

The Governor Ralph Northam affair

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Just about everything sordid and degraded in capitalist politics in America has been on display over the past few days in the media frenzy over Virginia Governor Ralph Northam. Virtually the entire Democratic Party establishment is now demanding Northam's resignation, although he has so far resisted the pressure.

The firestorm broke following publication of photographs from Northam's 1984 medical school yearbook page, showing two students, one in blackface and the other in a Ku Klux Klan costume. Initially, one of the two was believed to be Northam, and he issued a public apology on Friday.

On Saturday, however, Northam held a press conference at which he denied that he was either of the two students, although he could not explain why the clearly racist images were on his personal page in the yearbook, claiming only that he had never seen the yearbook before.

Northam went on to admit that on another occasion that same year, 1984, after joining the military as an Army doctor, he had worn blackface in a dance competition in Texas, in imitation of the entertainer Michael Jackson. At the time, Northam was 25 years old, a medical doctor and commissioned officer, so his actions cannot be dismissed on the grounds of youth and immaturity.

The yearbook photo surfaced as part of a right-wing campaign against Northam spearheaded by the internet publication Big League Politics.com, run by a former writer for the fascistic Breitbart News website. It followed a similar exposure of a right-wing Republican politician, Florida Secretary of State Michael Ertel, who resigned last week after his photograph in blackface from 2005 became public.

A few days after Ertel's resignation, Northam became the target of ultra-right vilification for comments made on an interview program in which the

governor, a pediatrician before he entered politics, defended late-term abortions as sometimes medically necessary. His comments were depicted as justifying "infanticide" and ultra-right politicians like Senator Ted Cruz called for his resignation.

Then came the publication of photos from Northam's 1984 yearbook page, and the entire Democratic Party establishment joined the campaign to force Northam out of office. Three top Virginia Democrats—Senator Mark Warner, Senator Tim Kaine and Representative Bobby Scott—issued a joint statement calling on Northam to step down.

They were joined by the black caucus of the state legislature, the Democratic caucuses of the State Senate and House of Delegates, the six other Democratic representatives from Virginia congressional districts, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic National Committee and a host of 2020 presidential candidates.

Virginia state Democrats were particularly concerned because the entire state legislature is up for reelection in 2019, with the Republicans clinging to narrow majorities in both houses. Moreover, if Northam resigns, Lieutenant Governor Justin Fairfax, an African-American Democrat, would succeed him and would be eligible to run for a full term in 2021 with the advantage of virtual incumbency (Virginia is the only state which imposes a one-term limit on its governors).

While the material exposing Northam was dug up by the ultra-right and promoted to serve its political interests, there is little there to surprise anyone familiar with the governor's social and political origins. He grew up on the eastern shore, the most rural and remote portion of the state, and he followed a career path steeped in conservative traditionalism: Virginia Military Institute, medical school followed by an eight-year stint as an Army doctor, then 15 years in a lucrative private practice as a pediatric neurologist in the Norfolk area.

Northam was a Republican, voting for George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004. He entered politics as a candidate for the Democrats, however, in 2007, seeking a state senate seat in the Norfolk area. But even after he entered the legislature, state senate Republicans tried to recruit him to their side, telling him that his conservative fiscal views were more aligned with theirs. The only obstacle was Northam's adamant support for abortion rights, informed by his profession as a medical doctor, which put him out of step with the Christian fundamentalist right.

In 2013, Northam was elected lieutenant governor, serving four years under Democratic Governor Terry McAuliffe, then winning the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 2017 over a Sanders-backed liberal challenger. He ran a thoroughly right-wing general election campaign, promising to "work with" Trump and avoiding issues of economic inequality or any challenge to the wealth and power of the ruling elite.

But when he swept to victory in November over Republican Ed Gillespie, Northam was portrayed by liberal publications like the *Nation* as being at the forefront of a Democratic "wave" repudiating the Trump administration's policies.

The level of sanctimony in the denunciations of Northam by Republicans, Democrats and media pundits is difficult to overstate. The Republicans, of course, tolerate far more blatant racism from President Trump and an array of congressional and gubernatorial candidates than anything of which Northam was guilty 35 years ago. Democratic officeholders and prospective candidates have traded in their hosannas to Northam for imprecations at the flip of a switch in order to pander to identity politics (and disguise their own right-wing support for big business and American imperialism).

As for the corporate media, the Northam affair has served, at least for a few days, as a gigantic diversion. The Sunday television interview programs were largely devoted to the fate of this comparatively obscure state politician, whom not one in a hundred Americans outside the state of Virginia could even have identified.

No need to discuss such issues as the US repudiation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty—bringing forward the danger of nuclear war—or the Trump administration's preparations to invade Venezuela, or Trump's threats to declare a national emergency and assume quasi-dictatorial powers if he cannot browbeat

Congress into approving a border wall, or the freezing death of workers and students in last week's cold snap.

And with its images of blackface and the KKK, albeit 35 years old, the Northam affair provides yet another opportunity to portray race—along with gender, sexual orientation and other "identities"—as the fundamental dividing line in American society. Anything to avoid the most important dividing line: that between the ruling elite of billionaires and multi-millionaires and the vast majority of the population—the working class, which is now beginning to move in a class struggle increasingly directed against the capitalist system.

There is nothing to defend in Northam. However, there is something massively fraudulent in the political-media operation launched against him. If Northam is forced out, he will be replaced by someone else, no less right-wing and reactionary, in a ritualist purge that will have no effect on anything of significance, least of all the conditions that give rise to racism.



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