On Sep 5, 2017, at 4:59 PM, robert bowen
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An Open Letter to Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe

I was born in Los Angeles, California and raised in Ohio. I have taught Political Science at the collegiate level in Cincinnati, been published in The Wall Street Journal and am in my 12th year of research for a forthcoming book on Columbine.

For the past seven years I have made Rockbridge County, Virginia my home. That was a dream planted in my heart as a 14-year-old boy decades ago on my first visit to the Commonwealth. I have loved this commonwealth since then and when offered a change of life, there was never a moment’s indecision where to move. Virginia first, Virginia only, Virginia last and Virginia always.

I chose Lexington for just one reason. I had no family in Virginia. I had no prospects for employment lined up in Virginia. I owned no property here. None of the factors that ordinarily move men to uproot after a lifetime in one state and move to a place where he has no ties motivated me. The one and only reason I live in Lexington, Virginia is because it is the final resting place of Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. Jackson.

Their lives, character, faith, integrity, honor and testimony shone so brightly a century and a half after their decease that there is no other place on the Earth I want to be but where they lived and served.
There is something deeply and morally wrong with anyone who objects to these two great Virginians – great Americans being honored by the native State for which they gave their lives, limbs and blood in selfless patriotic service. President Dwight D. Eisenhower kept Lee’s portrait in his executive office while president. Churchill extolled him as the greatest American. Ulysses S. Grant threatened to resign from the U.S. Army if Lee were tried for treason. International ships at sea flew their national colors at half-staff when Lee left this world from Lexington.

The statue that marks the grave of “Stonewall” Jackson was paid for not only by the veterans who served under him, but by financial contributions from former slaves whom he had taught to read in violation of Virginia law. In Roanoke today, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church features a stained glass window consecrated to the honor and memory of Jackson by descendants of the slaves he taught the Bible, for the chances he took on their behalf. When a Lexington local assailed Jackson for breaking the law to “teach those people”, Jackson uncharacteristically lost his temper and shouted, “If you were a Christian you would not say so!”

After the war, it was Lee who broke social convention at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church by kneeling beside a former slave who had mortified the White congregation by kneeling at the altar. Asked afterward by a bigot why a man like himself would kneel beside a former slave, Lee simply chastised him, “The ground is always level at the foot of the cross.”

And these are the men so repugnant to your modern sensibilities? This is the course so objectionable to you? This character is what is unacceptable in your enlightened times? If so, then it is you, Sir, who is the racist bigot. If their charity and kindness, their bravery in defense of the then-defenseless
offsends you, it only means your own character is so depraved and your own heart so darkened as to be unworthy the mention of their names.
The anniversary of the deaths of Lee and of Jackson were long commemorated in this Commonwealth by veterans of the North who were often the honored keynote speakers invited to praise the virtues of their once-foes. You were not at Manassas. You were not at Antietam. You were not at Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg. But the Union soldiers who were had more wisdom, more character, were simply better men than you, because they practiced forgiveness over hatred, compassion over contempt, fraternity over fractious division. They shook the physical hands that had sighted them down hot barrels and pulled triggers to kill them. They put the war behind them in their own generation and embraced their former enemies as their brother and countrymen. You, on the other hand, lack any redeeming moral character whatsoever, obsessing over political winds, polls and a personal agenda of race-baiting anarchy. More than merely unqualified for the high office you hold, you exhibit no evidence of redemptive humanity.

Every monument to a Confederate Virginian is a war memorial to an American veteran. It has been the mark of manhood and civility and longstanding American tradition to leave politics out of the way we honor our veterans. They fought the battles; we did not. They shed the blood; we did not. They reconciled with their enemies; we did not. They were tried on the battlefield and tried by a jury of their peers in the only court of public opinion that mattered: their own generation, the generation that knew the issues, heard the speeches, read the papers, pulled the triggers and took the trenches. The battlefield determined the issues and the veterans pardoned their enemies. End of subject.

It is not for children born a hundred and fifty years later to readjudicate the past and expose to double jeopardy men their
own contemporaries exonerated.
It is the height of arrogance to suppose that you know more about these men and their times than their even contemporaries. The command of God remains, “Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set.” That divine command is unambiguous and apolitical. It is to God you will assuredly answer for its violation. Make no mistake, as Claudius realized in Hamlet, “In the corrupted currents of this world, offense’s gilded hand may shove by justice, and oft ’tis seen the wicked prize itself buys out the law. But ’tis not so above. There is no shuffling. There the action lies in his true nature, and we ourselves compelled, even to the teeth and forehead of our faults”.

There will be no alibis before the judgment bar of God. You will pull no song-and-dance, no shady backroom deals, no political payola. Almighty God will not be fooled nor bought nor charmed. Naked in the full bloom of your monstrous sin, you will stand exposed, every fault, before His avenging eye. No excuses. No patter and spiel. No schmoozing this time. To God you will answer for the slander and libel of His servants.

