 95 in this part of the state, you see more Confederate flags than anywhere,” Parham said. “He has work to do, and I want him to stay and do it.”

A few blocks away, in the parking lot of the 130-year-old Tabernacle Baptist Church, Calvin Robb was getting into his car and lamenting what he called a rush to judgment. “The governor was young, and we all change,” said Robb, a retired nurse. “The Bible says a man who looks behind can never go forward.”

Robb decried his community’s fixation on race as too backward-looking. Even face paint can be neutral, he argued. Several churches where he has been a deacon hold “mime ministry” events in which African American children wear white face paint and perform nonverbal liturgical dances, he said. The 63-year-old said he often disagrees with modern priorities. “Why aren’t these pastors speaking out about things that really are against God, like homosexuality?” Robb asked.

The church shares the parking lot with Clayburn Square, a low-rise senior-living apartment where Trisha Storey was smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk. The 68-year-old was born in this tobacco town and lived here until the Brown and Williamson company moved its workforce and her husband out of state in the 1980s. Now widowed, she is one of just a few white residents in her building.

“I get along with everybody here, except one woman who’s crazy,” Storey said, sitting on the stool of her pink rolling walker. “We just treat each other like people.”

She hasn’t heard any of her friends call for Northam to step down, and she hopes he doesn’t. “I don’t want anyone to judge me on who I was when I was 25,” she said.

But Maxamilllan Patterson is 25 now, and the black cook wasn’t buying it.

“He absolutely should step down,” said Patterson, who was ordering lunch at the counter of the Dixie Restaurant. “You can’t have that kind of biased background and look out for all your voters, black, white, Mexican, Asian.”

Patterson, hip and friendly in long dreadlocks, is part of a promising youth wave giving the ancient brick downtown a faint neon pulse of cafes, coffee shops, bars and loft apartments. He works across the street at Longstreet’s Deli, and both his lunch spot and his dinner shift are on Corling’s Corner, where a historical marker notes that enslaved people were once bought, sold and even rented at that spot.

“We’ve got a deep history of all this,” he said.

A few tables away, Cynthia Masten, 41, feared the wave of scandals would swamp the government’s ability to address other issues, particularly the opioid crisis that had already caused the death of her husband and a cousin.

“It’s out of control,” Masten said. “The time they waste on this stupid stuff, they could be helping people who really need it.”

For some Republicans in this part of the state, the interlocking scandals presented a tricky calculation of another sort. If all three Democratic officials should fall, the governor’s job would pass to the Republican speaker of the House of Delegates, Kirk Cox. Cox was born in Petersburg and now represents Colonial Heights, the community just across the river where much of Petersburg’s white population has shifted over the decades.

Randall Wachman II is a Colonial Heights financial adviser who was waiting for friends at Petersburg’s Brickhouse Run, a stylish pub on a cobblestone alley. He would prefer to see a Republican in the governor’s mansion, but he does not want anyone to fall victim to what he called a “PC whirlwind.”

“If it got to Cox, that would be great,” Wachman said, turning back to his pint. “But would it really be fair? It’s not what voters voted for.”

He did not expect a quick resolution, as resignation calls came and went, new accusations emerged, and the Rubik’s Cube of action, reaction and succession continued to puzzle the commonwealth in a very uncommon way.
White people designed blackface to keep black people down, to intimidate, mock and stereotype. It began during the 19th century and wasn’t about white people honoring the talent of black people by dressing up to look like them. It was about mocking them and depicting them as lazy, stupid and less than fully human. It was a tool of oppression.

As a college kid in Virginia during the 1980s, I knew that and so did my classmates. But a whole lot of white people seem to not know that history or understand why blackface is so offensive, whether it’s practiced by a college student or a new doctor. The turmoil in Virginia — where I have lived most of my adult life, including nine years in Richmond — may do some good if it reminds white people that a river of oppression runs through U.S. history, deep and wide, down to today.

But the reporters hurrying to the state capital to cover this important story about a poorly understood tool of white oppression are literally rushing past much larger and more powerful symbols of that oppression — symbols born of a similar desire to keep black people down. There is no doubt that Virginia’s leaders need to be held accountable for their personal history, but every Virginia leader is responsible for the racist symbols that still loom over our lives.

