



# The Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia

*Brent Tarter*

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From the formation of the first institutions of representative government and the use of slavery in the seventeenth century through the American Revolution, the Civil War, the civil rights movement, and into the twenty-first century, Virginia's history has been marked by obstacles to democratic change. In *The Grandees of Government*, Brent Tarter offers an extended commentary based in primary sources on how these undemocratic institutions and ideas arose, and how they were both perpetuated and challenged.

Although much literature on American republicanism focuses on the writings of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, among others, Tarter reveals how their writings were in reality an expression of federalism, not of republican government. Within Virginia, Jefferson, Madison, and others such as John Taylor of Caroline and their contemporaries governed in ways that directly contradicted their statements about representative—and limited—government. Even the democratic rhetoric of the American Revolution worked surprisingly little immediate change in the political practices, institutions, and culture of Virginia. The counterrevolution of the 1880s culminated in the Constitution of 1902 that disfranchised the remainder of African Americans. Virginians who could vote reversed the democratic reforms embodied in the constitutions of 1851, 1864, and 1869, so that the antidemocratic Byrd organization could dominate Virginia's public life for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.

Offering a thorough reevaluation of the interrelationship between the words and actions of Virginia's political leaders, *The Grandees of Government* provides an entirely new interpretation of Virginia's political history.

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