

## Civil War History: Education System Impacts Debate

By Erik W. Robelen  
Education Week

WASHINGTON (AP) — You don't have to look far for examples of how the Civil War stirs public debate 150 years after it began.

A private "secession ball" in Charleston, S.C., pegged to the anniversary in February of the state's declared exit from the Union, sparked a protest from the local NAACP chapter. In Virginia, Gov. Robert F. McDonnell, a Republican, got into trouble last year for issuing a proclamation on Confederate History Month without ever mentioning slavery.

Experts say schools can play a powerful role — and hold an important responsibility — in helping young people make sense of a complex conflict whose meaning continues to be hotly disputed in the public sphere. That debate is sure to be amplified, given the prominent attention the war is getting as the sesquicentennial begins this month.

"One hundred and fifty years later, we're still fighting with many of the same questions," said Andrew T. Mink, the director of outreach and education at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville, who has administered a series of federal Teaching American History grants. "People bring a certain cultural understanding of the Civil War, of the Confederacy, of the Union. ... If teachers don't address that, it gets addressed somewhere else."

Recent polling suggests that Americans remain divided in their views of issues tied to the Civil War. The very idea of designating a Confederate History Month, for instance, which Gov. McDonnell's two Democratic predecessors declined to do, split those surveyed. Just more than half of U.S. adults said they oppose such a remembrance, according to the poll by Harris Interactive.

Meanwhile, 54 percent of respondents said they believe the South was mainly fighting to preserve slavery, compared with 46 percent who believe the South was mainly fighting for states' rights. (The poll did not offer further alternatives.)

To be sure, the nation has come a long way. For decades, historians say, slavery had been largely removed from the public conversation about the war and its origins, as had such topics as the role of African-Americans in fighting for the Union. Today, they get much more attention in schools, museums, and planned commemorations of the anniversary.

Most mainstream historians now agree that slavery was the leading reason driving the conflict.

"Slavery is the major cause of the Civil War," said James



I. Robertson, a Civil War historian at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, in Blacksburg. "There are people ... who will argue to the sky that slavery was just a byproduct, but without slavery, there was no cause for the North and the South to start killing each other."

That said, Mr. Robertson and others stress that it was by no means the only factor propelling the war, which involved a web of issues, including differences in the Northern and

One hundred and fifty years later, we're still fighting with many of the same questions

Southern economies, and disputes over the nature of the Union, the role of the federal government, and states' rights.

History educators say one of the biggest challenges for schools in promoting an accurate and deep understanding of the conflict may well be time. At the secondary level, the topic may be part of a yearlong course that covers the full sweep of American history; a lucky teacher might get two years.

"Teachers often find their time extremely limited to get in-depth with the Civil War," said Anthony Napoli, the

director of education at the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, in New York City. "The biggest question is what to cover and what to leave out."

A fundamental understanding of the Civil War is widely seen by historians and history educators as vital for Americans. They call it a defining moment in U.S. history that still has many ramifications and lessons a century and a half later.

"So many of the crucial issues that were connected to the Civil War, its origins and consequences, are still with us today," said Bernard E. Powers, a history professor at the College of Charleston, in South Carolina. "You only have to think about the question of race."

"But it's not just that," he said, citing, for instance, states' rights.

"The political problem still manifests itself today," he said, pointing to recent debates over health care policy. "Can the federal government require people to buy health insurance?"

How schools teach the Civil War flares up from time to time. One recent example concerned a textbook on Virginia history found in many of that state's public elementary schools. It came under fire last fall, after a parent complained about the book's contention, widely disputed by historians, that thousands of blacks served as soldiers for the Confederacy.

A review by a panel of historians of Our Virginia: Past and Present and another text from the same publisher, Five Ponds Press, led the state board of education last month to withdraw approval of both and to overhaul its textbook-review process.

When asked whether current teaching on the war reveals regional biases, most history educators interviewed said that if there are differences, they are far more rare than in the past, and less pronounced.

"I have no doubt you're going to find pockets (of the South) where ... this 'Lost Cause' view is present (in the classroom), but I'll tell you, I think it's much too easy to draw overly simplistic regional distinctions," said Kevin M. Levin, the history department chairman at the private St. Anne's-Belfield School, in Charlottesville, Va., who has led workshops to help teachers with the subject. "I don't think you can draw the same regional distinctions that were drawn a few decades ago."

"I definitely have sat in on a classroom or two that maybe shocked me with an old school, Old South version of the Civil War or the causes," said Donald Stewart, the project director for a grant in South Carolina under the federal Teaching American History program.

But he said that, in his experience, this is the rare exception.

"I'm still waiting to come across the teacher ... who believes that slavery was a side issue (in the Civil War)," said Paul C. Anderson, an associate professor of history at Clemson University, in South Carolina, who also has worked with many K-12 educators. "I have the exact opposite problem. If I get a question, it's that a teacher considers the war to be a moral crusade (by the North), and it was not that way."

"You have to understand that slavery," he added, "was sectional, but racism was national."

Meanwhile, Kimberley Warrick, a curriculum specialist for a set of Georgia school districts and a former history teacher in Montana and Ohio, said she's encountered that mind-set. She said she has perceived some misconceptions from teachers and students who don't live in the South, including that all whites in the antebellum South owned plantations and slaves, and that all Southern whites were, and still are, racist.

"I believe some students may have these misconceptions because time typically does not allow teachers to explore many of the issues deeply," she said.

In Hartford, Vt., Jennifer Boeri-Boyce, who teaches social studies at Hartford Memorial Middle School, said she tries to help students get past the stereotypes.

"This is not just 'the North is great, the South is wrong,'

### We honor the many accomplishments of African Americans.



It is our primary goal as a labor union to better the lives of all people working in the building trades through advocacy, civil demonstration, and the long-held belief that workers deserve a "family wage" — fair pay for an honest day's work.

A family wage, and the benefits that go with it, not only strengthens families, but also allows our communities to become stronger, more cohesive, and more responsive to their citizens' needs.

Our family wage agenda reflects our commitment to people working in the building trades, and to workers everywhere. In this small way, we are doing our part to help people achieve the American Dream. This dream that workers can hold dear regardless of race, color, national origin, gender, creed, or religious beliefs.



**The Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters**

Representing more than 5,000 construction workers in Oregon state.

Do you want to know more about becoming a Union carpenter?  
Go to our website at [www.nwcarpenters.org](http://www.nwcarpenters.org)

Offices in Portland  
1636 East Burnside  
Portland, OR 97214  
503.261.1862 • 800.974.9052

Headquarters in Kent, WA  
25120 Pacific Hwy S, Ste 200  
Kent, WA 98032  
253.945.8800 • 800.573.8333

Enter for a chance to win \$2,500 at [www.TheSkanner.com](http://www.TheSkanner.com)