The Confederate statues of Richmond’s Monument Avenue weren’t erected to honor the service of brave warriors. Those soldiers had been dead for decades before the statues went up. No, the statues were put up by white people, beginning in the 1890s, to remind black people that, despite all that nonsense of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, as well as the so-called Reconstruction, we are back, and you are back down. The towering likenesses of Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson weren’t put up to celebrate history or heritage; they were put up as a message: The 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution aren’t going to help you black folks because the South has risen from that humiliation. Jim Crow — a name rooted in blackface mockery — is king.

If you doubt that well-documented history — if you are tempted to buy the “heritage, not hate” rhetoric —
ask yourself this question: “Where are the statues of James Longstreet?” Remember: Longstreet was Lee’s most trusted general, his second-in-command, his “Old War Horse.” Longstreet was a brave and talented warrior for the Confederacy from beginning to end. But there aren’t any Longstreet statues in Richmond — and there weren’t any at all until 1998, at Gettysburg. That’s because his service to the United States continued after the Civil War, and he did something inconsistent with the purpose of the statues, and of blackface: He treated African Americans as citizens of the United States. Longstreet agreed to serve his reunified country, joined Lincoln’s Republican Party and helped Grant protect the rights of newly freed black Americans.

Longstreet committed two unforgivable sins in the eyes of white supremacists: He criticized Lee’s war leadership, and he led an African American militia to put down an 1874 white rebellion in Louisiana. That’s why this central figure in Civil War history is not depicted among the other Confederate statues in Richmond. The statues were about only a certain kind of heritage, just as blackface was about a certain kind of storytelling. It was about hate, not history or art.

Blackface, and our elected leaders’ involvement with it, is an important subject, and our country must confront that part of our racist past. Those who did it, or lied about it, shouldn’t hold office. Past actions matter. But our present is filled with gigantic bronze embodiments of that same racism. They loom over Virginians every day. If Virginia’s leaders want to atone for a troubling legacy, changing state law so Richmond’s statues no longer taunt the progress of our country would be a good place to start. Expressing bipartisan horror at blackface photos is essential, but removing the statues would show all of America that Virginia really has changed.

James Comey is a former director of the FBI and a former deputy attorney general.
Public office is a privilege, not a right. When you’re found to have racism in your past, the question is: Should you be allowed to redeem yourself while in office? Or should you have to step aside and stand down until you carry out that work?

When the news broke that a photograph of two individuals wearing shockingly racist garb appeared on Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam’s 1984 medical school yearbook page, my immediate instinct was to Google him. I needed to know his age. I knew Northam wasn’t a peer of former senators Strom Thurmond or Robert C. Byrd, with their Jim Crow and Ku Klux Klan histories, respectively. No, he was from my own generation, born after me, in 1959, five years after Brown v. Board of Education was decided. He was a kindergartner when the Civil Rights Act was signed into law. It was essentially the same for Virginia Attorney General Mark R. Herring (D), born in 1961, who has now admitted that he, too, once wore blackface, as a 19-year-old student in 1980.

It’s mind-boggling. Northam, Herring and I are the beneficiaries of the civil rights generation. Though children, we had our childhoods marked by the traumas of the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. We witnessed the dignity and resolve of activists, black and white, who risked all to hold America to the promise of its founding creed. We learned of the murders of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney in Mississippi in 1964. We remember in vivid detail the burning streets and neighborhoods of the summer of 1968. We were in high school or entering college around the time of our nation’s bicentennial.

And by the time we were born, blackface was well understood to be a hateful stereotype. Our roots, however, are in what came before. When I was a child, my mother recalled to us her experience growing up in North Carolina — the segregated schools, lunch counters,
bathrooms and water fountains. I learned, too, how my grandparents fought for their right to vote in rural North Carolina.

But Jim Crow — the system of state and local laws to enforce segregation that were placed on the books as a direct rejection of the abolition of slavery — extended up through 1965. For our generation, Jim Crow laws were still in force when we were small children. Black and white, we may not have understood fully our nation’s dark history on race. But it was not a distant memory. Our parents lived it as adults. It was the immediate past.

How is it, then, that at 19 (Herring) and 24 or 25 (Northam), someone of my generation would not have internalized the painful histories of blackface and the hood and robe of the Klan? How can someone who first apologizes for a photo turn around and say, oops, that’s not me — leaving all of us to believe that it certainly could have been? Or stand at a lectern and admit not that blackface but another blackface? Or step forward to apologize to preempt the inevitable revelation of a blackface photo? Black or white, anyone from our generation, whether ages 19 and 25 or 59, surely would have known that behavior to be wrong.

