

## Article

# “Are Not Our Interests the Same?”: Black Protest, the Lost Cause, and Coalition Building in Readjuster Virginia

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**Abstract:** Virginia’s Readjuster Party was the most successful interracial political coalition in the post-Reconstruction South. Initially arising from a conflict over the payment of Virginia’s massive public debt, the new party became a force of liberal reform and democracy in the Old Dominion. It represented an alternative path before Jim Crow segregation and disfranchisement became the norm. While the Readjusters have long interested historians, the significant work performed by Black Readjusters in building and sustaining the always-tenuous coalition has gone understudied. Knowing their white counterparts were anxious about interracial political alliances, Black Readjusters eased these anxieties by using the Lost Cause. Black Readjusters condemned carpetbaggers as corrupt and repurposed the myth of the faithful slave to strengthen the interracial coalition, press for their own demands, and demonstrate their status as true southerners. The strategy and its seeming contradictions succeeded in some cases and failed in others, and its ultimate effects remain unclear. By shifting focus to Black Readjusters’ coalition-building labors, this article centers Black political activism and challenges the presumptions scholars make about interracial politics and white supremacy.

**Keywords:** politics; race; US South; civil rights; labor; white supremacy; debt; Civil War; Reconstruction; slavery



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Black residents of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, were confused. The much-respected Black clergyman from Baltimore, George F. Bragg, delivered the benediction at the 1931 unveiling of a “faithful slave” memorial. Just a stone’s throw away from the spot abolitionist John Brown and his men made their fateful raid against slavery, the United Daughters of the Confederacy honored Heyward Shepherd, a free Black man who was ironically the first casualty in Brown’s attack. The memorial boulder pointed to Shepherd as “exemplifying the character and faithfulness of thousands of Negroes” to their enslavers. Black residents could not see why Bragg would participate in a ceremony “Designed to Ridicule His Own People”.<sup>1</sup> Others joined in the criticism. Carl Murphy, editor of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, insisted that Bragg had been “hoodwinked,”<sup>2</sup> and W.E.B. Du Bois called Bragg’s participation “disgraceful”. Bragg defended himself, citing his ministerial obligation to all of God’s children.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, however, this was not Bragg’s first run-in with Lost Cause mythology. Fifty years earlier, the barely 20-year-old Bragg edited a weekly newspaper in Petersburg, Virginia, known as *The Lancet*. Bragg’s paper vociferously called for equal political and civil rights for Black Virginians and served as a powerful advocate of the interracial Readjuster Party during a time “before Jim Crow” (Dailey 2000a).<sup>4</sup> At the same time Confederate apologists were crafting their Lost Cause mythologies of happy and faithful slaves, Bragg and other Black journalists saw an opportunity. Rather than evidence of inherent Black submissiveness to white domination, this mythology could serve as a weapon of protest. Lost Cause presumptions of Black humility and deference helped to blur the lines of accommodation and protest, fostering the type of confusion surrounding Bragg’s participation in the Harpers Ferry ceremony. Indeed, *The Lancet*’s 1884 assertion

that it was enslaved Black men who protected Virginia's "fair daughters in times of war while their husbands, fathers, and sons were battling to keep him in slavery"<sup>5</sup> was echoed when the UDC spokeswoman at the Shepherd memorial ceremony declared, to applause, that Confederates "went to the war feeling their women were protected". On the surface, there seems to have been agreement. But the utility of the Lost Cause was not so much in recollecting an imagined past; it was about deploying that manufactured past to bring about a future in need of manufacturing. Another speaker at the Shepherd memorial expressed this clearly: "Heyward Shepherd is not only a symbol of the happy relationship that is gone, but of the future".<sup>6</sup> Men like Bragg certainly disagreed about the alleged happiness of this "lost" relationship, but they nevertheless agreed that the myth could shape the future, even if that future looked drastically different from the one envisioned by white supremacists.

And while Bragg's motivations in 1931 may have been purely spiritual, they were entirely political in the early 1880s. He and other Black Virginians exploited the Lost Cause to press for equality. More importantly, they did so to build a political coalition that could provide them with the means of achieving it. The Readjuster Party was the most successful interracial political movement in the post-Reconstruction South. It owed its electoral and policy successes not only to Black men's votes, but also to the efforts of Black men and women to make the coalition work and survive. Like all such coalitions in the Gilded Age South, the ties that bound Black and white men together were always tenuous. Remembered traumas of war and passionate arguments against allegedly corrupt "Negro Rule" had instilled in many whites a racist animosity that proved difficult to overcome. Black Virginians were nevertheless well acquainted with assuaging the delicate sensibilities of their white compatriots. Lost Cause myths of "faithful slaves" and "terrible carpetbaggers" helped them do this.

