

Let's Get Real by Rev. Rollin Russell

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The Governor and Attorney General of Virginia have confessed to wearing black face as young men in the 1980's and are now being pilloried for it.

They grew up in Virginia, went to Virginia schools, and though many Virginians and other Anglo Southerners have conveniently forgotten all about it, that behavior would not have been at all remarkable in their communities, schools or social circles at that time.

Minstrel shows were rare, if not extinct in the 1980's, but the culture of derision and disdain toward African American citizens was pervasive and routine. So much was that the case that such young adults would not have thought twice about reveling in their club or class deciding to put on black face and shuck and jive for the amusement of one and all.

This was the Virginia of "massive resistance" to school desegregation which involved the founding of segregated academies and, in a few communities, the shuttering of public schools for months or, in one case, years. The continued maintenance of a segregated society was assumed to be necessary and proper, based on an assumed and constantly reinforced presumption of white supremacy.

These young men and thousands more were and are the victims of their own privilege. That does not excuse their behavior; it is reprehensible. Just as slavery and the decades of segregation were an abomination, so was the southern culture of the succeeding decades. The current situation in Virginia should at last cause us to fully acknowledge this sordid recent history and begin to deal honestly with its results.

The Governor and Attorney General have had to deal with their own personal histories and are now having to do so publicly. Like many others, they have faced up to the terrible reality and effects of that era and seem to have resolved to try to right the wrongs of the past through public service. That is good, though it does not resolve the question as to their ability to govern well and be trusted by all in the future.

The real question is about the rest of Virginia's citizens. Will they acknowledge the deep stains of their state's past and follow a restorative path that is fully inclusive and respectful of all Virginians. It is time to get real, time to tell the painful truth about the past so that reconciliation can pave the way to a more just and equitable future. Southerner William Faulkner famously wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Virginia just proved it.