During the 1970s, I was a college student at a university where the “Old South” was celebrated until a group of students rose up to put a stop to it. At the time, I saw that as an emblem of progress. But now I wonder how much of that behavior simply slipped underground and traveled on unchallenged, in carefully chosen spaces, as “harmless” play. How many other yearbooks, photo albums, business school performances and parties have blackface and KKK uniforms just waiting to be unearthed? I suspect we are going to find out in the coming days and weeks, either through self-revelation or investigation.

What do we do now? For some, these things are obviously disqualifying. No one, after all, is entitled to public office or the esteem of the community, and forgiveness has to be earned. I believe the answer can be found in the principle of accountability to oneself and one’s community. As to public office, for now, sit it out. Come back, if you do, prepared to ask voters to accept your past and cast their vote anyway — knowing the authentic you.

Regardless, perhaps some good can come of all this pain. Perhaps this is the time for an American truth-and-reconciliation moment, a “you too” reckoning by which we expose and, at last, confront the systems, institutions and relationships that embed racism and its casual acceptance. Perhaps.

Donna F. Edwards served as the U.S. Representative for Maryland’s 4th congressional district from 2008 to 2017. She is currently a Post contributing columnist.
As Black History Month nears an end, I’ve been impressed by a cavalcade of apologies for “racial insensitivity” and outright racism. Hardly a day has passed without one.

For the offended, however, the challenge is to determine whose apology is sincere and who is just blowing smoke.

Let’s see if you can tell.

The principal at Madison Trust Elementary School in Loudoun County, Va., sent a letter to parents on Feb. 12 apologizing for a “culturally insensitive” lesson on the Underground Railroad. Kids, black and white, were supposed to use cooperation and devise strategies to get everyone to freedom. A school spokesman said students were not assigned the role of slaves. The
parents of an African American student contacted the president of the Loudoun chapter of the NAACP, however, to say that their son had played a runaway slave.

Teaching about slavery: right direction, just the wrong train. The school made a mistake and learns from it.

“I extend my sincerest apology to our students and school community,” wrote David Stewart, the principal.

Accepted.

On Monday, a white lawmaker from Harford County apologized to the leaders of the Legislative Black Caucus of Maryland for using a racial slur. Del. Mary Ann Lisanti (D), while talking to a white colleague at a bar in Annapolis earlier this month, allegedly referred to an area of Prince George's County as a “¬n----- district.”

Del. Darryl Barnes (D-Prince George's), who chairs the Black Caucus, told Washington Post reporter Ovetta Wiggins: “She apologized several times. She recognizes how she has hurt so many within the caucus, and she hoped to repent from this.”

But when Wiggins questioned Lisanti about using the n-word, the delegate told her: “I don’t recall that.” And when asked whether she has ever used the slur, Lisanti said: “I’m sure I have … I’m sure everyone has used it.”

Sincere? How can you repent if you don’t know what you did? How can you repent when you admit that you’ve used it before and are sure everyone else has, too?

Smoke.

At the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, President Samuel Hoi released a campuswide memo last week acknowledging and apologizing for racial segregation in its admissions policy from 1895 to 1954.

“An institutional acknowledgment in the form of an apology, no matter how sincere, is empty unless it is rooted in a systemic commitment for change and unless it represents meaningful action that is in progress,” Hoi said.

It’s an honest assessment of past failures and recognition of the work ahead, and that counts, too.

Accepted.

On Feb. 1, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam (D) acknowledged appearing in a “clearly racist and offensive” photograph in his 1984 medical school yearbook that shows a man in blackface and another in a Ku Klux Klan robe.

Although he had just proclaimed the start of Black History Month, Northam would spend much of the time participating in black apology month activities.

“I am deeply sorry for the decision I made to appear as I did in this photo and for the hurt that decision caused then and now,” he said.

Then, 24 hours later, he said he wasn’t in the photo and had been too eager to apologize, although he also acknowledged wearing blackface as part of a Michael Jackson costume that same year.

“When you're in a state of shock like I was, we don’t always think as clearly as we should,” he said later. “I will tell you that later that night I had a chance to step back, take a deep breath, look at the picture and said, ‘This is not me in the picture.’”

