



BOARD OF VISITORS

201 SMITH HALL, LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA 24450-0304

Message from Teddy Gottwald '83 to the VMI Community

June 16, 2025

Many of you have seen the press lately regarding a Virginia General Assembly Senate committee holding a special meeting and rejecting eight Board of Visitor members appointed recently this year by Gov. Youngkin, including three VMI BOV members: Jon Hartsock '00, Steve Reardon '84, and José Suárez '82. We have received guidance from the Virginia Attorney General that these three are still members of our BOV in good standing until the full General Assembly meets in January and then considers the governor's appointments.

In a letter to university rectors, Sen. Scott Surovell, majority leader of the Senate, implied that Gov. Youngkin's appointees will not put "institutional needs and the broader public interest" ahead of "external political pressures" and directives from the governor. He further stated that the General Assembly "will not confirm individuals who do not possess the judgment, character, or willingness" to put good governance ahead of "excessive partisan inclinations." Below, you will find my response to Sen. Surovell.

We have a strong Board today, and Gov. Youngkin has continued the Virginia tradition of appointing highly qualified members. Our board has been accused repeatedly, with no evidence, of putting politics ahead of doing what's right for VMI. I have asked for evidence of this, or of improper meddling by the Executive Branch in our governance, and have not received any.

June 10th response to Senator Surovell:

Dear Senator Surovell,

Thank you for your email and letter dated June 9th. I appreciate your input regarding the governance and oversight of Virginia's colleges and universities. It is helpful to know the concerns you expressed in your letter, and I can assure you that the VMI Board of Visitors shares your desire for good and proper governance.

The General Assembly in January chose to reject two highly qualified and capable alumni appointees to our BOV with little explanation, leaving us to wonder about the reasoning. Quintin Elliott served for more than twenty years in the Virginia Air National Guard and was later named Deputy Secretary of Transportation by Governor Northam. Clifford Foster is a highly respected financial professional who has given back to VMI extensively. Both were expected to strengthen our Board Finance Committee. The three alumni nominees in question today are all equally qualified. José Suárez is a US Navy veteran, an accomplished businessman



and expert on green energy. Steve Reardon is a respected lawyer who served in the US Army and Army Reserve. Jon Hartsock is a twenty-year veteran of the US Army - a combat veteran who later served with distinction in leadership positions at VMI. I respectfully take exception to any suggestion that these five individuals somehow do not possess the judgment, character, or willingness to follow good governance practices per your letter.

Your letter also suggests that Governor Youngkin has given our BOV members binding directives to follow, in conflict with proper governance. I am not aware of any directive, binding or otherwise, that the Governor has given members of our BOV. I believe that any suggestion of that sort has no basis in fact. In February, our Board voted to not extend the contract of our Superintendent, Major General Cedric Wins. This tough decision has been unpopular with some, and due to the sensitive nature of this personnel matter, the BOV has not commented on it. Our decision was based on several years of performance reviews, together with an assessment of our institutional needs, and then made after thoughtful and thorough discussion. Governor Youngkin was not involved in this decision, nor am I aware of any directive or guidance from the Governor on this decision to any Board member.

The VMI Board of Visitors has received guidance from the Secretary of Education regarding the State's desire to keep Virginia schools affordable. We share that concern and have also had extensive discussions on tuition and fee increases. On this, we have been aligned with Executive Branch guidance, but our decisions have been based on what we feel is best for VMI, and not on any binding directives.

If you have heard of any undue interference from Governor Youngkin with any of our Board members, I ask you to share the specifics of that information with me. Our Board takes seriously the Code of Virginia and our bylaws, and we have a strong desire to see VMI operate independent of improper political interference so that we can continue to produce educated and honorable men and women, many of whom then serve our State and our Country with distinction. I welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this matter further.

Sincerely,

Thomas E. Gottwald
President
VMI Board of Visitors