

What was he thinking?

You've probably heard about the flap involving Bob McDonnell, Virginia's new Republican governor. McDonnell issued a proclamation calling April Confederate History Month in his state. But he had omitted a key belief of the Confederacy—its support of slavery. Naturally, there was outrage from civil rights leaders, African-Americans and the media. And guess what, McDonnell had to amend his statement to include language about slavery.

Now, I think McDonnell was speaking his mind the first time. I also think Virginia has a large racist population who would be happy to be Confederate once again. And clearly, I think the whole Confederate declaration is a ridiculous, shameful attempt to pander to the more right-wing, racist elements in Virginia. But, from a public relations perspective, I want to know what was McDonnell thinking? Indeed, was he thinking?

McDonnell either is unaware that large segments of the population consider slavery an outrage or he has really bad advisors or simply is ignorant of how the media works. Anybody could have told him that many people would be offended by this offensive proclamation. And furthermore, that the media would pick it up and tear it apart. Sure, he reacted within a day and issued a "fix" and an apology, but why on earth was the governor not aware of the furor his decision would cause?

On the one hand, I think that McDonnell probably does not realize that being associated with confederacy equals racism because he does not see that as racist. He buys the whole Confederate argument that the Civil War was a fight about states' rights. On the other hand, I also think McDonnell does not understand public perception or perhaps he lacks in the public relations advice department.

Whether on purpose, or unwittingly, McDonnell has contributed further to the perception that he is a good ol' boy, happy to maintain Virginia's commitment to Confederate ideals where African-Americans are second class citizens, if citizens at all. McDonnell did not even consider that African-Americans live in his state and that they may not share his rosy view of the importance of celebrating Confederate history.

So, what was he thinking? He was not thinking nor was he receiving any type of credible public relations advice when he issued the proclamation. Obviously, once the criticism started, his PR folks woke up or showed up to the office.

The moral of this story is that perception matters, and that if you do or say something offensive, and you are in public office, you will have to face the music.

UPDATE: Washington Post columnist Robert McCartney makes very good points in his column today.