A Post-Schar School poll found that 58 percent of Virginia's black voters want Northam to stay in office and not resign.

Accepted by some, smoke to others.

And then there’s one that made me wonder why even ask for an apology.

During the American Federation of Government Employees conference in Washington last week, several members visited the Capitol Hill office of Rep. Drew Ferguson (R-Ga.). On display was a book, Gen. Robert Edward Lee: Soldier, Citizen, and Christian Patriot, along with some of Lee’s medals.

Ferguson had the book under a glass case and opened to a page that read, “The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, societally, and physically. The painful discipline they are undergoing is necessary for their instruction as a race.”

“As a black man and constituent, I can say that nothing makes you feel more unwelcome in your own member of Congress's office than seeing such racist memorabilia,” James Miller, AFGE Local 554 legislative political coordinator and steward, said in a statement.

In the same statement, Jeremy Lannan, AFGE national vice president for women and fair practices, said: “It is heinous to me that a sitting member of Congress elected by the people, for the people, would display such hateful materials in his congressional office. … Rep. Ferguson must immediately explain
why he chose to display this book and the medals, and issue a formal apology for offending the countless constituents who have been forced to see it.”

Ferguson told The Post that the book was placed in his office by someone on his staff who he said decorated his office. He said he didn’t even know the book was there until AFGE members complained. Later, when asked about the book on CNN, he said he had already apologized — in effect, been there, done that.

Smoke.

Only a day left in the month. So many apologies still to be made, so little time.

Courtland Milloy, is a local columnist for Washington Post. Education: Attended Louisiana State University and Southern Illinois University. Milloy began writing for newspapers as a high school student in 1967. He learned the craft from his father, who taught journalism and graphic arts, and his mother, who taught typing and shorthand, both at Booker T. Washington High School in Shreveport, La.
Blackface historically has meant the darkening of the face with some sort of makeup and the using of red and white face paint to exaggerate features, forming grotesque caricatures of African Americans. The imagery has been used with devastating effect to depict formerly enslaved people of African descent as uneducated, uncouth and unworthy of freedom.

And yet, about one-third of Americans say blackface would be acceptable as a Halloween costume, according to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center. How could that be?

At the University of the District of Columbia last week, a panel of experts looked beneath the shoe-polished skin and minstrel buffoonery to reveal a mix of ignorance and racism.

“From our perspective, blackface is a hate symbol,” said Doron Ezickson, Washington regional director of the Anti-Defamation League. “How we at the ADL attend to hate symbols is, one, call them out and, two, educate people because these incidents represent a failure in our society to educate about the origins and impact of bias.”

These incidents include admissions by Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam (D) and Virginia Attorney General Mark R. Herring (D) that they had darkened their skin to portray black musicians while in school. There is also a photograph on Northam’s page of his medical school yearbook that shows a man in blackface posing with someone wearing a Ku Klux Klan hood and robe. Northam maintains he is not in that picture and has no idea how it ended up on his page.

The controversy took another turn Tuesday at Mardi Gras in New Orleans, where a predominantly black group known as the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club have a 110-year tradition of parading in blackface. Following the Virginia controversy, there were vociferous calls for them to end the practice.

Dwandalyn R. Reece, curator of music and performing arts at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, said the intention of those who wear blackface should be taken into account.

“For me, everything is context,” Reece told me. “Whether people should do it or not, intention is the key. Is blackface different when black people use it? The Zulu use it as part of a historic tradition and culture, but the growing sensitivity to blackface
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would make a rule that applies to every situation. It’s difficult to understand when it’s okay and when it’s not, unless we know the history and the performance tradition behind it.”

A spokesman for the group answered critics in a news release last month.

“Those who incorrectly compare our use of black makeup to ‘blackface’ minstrelsy can first look to our name to dispel that notion,” it read. “Unlike minstrelsy, which was designed to ridicule and mock black people, the founders of our Social Aid & Pleasure Club chose the name ‘Zulu’ to honor their African ancestry and the continent’s most fierce warriors . . . Zulu parade costumes bear no resemblance to the costumes worn by ‘blackface’ minstrel performers at the turn of the century.”

Despite the explanation, criticism of the tradition persists. And the Zulus remain adamant in their refusal to stop it. Is blackface okay when blacks do it to honor other blacks?