Meanwhile, in the unlikely event that your parents were not the abject failures your embarrassing course of conduct appears to suggest, I ask you to reconsider the wrong-headed evil you have proposed. If you find it impossible to respect your elders, attempt at least to revere your betters. The destruction of Virginia’s monuments to her war dead is sacrilege and those who urge and execute it are nothing more than cemetery vandals. There is no honor in this course of wanton destruction and, morally, you equate yourself with ISIS which shares your contempt for actual culture, something you both so manifestly lack. It is more than history, more than art. When you pursue this thing, you diminish the honor of these heroes not one bit. You only emphasize … how puny and insignificant by contrast you are. You reveal how
painfully short of their measure you fall.

And it is that that galls you, isn’t it? You despise good men because their virtue condemns your depravity. You know you lack their character, their courage, their integrity, their stature. You know that if you served 50 terms, you will never amount to 1/100th of the men they were. You have wasted your entire life in selfish ambition and here, at your age, you haven’t amounted to anything but a common street hooligan, the shame of your family name. Those proud of you love evil itself.

No matter. No one will remember you in any 150 years. Nothing you do can make anything like the mark these great Virginians made on history’s ledger. You are doomed to the political graveyard of insignificant bureaucrats who lined their pockets, sold out daily and slaved away in tireless service to pointless mediocrity. Just being you another day is your own punishment and yet you still face God for what you propose to do as well. Something is deeply, horribly wrong with your soul, Sir. And you know it. So does all Virginia.

If you suppose brass and marble are the only media in which their immortal valor is inscribed, you are as limited in intellect and character as I suspect. Men like Lee and Jackson, for just two, reach good men at the heart; something you won’t even comprehend, much less ever do. No one, of course, respects you and who, pray tell, could love you? Just asking is to snicker. There is nothing important about you, “Man, proud man, dress’d in a little brief authority, most ignorant of what he’s most assur’d, his glassy essence, like an angry ape”. Still, you might prolong your useless career by imitating conscience, but you have hitherto, year after year, crime after crime, failed to generate the least flicker of that vain hope.

Still, your lascivious ambition, that crying ache for power and
meaning that keeps you awake on your bed at night, might reckon (for all the wrong reasons, as usual) that just perhaps doing the right thing – doing, for once, the hard thing – just might work as policy. Relax, you wouldn’t have to actually care or be right; nothing so unthinkable as all that. You would only have to play the empty part of doing the right thing as if you did have any sense. No inner reform or spiritual growth necessary, just the usual outward show you’ve performed your whole life long. Going through external motions, as ever. You know: SHOWTIME…again!

You could still wring your hands and knit your brow and pretend to care and squeak through the polls but yet accidentally do the actually moral thing for a change. Just to see how it feels. Leave the monuments alone. Muster the courage to…to…do nothing – something you’re usually proficient at. You can prate about how awful those good men were and how terrible their splendid monuments are – no one pays any attention to what you say anyway – and then resume your strong point: noisy inaction. You’ve done nothing so long this one should be easy for a pro like you. Just leave the status quo in place. Don’t worry, no one will accuse you of virtue. Have they ever?

If there were any glimmer of character down in that empty suit anywhere you might even work up the decency to strengthen the existing laws protecting Virginia’s veterans’ memorials. I no more expect it than I expect the shore to drown the sea, but miracles have happened. And God has often worked His wonders with clay as useless as yourself. Perhaps you had a loving grandmother who instilled in you something worthwhile after all a very long time ago. Evidently not. But maybe. Maybe somewhere down deep inside in a secret spot you can yet prove useful in this world by surprising everyone with an honorable act. Just one.

I have strived to be civil, but you do not make it easy. Smearing
reputations, slandering saints and tearing down what better men raised has zero to do with love, unity, tolerance, acceptance, diversity and coexistence. It’s just the usual political spoils game, playing one race/class/group against another to score a win at any cost. The mean, petty loathing of Virginia’s first string heroes outs you as a raging hypocrite just as you were trying to pass for intelligent. What a piece of work.

I can’t pretend anything could ever make me vote for you. Nothing can. So there’s no political leverage I can exert here, to be frank. You could do the right thing here and I would still know it was the exception, done for some underhanded criminal motive as always. Let’s not pretend. But I would thank you for it. Because, in the end, it’s actions that count. Whether you do the right thing for the right motive is between you and God. (No, not “your God”; THE God. Get off that lame routine) Whether you do it at all is where my interest ends. Just leave the statues, graves, monuments and memorials right where the grown-ups put them, Terry. Just fool around doing nothing, you know, like back at Georgetown. Easy. That’s all I ask. And about the most anybody expects of you. Aren’t you tired yet of just being the same old failure and lurching from bungled debacle to bungled debacle? Why not shock the world: open a book, educate yourself and do something less horrible than usual. Resign, even, and leave Virginians to govern Virginia. What a concept. Shouldn’t you be ruining Syracuse instead of Richmond?

With all due respect,
Sherwin W. Dillard, Jr.