Black Readjusters, particularly Black editors and journalists like Bragg, led the charge, exposing the flexibility of the Lost Cause in the process. By denouncing corrupt and conniving carpetbaggers, they distanced themselves from the memory of Reconstruction with the goal of boosting their political clout among potential white allies. Meanwhile, the myth of the faithful slave steadfastly defending white womanhood during the Civil War served as a potent weapon against the even newer myth of the lustful Black rapist. This repurposing of Lost Cause narratives represents one example in the long history of Black men and women blurring the lines between accommodation and protest (Among others, see [Kelley 1994](#); [Jordan 2001](#); [Kelley 2010](#)). It also reinforces arguments about the diverse origins, uses, and temporal outlooks of Lost Cause proponents. The Lost Cause was not a monolithic tool created by a designing cabal of politicians, terrorists, and writers bent simply on white supremacy. Its symbols were contestably constructed and exploited by people of every stripe for drastically different and seemingly contradictory purposes. Moreover, the Lost Cause's recollection of an allegedly bygone era of happiness and good-feeling was primarily forward looking. While anxieties about the chaotic uncertainties, changes, and upheavals of the Gilded Age often motivated such fanciful recollections, the intent was most often based on a desire to address the causes of these anxieties, not to revert to a period before they existed ([Foster 1987](#); [Janney 2008, 2013](#); [Blair 2004](#); [Blight 2001](#); [Clark 2005](#); [Prince 2014](#); [Domby 2020](#); [Stanley 2021](#)). Mythologizing the Old South could help build a New South. But the New South that came to be was just as much a product of unintended consequences as premeditated calculation.

More importantly, Black Readjusters' use of the Lost Cause calls for a necessary reconsideration of the Readjuster coalition. Historians of the Readjusters—and postbellum interracial movements generally—tend to focus primarily on the extent of whites' commitment to interracialism. In large part, this is a problem of sources. But it is also a problem of framing. The creation of narrative-form tally sheets with "true" interracialism on one side and cynical political expediency on the other demonstrates the immense ideological power of white supremacy and the shortcomings of history's "might-have-beens" ([Dailey 2000a](#); [Moore 1974](#); [Tarter 2016](#); [Deglar \[1974\] 2000](#), pp. 269–70, 276–315; [Hahn 2003](#), pp. 375–84,

400–11; Ayers [1992] 2007, pp. 46–47; Woodward [1951] 1971, pp. 94–105). Yet it runs the risk of obscuring the mobilizing efforts of Black men and women, thereby diminishing the hopes and aspirations that motivated them to join and support these movements in the first place.<sup>7</sup> As Bragg later said in defense of the Readjuster's racial record, Black men and women "were not *ornaments*. They were in action".<sup>8</sup>

Their repurposing of the Lost Cause exemplifies the seemingly contradictory labor involved in organizing, building, and radicalizing postbellum interracial movements. In the war-torn and economically depressed South, people of all stripes often declared that they shared similar interests. Black Virginians knew, though, that "interest" was a labor-intensive process rather than a well-apparent fact. When the author of "An Appeal to the White People of the South" asked in the *Virginia Star* "Are not our interests the same?" and "Why are we not the best of friends?," the answer was "Because bad men both white and colored, will not permit us to be". This writer called for fair treatment, raised the prospect of identical interests and an unrealized racial harmony, and pointed to a vague yet rhetorically meaningful culprit.<sup>9</sup> Legitimate frustrations about the disappointments and shortcomings of Reconstruction fused, almost imperceptibly, with exaggerated memories of corruption and demagoguery. It was a call to action as well as a sleight of hand. Starting from the near-universal perception that things in the South had gone wrong, the author sidestepped the likely disagreements over what in particular had gone wrong and raised a specter. And as Black southerners well knew, specters possessed substantial mobilizing power. After all, it was the specters of "Negro Domination" and "carpetbag rule" that had fostered the overthrow of Reconstruction and drove the initial wedge between those who should have been "the best of friends". Perhaps a new coalition of white and Black men could undo the economically and politically devastating work of the "bad men" who had summoned those specters.

