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Mark Warner's Bull Run

So, a "Connecticut Yankee" will be Virginia's governor. Perhaps it's not surprising. Mark Warner campaigned for seven years and poured millions from his own pockets into the effort. But if one had not paid attention to politics in the Old Dominion recently, the outcome might be a shock.

"Virginia," nearly everyone says, "is a conservative state." That is largely true. "And," nearly everyone continues, "it has become Republican." This corollary requires examination. In 2001, the Democrats could not win the governorship; the Republicans had to lose it, and they committed every mistake necessary to ensure the loss.

Mr. Warner presented himself as a centrist and campaigned as a businessman, not a politician. By emphasizing economic issues, he never had to defend the Democrats' leftist social agenda. He made symbolic overtures to the Republican base, never gratuitously offending them. He wooed Virginia's rural and small town voters, wearing hunting clothes and opening campaign appearances with country music. He so carefully tiptoed around the gun issue that the National Rifle Association's fearsome grass-roots mobilization mechanism remained idle. He did this while holding his own base. Prospective Democratic candidates elsewhere are furiously scribbling notes.

Mark Earley espoused a "big tent" Republicanism but found the tent empty. Instead of country music, Mr. Earley inflicted Filipino folk songs on a bemused electorate. His "gun rights" position had soft spots. On "heritage" issues, he needlessly antagonized the Sons of Confederate Veterans over a license

plate logo and the continuation of Confederate History Month. A Democrat until 1987, Mr. Earley never fully repudiated his opposition to Virginia's "right to work" law. He even soft-pedaled his pro-life views. His "outreach" failed to attract Democratic voters and left natural supporters feeling ignored. Mr. Earley touted his life membership in the NAACP, but how many of his fellow members voted for him?

Conservative voters knew Mr. Warner's flattery was insincere, but also that Mr. Earley's disdain was real. That they were able to draw the distinction is illustrated by other results.

The Republican heartbreaker was lieutenant governor candidate Jay Katzen's narrow loss to Tim Kaine, who ran 65,000 votes behind Mr. Warner, while Mr. Katzen was only 3,000 votes behind Mr. Earley. Mr. Katzen came so close with little financial support. The only TV ads that mentioned his name were his opponent's negative ones. If the GOP had put a fraction of the money lavished on Mr. Earley's campaign into Mr. Katzen's effort, he would have cruised to victory. Unlike Mr. Earley, Mr. Katzen was not afraid to draw distinctions between himself and his opponent and highlight Mr. Kaine's far-outside-the-mainstream positions. When this earned the censure of The Washington Post, it only helped him more. Some heads should roll over this unnecessary loss.

What money can do was shown in Jerry Kilgore's victory in the attorney

general's contest. Mr. Kilgore got more votes than anyone else on the ballot in rolling over Donald McEachin. If a little of the money that went into Mr. Kilgore's media blitz had been diverted to Mr. Katzen, both could have won. Incidentally, Mr. Kilgore was the only Republican candidate strongly attacked for pro-life views, to little effect.

In House of Delegates races, Republicans gained 12 seats, increasing their majority to 30 in the 100-member House. With this and continued Republican control of the Senate, Mr. Warner will have little freedom of action, if — a big if — the Republicans can act together intelligently. They may contrive to fritter away this advantage, too.

The Republican dominance of Virginia that once seemed so secure began with a long, painful climb back from the narrow gubernatorial defeat of 1989 — the fourth statewide election loss in the 1980s. Groundwork was laid by the patient labors, dauntless courage, and solid integrity of Pat McSweeney, party state chairman from 1992 to 1996. This foundation was built upon by the savvy George Allen in his underfunded but victorious 1993 gubernatorial campaign and his ouster of Sen. Chuck Robb in 2000. The pattern continued until Gov. James S. Gilmore III became Republican national chairman and succumbed to the temptation to "go national" — a temptation that may claim more victims.

Other lessons from this election: • Mr. Warner showed that Democrats gain by running closer to

Republicans, but Mr. Early demonstrated that running on quasi-Democratic issues is a losing proposition. Is anyone sharp enough to draw the conclusion that Republican positions are winners and Democratic ones are losers?

• Beware the "discouraged voter." Turnout was below 40 percent. We can guess that most of the stay-at-homes were conservatives, tired of empty promises that never translate into action. Republicans must show these voters that tramping to the polls is not a waste of time and that

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Republican victories mean something in ways that matter to them. Many Virginia Republicans are former Democrats who fled the party of their ancestors to escape an increasingly hard leftism. They cannot be pleased to see the same thing appearing in their new political home.

• "New Virginians" — recent immigrants to Northern Virginia and elsewhere in the commonwealth — were not attracted by Mr. Earley's multicultural message. Relatively few of them are yet citizens and voters, but those who are show a pref-

erence for "big government" prescriptions. "New Virginian" candidates that Republicans ran in specially drawn districts were swamped by Democratic incumbents. Republicans are successful at turning Americans into conservatives; but the two-step process of turning immigrants into Americans and then into conservatives seems beyond them.

• You still can't believe The Post, which tagged Mr. Earley as an exemplar of "orthodox Virginia conservatism," leaving real conservatives puzzled. Astute readers see The Post's blatant Democratic partisanship for the joke that it is. Still, it does tend to skew a state's politics when nearly a quarter of the electorate lives in the home delivery zone of that dissembling daily.

Results in legislative races show the reserve of popular support for Virginia Republicans. What must they do to tap it? They must fearlessly proclaim their small government, low tax and socially conservative philosophy, and equally boldly expose the Democratic Party's preference for governmental tyranny and social anarchy. (That would solve the "discouraged voter" problem.) Put Tim Kaine in the political crosshairs now; there could scarcely be a fatter, easier target. Move quietly but forcefully for national immigration reforms. Now. Fast. Dress down in camouflage and dress up in Confederate gray. Virginia Republicans can recover if they whistle the right tune: "Carry Me Back to Old Virginy."

RICHARD HINES

Mr. Hines is the president of RTH Consulting, a Virginia-based political consulting group.