Back in 1959, white journalist John Howard Griffin darkened his skin and passed himself off as a black man during a journey through the Deep South. In 1961, he published a book about his experience, Black Like Me. Being “black” proved to be a lot more difficult that he realized and many applauded him for his effort — including black people. Is it acceptable for whites who are trying to help blacks and not dehumanize them?

Former D.C. mayor Sharon Pratt, who serves as founding director of UDC’s Institute of Politics, Policy and History, which sponsored last week’s panel discussion, had her own answers:

“For black people to go from being a commodity as slaves to a position of dignity has been an ongoing struggle, so any effort to dehumanize us can be unnerving,” she said. “So, in my view, there is a vast difference between somebody browning their skin to imitate a hip-hop artist and someone using blackface to dehumanize us, the way it was done in the Birth of a Nation. That film portrayed black men as rapists and glorified the Klan in such a way that it led to a resurgence of the group.

As Reece sees it, blackface is essentially about a majority group’s appropriation of another culture and distorting it for their entertainment. And she points out that the patterns established in 19th-century minstrel shows continue today, even without the blackface.

“In some of the cop shows featuring a black and white partner, you’d see the white cop awkwardly trying to ‘act black,’ ” Reece said. “You don’t need blackface to mimic song and dance.” The ADL is clear in how it sees blackface. It is grouped among the organization’s “Pyramid of Hate,” which includes hate symbols such as swastikas, nooses and burning crosses. At the base of the pyramid are common insults and slights which, if left unchecked, grow into increasingly offensive behavior and ultimately lead to violence. Even genocide.

The pyramid represents “a process in human nature where even acts that are historical or unintentional can form the foundation of a very dangerous chain of events,” Ezickson said.

“Only if we understand history can we see how blackface arises in a moral context,” he said. “Often the debate over blackface goes right to what is the intent of the individual. We start with what is the history and therefore what is the impact on people who were targeted.”

The purpose of a hate symbol, he said, is to “delegitimize people on the basis of race, religion, gender, and it’s fundamentally inconsistent with our individual right not to be discriminated against.”

But not everybody is ill-willed; some are just ill-informed.

“We need to do a lot more listening and empathizing,” Reece said. “We are in a time when that is most difficult, but we can’t abandon the effort.”

Courtland Milloy is a local columnist for The Washington Post, where he has worked since 1975. He has covered crime and politics in the District and demographic changes in Prince George’s County, Md. He has also written for The Post's Style and Foreign sections.
Photos of blackface, KKK robes and nooses lurk alongside portraits in old college yearbooks

BY NICK ANDERSON AND SUSAN SVRLUGA

The 1922 edition of the Campanile yearbook at Rice University featured a group photo of white-hooded members of what appears to be a campus chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1968, the Virginia Military Institute yearbook, known as the Bomb, published racist slurs and images, including a picture of two grinning men in blackface holding a football. And the 1979 yearbook of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill included a photo of a simulated lynching, with two people dressed as KKK members and a person in blackface hanging from a noose.

Now, college officials, students, faculty, journalists and others are sifting archives across the country to learn what else those musty tomes of yesteryear might tell.

"We’re going to see more of this — these pictures are probably lurking in people’s yearbooks everywhere,” said Kirt von Daacke, a history professor and assistant dean of arts and sciences at the University of Virginia who has been studying yearbooks.

"No one stopped to think about what’s in them — and what story does that tell,” von Daacke said. "It’s particularly bleak for Southern institutions.”

Katherine A. Rowe, president of the College of William & Mary, this week ordered an audit of its yearbooks as officials acknowledged they were aware of editions of the Colonial Echo from the first half of the 20th century that contained racist images.

“This review will help inform [a] deeper understanding of William & Mary’s racial history as we work together as a community to ensure this is the kind of respectful and welcoming campus we want and expect,” university spokesman Brian Whitson wrote Thursday in an email.

After blackface images from an
old school yearbook circulated on social media, University of Maryland President Wallace D. Loh called them “profoundly hurtful and distressing” and said, “Traditions like this reflect a history of racial prejudice and do not convey what we seek to embody today.”

The renewed scrutiny comes as many college yearbooks are dying out, a trend that accelerated during the 2008 financial crisis. “Yearbooks were often one of the first things to go,” said Kelley Lash, director of student media at Rice University and past president of the College Media Association, a group based in New York that represents advisers to student publications.