Late February 1879 marked a turning point in Virginia politics. In a two-day "People's Convention" in Richmond, hundreds of delegates from across Virginia organized a new party. The primary motive behind the new organization was to address the massive public debt that had paralyzed Virginia's economy and divided its politics for the last decade. As the new party's name indicated, these men hoped to "readjust" the debt and liberate the state from "bloated bondholders", brokers, and speculators. Some of the delegates, though, sought an additional readjustment. William Jefferson, of New Kent, expressed gratitude for the call "which convened the people of Virginia without distinction of color". Regarding the debt, he said, "we don't want to pay a cent of it". He recalled the still-fresh memory of slavery to justify the sentiment he shared with his fellow Black delegates: "We think we paid our share of it, if it ever was justly chargeable upon us, by long years of servitude". Moreover, the significant divide among white Virginians about the debt meant that Black men "might step in and be healed of the political leprosy which had fatally afflicted them". Black Virginians now held the balance of power, but that power, Jefferson cautioned, must be wielded carefully because "we are anxious not to offend you".<sup>10</sup>

Jefferson's assertive humility presaged the role that slavery's memory would play in the Readjuster movement. It also hinted at the origins of the debt that underlay the new but delicate interracial coalition. Most of Virginia's public debt had been accumulated when Jefferson and most other Black Virginians were enslaved. Like many other states in the Antebellum Era, Virginia saw internal improvements like canals and railroads as a key to their future commercial prosperity. This prosperity required connecting the rapidly growing and bountiful hinterlands of the west to eastern ports via a network of efficient and affordable transportation. Yet the network required significant amounts of capital, and the preference of Virginia planters for land and enslaved people left much to be desired for railroad construction. Exacerbating the scarcity of capital was the fact that many investors, especially in capital-rich European markets, were highly skeptical of railroad ventures after the Panic of 1837 tainted the image of many American securities. Particularly untrustworthy were the stocks and bonds of Southern railroads. Virginia's state legislature eased investor anxiety by selling state bonds, which European capital markets viewed as less risky, and

used the proceeds to buy railroad stocks. Essentially, Virginia became a primary stockholder in risky railroads, taking on debt in the process.<sup>11</sup> Virginia consequently entered a railroad boom, building more lines than any other state during the 1850s, more than tripling its mileage (Stover 1955, p. 9). The state held 60 percent of most railroads' capital stock with a book value of about USD 43 million at the start of the Civil War, which more than offset the massive public debt of USD 33 million (U.S. Department of the Treasury, Bureau of Statistics 1886, p. 20; Ratchford 1940, p. 197; Pearson 1917, pp. 1–7).

The war changed this. Railroads lay in shambles; nearly a third of Virginia's territory had seceded to become West Virginia; and Black men and women, whom the state had previously considered taxable property, now claimed their freedom. The debt and unpaid interest remained. Furthermore, railroad tycoons exploited the situation and personal relationships with military and civil authorities to persuade the state to give up its railroad stocks for pennies on the dollar (Nelson 1999, chp.4; 2006, pp. 98–100; Maddex 1970, chp. 10). Despite these new economic realities, Virginia passed a law to pay its debt in full in the early 1870s, and Virginians immediately raised their voices in protest. During the remainder of the decade, popular resentment and unrest only grew as the state continued to go deeper into debt and overwhelmingly popular social institutions, particularly the public schools, languished (Pearson 1917; Maddex 1970; Moore 1974; Dailey 2000a; Tarter 2016). That is until 1879 when the Readjuster Party organized and won control of the legislature later that year.

Nevertheless, the alliance between white and Black Virginians was highly tenuous at this point. While Black men knew they held the balance of power, they were divided on how best to exploit this power. Before the 1879 elections, Black Republicans had to contend with the principles of their party. Since the end of the war, the national Republican Party declared itself to be the party of honest debts, and it could in no way sanction what it viewed as "rank repudiation". Virginia's Republican Party, which was almost entirely a means of patronage distribution rather than an active party at this time, also stood on the side of the "Funders" against readjustment.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the popular support for readjustment among Black men and women, the Black-owned *People's Advocate* implored voters to ignore "the sophistries and fallacies" of the Readjusters. It added that although Black Virginians were not responsible for the debt, they still enjoyed the benefits and should insist on its full repayment.<sup>13</sup> Even Frederick Douglass similarly challenged the notion that enslavement absolved Black Virginians from responsibility for the state debt. Ironically for one who escaped enslavement, Douglass declared that by the same logic it could be argued "that you had nothing to do with obtaining your freedom; therefore you should not enjoy its blessings".<sup>14</sup> As good Republicans, some insisted, Black men were duty bound to vote against the Readjuster Party.

