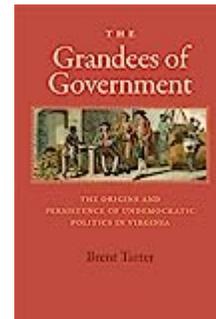




Brent Tarter. *The Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013. ix + 453 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3431-0.



Reviewed by Lauren Haumesser (PhD student, University of Virginia)

Published on H-SAWH (August, 2014)

Commissioned by Lisa A. Francavilla (The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series and Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters)

Elite Power in Virginia's Politics, 1619-2010

In writing *The Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia*, Brent Tarter set himself the difficult task of writing a cohesive history of four hundred years of Virginia politics and has succeeded in uniting all of Virginia's political history by exposing the pernicious effects of elite control. The elites who have presided over Virginia's governments, Tarter argues, used their power to protect their private economic interests and when their power was challenged, they resisted change. The founding at Jamestown initially shaped Virginia's political institutions and culture. That beginning profoundly influenced practical politics and institutions of government ... into the twenty-first century (p. 6).

Building on histories of colonial Virginia, Tarter is not so much opening a new line of inquiry as offering a necessary corrective to the existing historiography. Kathleen Brown has argued that Virginians continually redefined categories of race and gender so as to support elite Virginians' patriarchy.[1] Tarter expands

on this insight by examining how politics in particular supported the elite patriarchy at the expense of common people, slaves, women, and Native Americans. Tarter's work also complicates arguments made by Eric Foner and others, for the expansion and redefinition of freedom in American history by showing how Virginia's elites habitually rescinded any liberties that challenged their own power.[2] The ways in which elites have limited freedoms for others has been as important a force in history as the struggles to expand freedom's reach. Tarter's work forces us to reassess the argument that the American story is one of expanding freedom and to question how many freedoms have to be taken away before we discredit this narrative.

Tarter's first four chapters deal with the origins and early solidification of elitism in Virginia politics. He argues that the General Assembly that met in 1619 created a government that was representative but elitist and that this model has persisted throughout Virginia's history. Tarter also examines Virginia's religious history, argu-

ing that parishes became units of local government and, less importantly and less convincingly, that Virginians were profoundly religious. Tarter demonstrates that Bacon's Rebellion was not merely a frontiersmen's uprising, but was rather a class-conscious rejection of the elite attitudes toward the average men and women who referred to themselves as the "Commonality" (p. 77). He notes that after the rebellion elites hardly redressed the commonality's grievances. Chapter 4 argues that the American Revolution is another example of how elites resisted challenges to their power. Tarter alleges that elites saw the Crown as an outside threat to their power over the colony and the commonality. Men like Thomas Jefferson did not intend their words to be taken as support for total equality, or indeed the equality of anyone but the planter class of which he was a member. The elites were not true revolutionaries.

And yet the revolution the elites began had unintended consequences. Baptists, women, and common people co-opted the language of liberty that the elites had developed to protect their own power from the Crown and used it against the elites themselves. Chapter 6 demonstrates that the language of liberty forced elites to consider abolishing slavery, though the perceived difficulty of doing so eventually encouraged statesmen to retreat and argue for slavery as a positive good. And in chapter 7, Tarter shows how common men deployed the language of liberty to expand the franchise in 1851. The elites who rebelled against the Crown never imagined the ways their words would be deployed against them.

Tarter next considers the Civil War, the Lost Cause myth, and the white, elite control that the Lost Cause myth helped create and sustain. He convincingly demonstrates that it was the desire of elites for continued control over their government and their slaves, and not a belief in states' rights that pushed Virginians to secede from the Union. Tarter next argues that the Lost Cause myth allowed all Virginians to understand their history as the history of the elite. As Tarter writes, "the things that were almost exclusively the property of the wealthier white planter families, became generalized to belong to the whole population, as if all white and all black people in their little cabins shared equally in the honest, pure, gentle, and good things that plantation slavery had in fact bestowed upon only a very few people" (p. 260). This understanding of Virginia's history in turn justified policies aimed at restoring a glorified, elite, white, mythologized past. The Constitution of 1902 disenfranchised black and poor white men and empowered elite white men. Tarter argues that legendary politician Harry

Byrd profited politically from that disenfranchisement. Though the civil rights movement challenged the laws that disenfranchised African Americans, it did not completely change the Lost Cause narrative on which disenfranchisement rested.

The final section of the book deals with how the idea of Virginia, supported by inaccurate histories that glorified elite control, has influenced the course of Virginia politics to the present day. Tarter shows how historian Douglas Southall Freeman's work conflated the elites' culture with all of Virginia's culture. Those elite Virginians were so great, the argument went, that the "historian of Virginia should strive to pass on to his or her readers only the best parts of the old civilization" (p. 346). By writing about only the grandees of Virginia's history, historians led generations of Virginians to believe that the grandees had done their best to represent the interests of all Virginians. Tarter's work has shown readers that this is untrue. Elites have pursued their private interests in public office since the seventeenth century. In his final chapter, Tarter suggests that the elitist impulse in Virginian history is in fact present in all American history.

Tarter supports his narrative primarily with documents drawn from the public sphere, including newspapers, editorials, letters to the editor, petitions, government proceedings, legislation, speeches, and founding documents. His argument is strongest in the places where it matters most, in his argument for the creation of a government of elites in the colonial era, and for elites' belief in the righteousness and necessity of protecting their power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the process of examining this elite control, Tarter has also done justice to the narrative of history's oppressed, including women, Native Americans, and enslaved peoples, and that is a great accomplishment.

The study's broad chronological scope is necessary to identify the patterns of elitism that biographers or political historians of one particular era would miss. Over the course of the book's four hundred pages, however, readers may wish that Tarter had capitalized on his strengths by paring down the narrative in areas less essential to his argument. The second chapter, for instance, contains plenty of argumentation about Virginians' religiosity but less on how the parish as local government reinforced elite power, even though the latter is more important to the book's argument. Such diversions can distract from Tarter's otherwise astute analysis. Readers may also wish for shorter sentences and more accessible

prose.

Tarter could also have been more explicit in the way he engages with the historiography. In a book with such a broad chronological scope, readers are bound to be unfamiliar with one or more of the periods Tarter covers. Although he cites the relevant literature, more discursive footnotes and a clearer outline of the literature on democratizing forces in American politics would have helped readers understand how Tarter's analysis contributes to that conversation. As it is, readers require foreknowledge of Eric Foner and Woody Holton's work to see that Tarter is offering an important counterpoint to their narratives.[3]

Tarter acknowledges that democratic forces have played a role in Virginian and American politics, but he

argues that elite power is more profound: elites have both controlled the government and written the flattering histories that perpetuate their own power.

Notes

[1]. Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[2]. Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998).

[3]. Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh>

Citation: Lauren Haumesser. Review of Tarter, Brent, *The Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. August, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41374>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.