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"This is blowing up": Inside the chaos that led to Northam's admission and reversal on racist photo

By MARIE ALBIGES
STAFF WRITER | MAY 23, 2019



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The Executive Mansion in Richmond, home of Virginia's governor. (Governor's office)

The afternoon of Feb. 1, Gov. Ralph Northam was supposed to go to a soldier's funeral.

At around 3:30 p.m, before leaving by helicopter, the Democratic governor was called into the office of Clark Mercer, his chief of staff.

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A photo had surfaced. It showed a person in blackface and another in Ku Klux Klan robes standing next to each other at what looked like a party. And it was on the governor's 1984 medical school yearbook page beside photos of Northam.

Mercer showed his boss the photo posted by a conservative blog on his cell phone, and the two debated whether it was real or Photoshopped.

Northam, who's from the Eastern Shore and had worked in Hampton Roads as a doctor, dispatched a friend in Norfolk to go to the Eastern Virginia Medical School library and see the yearbook, and hopped on a helicopter to go to the funeral in Suffolk.

It started snowing. While the governor was flying over Petersburg, Mercer called. The photo was real.

Things started moving quickly. The helicopter turned around. Northam headed back to Richmond.

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The interviews are summarized in the firm's investigation into yearbooks at Eastern Virginia Medical School and the school's inclusion and diversity efforts over the years. Northam was interviewed twice, on March 27 and May 8. His chief of staff was interviewed on April 22 and May 14.

The report was made public Wednesday.

When Northam returned to Richmond, Mercer and a senior staffer gave him two tasks: release a statement as quickly as possible, and start making calls to the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus.

"It literally was blowing up," Northam told investigators.

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Clark Mercer, chief of staff to Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam. (Governor's office)

Getting a statement out was the most important thing to do, Mercer thought.

"At the time, (our thought) was if you don't make a statement tonight, your governorship is over," he told investigators.

"Clark Mercer, chief of staff to Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, started giving a speech without any

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He said he talked to U.S. Reps. Bobby Scott and Don McEachin, fellow Virginia Democrats who are both black. To members of the state's legislative black caucus, he recalled saying "There's this terrible picture on my yearbook page and I'm very sorry and I'll take responsibility."

He spoke with Del. Luke Torian, D-Prince William, a member of the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus.

"Which one are you?" Torian asked.

"Luke, I can't answer that, I have no memory of this," Northam replied.

In between calls, senior staffers and a crisis team came in, urging him to release a statement quickly.

"I shouldn't use the term raising a gun to my head, but they were saying we need to do it quickly. This is blowing up," Northam told investigators.

Amid the chaos, Northam was struggling with how to take responsibility. He said he thought it wasn't him in the photo, but it was also from 35 years ago.

"The last thing I wanted to do is say 'This isn't me' and then have someone come

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That day, he couldn't say for sure he wasn't in the photo. When one senior staffer asked him point blank if it was him, Northam responded, "I don't think so."

The staffer insisted: "Are you sure?"

"I don't think that's me," he responded.

He seemed, as a physician, to never speak in absolutes, staffers told investigators.

But they also said from the start, Northam said he couldn't remember the photo and had never seen it.

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Del. Kathy Tran, D-Fairfax, listens to a speech on the floor of the House during session at the Capitol in Richmond on Wednesday, Jan. 30, 2019. Tran's abortion bill is erupting into a fierce partisan clash as video of a legislative hearing goes viral. (Steve Helber/AP Photo)

The governor's office had already faced a tough week.

On Jan. 30, Northam went on a WTOP-FM radio show and fielded questions about a failed bill carried by Del. Kathy Tran — a Democrat — that loosened restrictions

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Mercer told investigators Northam gave "high-level answers as a physician who had delivered babies" — Northam is a pediatric neurologist — but not answers "that a political person would have necessarily recommended."

Explaining what would happen in a case where a fetus had deformities or is nonviable, Northam made comments that were soon seized on by political opponents and others: "The infant would be delivered, the infant would be kept comfortable, the infant would be resuscitated if that's what the mother and the family desired, and then a discussion would ensue between the physicians and the mother."

His comments eventually led President Donald Trump and others to accuse Northam of supporting infanticide. Mercer recalled the governor's office received death threats late that night.

"Walking into Friday, half of the state already had their knives sharpened and out for the governor," Mercer told investigators.