Also at issue was the possible social consequences of Black support for debt readjustment. White Funders had already begun to denigrate the call for readjustment by linking it with the alleged corruptibility and shiftlessness of Black men. The *People's Advocate* noted one such instance as exemplary of "Southern regard for truth and honesty".<sup>15</sup> Indeed, white political leaders had often scapegoated Black men to deny and justify their own political corruption, fraud, and financial malfeasance. Unlike Virginia, however, other Southern states that had already repudiated portions of their public debts *justified* repudiation as a corrective of the "Negro rule" that saddled these states with "illegitimate" debts.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, some Black editors insisted the honor of the Old Dominion depended on the votes of Black Virginians. They urged their followers to prove their worthiness by demonstrating "that *principle* is the same everywhere and under all circumstances" and was "the controlling influence among all good men of all races".<sup>17</sup>

Added to party lines and demonstrations of their financial morality was simple distrust of the white men now claiming to be their friends. The leader of the new party, for instance, was former Confederate General William Mahone. Portrayed as rivaling the genius of "Stonewall" Jackson and even Lee, Mahone's fame arose from his successful leadership in the Battle of the Crater outside of Petersburg. In addition to the massive explosion of



gunpowder placed underground by US troops, the battle was notorious for the brutal slaughter of Black soldiers by men under Mahone's command (Levin 2012, particularly chp. 1). Since the war, Mahone had been a key figure in the state's Conservative Party and was credited with that party's use of "tissue ballots" and other tricks to undercut Black votes (Blake 1935, chps. 4–6, 144n65). Mahone's chief lieutenants in the new party had also previously fought against and criticized Black rights as well as federal attempts to uphold them.<sup>18</sup> Under the circumstances, Black leaders like Captain R.A. Paul took a wait-and-see approach. As his biographer wrote, "those who had been the bitterest and most dangerous foes to the Colored People were calling for their support". Like the apostle Nathanael in his initial skepticism of Jesus, Captain Paul was uncertain "whether any 'good thing could come out of Nazareth'" (Williams 1885, pp. 16–17; Rachleff 1984, p. 92). Another later account captured Black Virginians' initial hesitancy by saying that after waiting years for a friend, "the devil brought that friend".<sup>19</sup>

Still, some Black voters endorsed the new party, despite the pleas of Republican leaders and the past records of their new allies. In fact, some Black men took offense at the attempt to discourage their support of readjustment. In a letter to Mahone, several professed "leaders of the colord [sic] people of the State" complained that the *Virginia Star* of Richmond was edited "by a certain class of colord [sic] men [who had] been bought up by the Bond-holders". They asked Mahone to support a rival paper, the sooner the better because "we do not desire to stand still and see our people sold out by a few men against their will".<sup>20</sup> Black Virginians were anxiously split, torn between racial and party solidarities and wary of ulterior motives of those professing unbiased leadership. A world-changing opportunity knocked. Answering the call incorrectly could prove devastating.

Yet old loyalties proved stronger than new, at least for the moment, and it appears that most Black men voted the Republican ticket. The Readjusters held a slight advantage over the Conservatives in the legislature, leaving 14 Black Republicans the balance of power. After using that power to extract greater promises from white Readjusters for more school funding and a larger share of patronage, Black Republicans in the legislature threw their support to the Readjuster program, most significantly a new debt law that cut the debt nearly in half and the election of William Mahone to the US Senate (Moore 1975a, pp. 171–72).<sup>21</sup> Clearly, though, the coalition was anything but secure. The 1880 presidential election would further test the delicate relationship.

Many Republicans, both Black and white, hoped that the divisions caused by the Readjuster revolt could work to their advantage. If enough white Readjusters could be convinced to vote for Republican electors, then the election of another Republican to the White House would be a certainty. Early that year, William Mahone issued a call for Democratic and Republican Readjusters to join forces for an independent electoral ticket composed of unpledged electors (Dailey 2000a, p. 51). The leaders of the regular parties thought this outrageous. But the rank-and-file saw things differently. Although still urging caution in overcommitting to the Readjusters' plan of a split ticket,<sup>22</sup> the *People's Advocate* exclaimed that the "republican masses" favored it.<sup>23</sup> Some Black men apparently endorsed the Readjusters so fervently that they made "fidelity to all the plans of the Readjusters a test of loyalty to race".<sup>24</sup> The selection of the western town of Staunton for the state Republican convention made the connection between race and the split ticket even more explicit. That "remote corner of the State" was chosen "to get rid of the 'black horde of Eastern Virginia'". Black Republicans overwhelmingly favored the nomination of Ulysses Grant to run for an unprecedented third term while the white party bosses favored James G. Blaine of Maine. Against the wishes of some of his lieutenants, Mahone had indicated a similar preference for Grant, which further encouraged Black Virginians to support a split ticket. If they were unable to win the convention in favor of a joint ticket, Black Republicans predicted that there would be three tickets in November. And the Readjusters, they insisted, would "find sufficient strength from the Negroes to sustain a ticket and to elect it".<sup>25</sup> Their prediction was half right.