The University of Richmond said it has not published a digital or print yearbook in at least a decade. But the liberal arts school was shaken this week when it learned that a racist image from a 1980 yearbook was circulating on social media. It showed hooded people posing next to a grinning man with a noose around his neck and a beverage in his hand.

“Images of this sort, and the behavior and attitudes they represent, are appalling and antithetical to the values of the University today,” University of Richmond President Ronald A. Crutcher said in a statement Thursday. “No one should have to experience the pain caused by such vile images, or evidence of such behavior, either at the time the incident occurs or thereafter.”

At Rice, 21-year-old senior Charles Paul said he became curious about yearbooks after Northam and Virginia Attorney General Mark R. Herring (D) acknowledged wearing blackface. “If it was a widespread thing in Virginia,” Paul said, “it must have been a widespread thing in Texas.” He started tweeting what he found, including images from the 1920s of blackface and the KKK. “I felt like it was important,” he said.

Asked about the pages Paul tweeted, Rice said: “What these old yearbook entries show was shockingly wrong and inappropriate, a reflection of disgraceful behavior that apparently was all too common in past decades but has no place on our campus today.”

At VMI, officials have reviewed their handling of yearbooks since the Northam scandal erupted. A 1981 yearbook picture of Northam, a VMI graduate, noted a nickname for him, “Coonman,” that some perceive as including a racial slur. Northam has said he does not know why people gave him that nickname.

On Thursday, the VMI yearbook came under further scrutiny as the Virginian-Pilot newspaper reported that a 1968 edition of the Bomb included images of people in blackface and racial slurs referencing African Americans and people of Asian descent. Virginia Senate Majority Leader Thomas K. Norment Jr. (R-James City), also a VMI graduate, was an editor who helped produce that year’s edition. He released a statement Thursday disavowing responsibility for the offensive content.

“The use of blackface is abhorrent in our society and I emphatically condemn it,” Norment said in the statement.

Stewart D. MacInnis, a VMI spokesman, said the public military college has in recent years tightened its review of the student publication. What is published is the decision of cadets, MacInnis said, but VMI officials read it before publication and advise editors to weed out offensive images and language. MacInnis said VMI is aware that past editions contain offensive material.

“We have a past,” he said. “We are living in the present. We think we’re good citizens of the present. We’re using the past as a guide for us — lessons for the future.”

In North Carolina, a reporter for the Raleigh News & Observer tweeted on Wednesday a picture from a 1979 yearbook showing a simulated lynching. That image and others taken from a page dedicated to the Chi Phi Fraternity quickly went viral and sparked outrage.

Joel Curran, a spokesman for University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said in a statement Wednesday evening: “The photos found in the 1979 student yearbook are abhorrent. We fully and wholly condemn both the photos and the racist behavior they depict. That kind of behavior has no place on our campus now or then.”

Michael Azarian, Chi Phi Fraternity
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executive director, said in a written statement: “We strongly denounce the behavior and sentiments displayed in these images. Bigotry is not welcome in our Fraternity.”

In Charlottesville, the University of Virginia has been combing through yearbooks for two months, part of an ongoing exploration into its past. Von Daacke co-chairs the U-Va. President’s Commission on the University in the Age of Segregation, which followed a similar commission on slavery at the university. The school has always revered its history, but in recent years it has taken an unflinching look at the more troubling aspects of the legacy of its founder, Thomas Jefferson, and the university’s culture.

Von Daacke said scholars have gone through yearbooks into the 1950s and found them shaped by a culture of white supremacy.

“From the inception of the yearbook, one of the themes running through it is denigration of African Americans — in cartoons, in photographs, in stories, in fiction,” he said. He described it as “a running theme” from the 1800s into the 1930s. And it doesn’t disappear entirely after that, he noted.

Von Daacke has found the same themes at other schools in the early 20th century. There’s more of it at U-Va. than he has seen at many other schools, he said. But on Thursday morning, he was looking at yearbooks from some colleges in Boston and found blackface images from the 1910s and 1920s. “It’s part of the national culture,” he said. Blackface performances were part of early cinema, The Birth of a Nation film was released in 1915, the Ku Klux Klan was reborn, and Confederate monuments were being erected in Charlottesville and many other places. The offensive imagery is particularly enduring in the South, he said.

Schools should be examining — and coming to terms with — their pasts, Von Daacke said. “The first order of business is the truth-telling. . . . We have to be honest about who we are. Schools often haven’t been.”