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A photo from Gov. Ralph Northam's medical school yearbook shows two people, one in blackface and one in a Ku Klux Klan robe and hood. A half-page from the 1984 Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook, photographed by The Virginian-Pilot on Friday, Feb. 1, 2019. (Eastern Virginia Medical School)

Two days later, as the photo was being circulated on the internet, calls and texts were pouring in to Northam's office. Statements from officials started coming. The press wanted to know what was going on.

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was transpiring."

But no political allies came to Northam's rescue that night, Mercer recalled, saying they "abandoned him en masse." He described feeling like the governor's office was "on an island."

"Officials were saying it didn't matter whether it was him or not, before (Northam) uttered a word," Mercer said, adding they wouldn't give the governor a "heads up" about what they were going to post on Twitter.

Northam was given three options for a statement. Full denial, full acceptance of responsibility, or something in between, investigators wrote.

Mercer recommended accepting responsibility. Northam told his staff to prepare that statement.

"(Northam) interpreted that if he said, 'It's not me and someone comes out and says it is me ... the one thing I have is my credibility, my honor, and that would devastate me,'" Mercer said.

A group of staffers writing the statement huddled around a laptop in a conference room, tweaking one word here, another here.

Eventually, Northam read it and approved it, and the statement was sent at 6:10 p.m.

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"I am deeply sorry for the decision I made to appear as I did in this photo and for the hurt that decision caused then and now," it said.

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, with his wife Pam at his side, said at a press conference in the Executive Mansion on Saturday, Feb. 2, 2019, that he is not the person in the racist photo in the EVMS yearbook and he will not resign. (Steve Earley)

An hour later, calls for his resignation began, from leaders in the General

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"I said, 'What do you need me to do and I'll do it.' That's the mode I was in," he said. "There was an urgency to get the statement out. If I had to do it over again, I'd do it differently. I always rely on my communications people. You see these statements ... I don't know why the statement went in the direction it did."

Later that night, Northam issued a video statement on Twitter.

"That photo, and the racist and offensive attitudes it represents does not reflect that person I am today or the way I have conducted myself as a soldier, a doctor and a public servant," he said. "I am deeply sorry. I cannot change the decisions I made nor can I undo the harm my behavior caused then and today."

First Lady Pam Northam — who was certain he wasn't in the photo — didn't know her husband would accept responsibility for it. If she had, she told investigators, she would've "physically stood there and stopped it."

Once the statement was released, she demanded her husband go home.

Around 10 p.m., Northam retreated to the Executive Mansion. Once home, he got a call from his Virginia Military Institute roommate, a practicing dentist.

"Have you taken a good look at it?" the roommate asked. "I don't think it's you."

Investigators wrote that the roommate said Northam's teeth had "never looked that good" and that Northam never wore bowties or had plaid pants — both of which the person in blackface is wearing in the photo.

The roommate also noted Northam holds drinks in his left hand, and the person in blackface was holding a can in their right hand.

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a press conference and protesters made their first appearances, Northam's staff tried to get a copy of the yearbook.

But, investigators wrote, "there was a feeding frenzy and it was impossible to find one."

Northam called a former EVMS classmate who still practices medicine in Hampton Roads. She told him she didn't think it was him, and that she knew of several instances where photos were misplaced in that yearbook.

"Once he could sit in a quiet room and think critically about this, any doubt or indecision he had was gone," Mercer told investigators. "Then he didn't care what these political people thought. He couldn't care less. He was going to do what he was going to do and plow forward."

Mercer acknowledged the 2:30 p.m. press conference — where Northam recalled painting his face black as part of a Michael Jackson costume for a dance contest, then appeared ready to demonstrate his moonwalking skills to the press corps until his wife stopped him — could've "been handled differently too."

In the days following the chaos around the initial publication of the photo, Mercer said the governor wondered who could be in it.

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In the report, McGuire Woods said investigators couldn't conclusively determine the identity of either person in the photo.

The report noted investigators received a forensic facial recognition report from Alston & Bird, a law firm that's done work for Northam's political action committee, as his latest campaign finance report shows. But the firm found the image wasn't of high enough quality to compare it to other photos.

Mercer said at one point in Northam's conversations with classmates, a name came up.

"Folks wondered where that person might be," Mercer told investigators. "We all have our suspicions as to who it might be."

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