

How Virginia lost political clout

By Robert Shultis

"History is to the nation as memory is to the individual. As a person deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he has been or where he is going, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future."

— Colin Campbell quoting historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Schlesinger's use of the word "nation" could apply to a state as well — Virginia, for example. As I was reading Susan Dunn's outstanding new history, "Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison & the Decline of Virginia," Schlesinger's comment kept coming back to me.

As Dunn relates in her book, Virginia was first with Jamestown in 1607. It retained its supremacy as the leading colony and state throughout the Colonial and Revolutionary periods, and during the early era under the Constitution, which had been enacted 1787-89.

We can all be proud of the contributions of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, John Marshall and others during that period. Virginians occupied the presidency for 32 of America's first 36 years. Then, Virginia's decline began. This is the history that Dunn so brilliantly relates. After Monroe, only one lifelong Virginian, John Tyler, has since become president. Tyler was elected vice president and assumed the presidency upon the death of William Henry Harrison.

What happened to Virginia? As Dunn aptly describes, the powers in Virginia, largely the landed aristocracy of the

BOOK REVIEW

"Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison & the Decline of Virginia" by Susan Dunn. Published by Basic Books, New York. 224 pages, \$27.50.

Tidewater and Piedmont, maintained their control of the Commonwealth, continuing to lead their gracious plantation lives, while making sure others did the work. Virginia became a byword in the country for slavery, provincialism and poverty.

At the same time, the North and the upper Midwest industrialized and democratized gradually. They built their intellectual and economic resources far beyond those of the Old Dominion. The trend, so well described in this book, affected every aspect of life in Virginia.

Politics — Only male landholders could vote.

Although free white males living beyond the Blue Ridge outnumbered their counterparts in the Tidewater and Piedmont areas, far fewer of them could and did vote.

Education — As

Dunn describes, serious education, even at grade-school levels, was far more limited than in northern states. Higher levels even more so.

Infrastructure — Same thing. No Erie Canal for Virginia. The author devotes chapters to each of the several aspects that led to Virginia's decline. Especially interesting is Chapter 7, "Another Constitutional Convention" held in Richmond starting in 1829.

This was a state constitutional convention, called to make sure Virginia stayed on

the same track it had been, and not move in the direction the northern and western states were moving. Chapters on education, tariffs, roads, canals and railroads describe how the powers of the time, largely the Tidewater aristocracy, kept Virginia from progressing sociologically and economically.

Although they are part of the book's title, and although their advice and counsel were frequently solicited, as the author describes, Jefferson and Madison weren't the prime movers in this downward spiral. Jefferson did revert largely to his "states rights" philosophy after retiring from the presidency. He probably contributed more intellectually to the "Virginia is paramount" idea and, as a result, to its decline more than did Madison.

Jefferson largely turned his back on the philosophy of fellow Virginians Washington and Marshall, and opposed their programs and ideas for strong federal control. Madison flip-flopped on various issues, then back again after leaving the presidency. Dunn illustrates these points many times throughout her excellent book.

Dunn's epilogue jumps forward about 100 years, to the 1930s, when Franklin Roosevelt was president and eager to implement numerous federal programs to help the country recover from its worst depression in history. Virginia's leaders at the time, Senators Glass and Byrd, together with their coterie of supporters, opposed most of FDR's proposals. They continued to maintain their philosophy of state supremacy.

This book, in every way, deserves a thorough reading and study. The history of our state should be important to all of us, especially our younger citizens, whether native-born or adopted Virginians. The state's history is far more than Jamestown, Williamsburg and Yorktown, important as those are. Dunn, a professor of humanities at Williams College in Massachusetts, has given us a great book for anyone interested in where we are, how we got here, and where we go from here. □

Robert Shultis reviewed "George Washington's Legacy of Leadership" by A. Ward Burian, earlier in June.