It’s a sharp reminder that our histories are relevant in today’s climate, said Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Just as schools should be considering their monuments and building names that may have racist tones or histories, he said, “I would urge every institution to do the work of examining their past publications” to see if there are things that could offend.

When he asked some college administrators Thursday if they had checked their student yearbooks, he said they told him, “We haven’t done it yet — but we should.”

Laura Vozzella in Richmond contributed to this report.
What To Do?

1. Journalist Maya Kosoff reported: “The University of Chicago warns students that social media posts can hurt their employment prospects, since ‘people you’ve never met can view those postings and judge you for them.’”
   a. Assuming that this is true, at least for admissions and first job, what guideline would you give for posting photographs?
   b. Give a guideline for quotations posted on your social media accounts.
   c. What guidelines do you have for the language that you use online?

2. Consider the scholastic press. Should student media
   a. publish whatever a student, or faculty member/coach, says in an interview?
   b. use paraphrasing and short quotations to avoid offensive or harsh language?
   c. avoid publication of statements that might be controversial or insensitive?
   d. never publish quotations that may be misunderstood without context?
   Explain your choice(s).

3. Kosoff also writes in “Why Facebook is safer than yearbooks”: “Actions have consequences, and old racist yearbook pictures can and will be used to hold public figures to account.”
   a. If your school has a senior page for which students may submit one to three candid photographs to reflect their time in high school, should the yearbook editors have the right to reject photographs? Explain why or why not?
   b. If a student does not respond to staff requests for photographs for a senior page in the yearbook, what should the senior section editors do?
   c. If you school newspaper has a senior edition or the yearbook sells senior ads, who should have the final say in what is published — in words and images?

4. Kosoff continues: “On Thursday, the Virginian-Pilot reported that the state senate majority leader had edited a 1968 yearbook that ‘features a host of racist photos and slurs, including blackface.’”
   a. If events took place on campus and were photographed, are photographs and text part of the historic record of that academic year and the school environment?
   b. What would stop student media from publishing photographs of good technical quality?
   c. What would stop a student media staff from publishing comments made during campus activities? Review questions #1 and #2 above. How do your responses guide your point of view about publication?
   d. To what extent should scholastic media editors be held responsible for text and images published? To what extent are they gatekeepers, historians and decision makers of their school?

5. Captions should inform readers about the context, outcome or significance of the person or event photographed.
   a. When may a caption be offensive or insensitive?
   b. Is there a place for “cute” or “inside joke” captions in student media?

6. You are a student enrolled in a U.S. history or social studies class. Your instructor has assigned each student group a different decade to research and present the main political and historic events, music and arts of the period and one other hallmark of the decade. Your decade includes the heyday of minstrel shows.
   a. Would you present representative skits and music in blackface? Why or why not?
   b. If you did so, would you allow photographs to be taken of your presentation by your classmates or student media? Why or why not?
   c. How do you explain the place of minstrel shows in the assigned decade and the American character without physically acting them out?
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7. To what extent do you feel free to be yourself online? Say what you want in the words that express your feelings and beliefs? Posting photographs, artwork and sayings that reflect your talent or point of view? Do you consider how others will respond now or in the future to your postings?

8. Kosoff gives examples of millennials’ “crafting our behavior and our virtual selves in accordance with the knowledge that someone, somewhere might one day judge us.” Give three examples of online self-defense that is practiced or available to you and other online users.
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 

9. To what extent do you agree with the statement, “When you know you’ve always been watched, you play it safe”? Explain your response with at least one example.

10. Susan Svrluga reported in “Yearbooks document racist past at U-Va.” (Feb. 13, 2019) that racist ideas and traditions may be documented in yearbooks. “U-Va. is not alone. The political revelations prompted schools nationwide to scan their own yearbooks. Many found images of students in blackface or other offensive elements.”
   a. Review your school’s yearbook. If possible, locate and scan the first three volumes.
      What do they reflect of your school’s traditions? Community values?
   b. Would any of the photographs, captions or text be considered offensive by today’s values?
   c. Do you find images of what might be considered inappropriate cultural appropriation?

11-15. Many media staffs have a manual or statement of policies to guide staff members. Write a guideline or policy statement regarding publication of photographs that may be considered offensive, insensitive or racist. Include a guideline for captions/cutlines.