A chaotic, intrigue-filled Republican convention ended with the defeat of a split ticket (Moore 1974, pp. 70–73; Woodward [1951] 1971, pp. 99–100). Disheartened by the Republicans' "straightout" ticket and with whites deeply divided about abandoning the national Democratic Party, the Readjusters barely survived the ordeal. Mahone succeeded in his efforts to put out an independent ticket, but it was still headed by the regular Democratic nominees for president and vice president. With two tickets dividing the Democrats, Republican voters lost all reason to vote the Readjusters' ticket, which suffered a devastating loss. Embarrassed but not disheartened, many white Readjusters concluded that they needed to make stronger, concrete demonstrations of their sincerity to Black Virginians whose votes would be vital to success. And with grievances of their own, Black Virginians were still interested in granting them an audience.<sup>26</sup>

When the *People's Advocate* denounced the selection of Staunton for the Republican state convention as an attempt to defeat the wishes of Black Republicans, it exposed a prevailing doubt about who had their best interests at heart. While Black Republicans endorsed a split ticket headed by Grant, Blaine was "the first choice of every New England man in Virginia". Those who had come to the state after the Civil War to represent the Union in southern constitutional conventions and subsequently the state and national legislatures, originally seen as friends by newly enfranchised Black men were no longer seen as such. Now they were simply "the old ring". Making a clear distinction between Black and native white Virginians on the one hand, and "carpetbaggers" on the other, the article made its prediction of a bolt to the Readjusters.<sup>27</sup> Shortly after November's election, Black citizens of Richmond called for a statewide convention to determine future action. They deemed it "expedient as well as due to our interests to concert with the most liberal party in Virginia".<sup>28</sup> When William Mahone went to the Senate in early 1881 and shocked the world by voting with the Republicans, thereby breaking the tie and giving that party control of the Senate, Black Virginians increasingly viewed the Readjusters as that party.<sup>29</sup> They promptly took up the Readjuster banner and let loose a constant barrage of attacks not only against the "Straightouts"—those Republicans who continued to oppose the Readjusters—but also the infamous carpetbaggers and "gripsackers".

Carpetbagger was the derogatory term applied to a man who came from the North after the Civil War, supposedly so poor that he could carry "all of his earthly belongings" in a carpetbag. According to recalcitrant white southerners, these men came to the South to get rich and powerful by pitting freedmen against their former masters, thereby destroying the purported good feelings between the two classes. Some of these men were, indeed, corrupt, but the accusations of most white Southerners were not entirely well-founded (Foner [1988] 2014, pp. 294–96).

Yet like their white counterparts, Black Readjusters denounced carpetbaggers for preying on their "ignorance" and robbing them of the little wealth they had. "These friends of ours, having made us bankrupt financially and politically, put out for parts unknown with well-filled carpet bags, while we for eight long years have toiled under the odium which they left us as a legacy," the *People's Advocate* exclaimed.<sup>30</sup> Expressing its discontent with the state Republican Party, the *Petersburg Lancet*, added that the "chief good" carpetbaggers accomplished was controlling federal patronage and making "bitter the strife among the colored people and their former masters".<sup>31</sup> Joseph Jorgensen, a former US Army surgeon turned politician, received torrents of abuse from George Bragg's *Lancet*. In the 1882 elections, an article asked, "how much does he [Jorgensen] own in Virginia?", and provided an answer: "not even a sewing machine, maybe 'a carpetbag.'" <sup>32</sup> "God save us from carpetbaggers and gripsackers," another article read.<sup>33</sup> At the 1881 convention in Petersburg that called on Black men to vote for the Readjusters in the upcoming state elections, delegates declared that the Republican Party of Virginia was merely "a name to rally colored men to political slaughter".<sup>34</sup> Clearly those who claimed the political fealty of Black voters could do so no more.

Why would Black Readjusters express such hatred towards carpetbaggers who, although potentially corrupt wealth-seekers, had been better proponents of civil and political rights than most native white Virginians? First, of course, was the dissatisfaction with the leadership of the state party. When the Republicans had legislative control, white leaders tended “to ignore the negro in the distribution of its patronage”.<sup>35</sup> And, as already mentioned, many carpetbaggers did leave after the overthrow of Reconstruction, leaving black Southerners behind on their own. But there was also a political strategy to playing up the anti-carpetbagger rhetoric. Black editors and journalists were aware that, albeit limited, their readership included Southern whites, usually those with power. They knew that the political coalition of black and white Readjusters was always subject to the old arguments of the Democratic Party surrounding alliances with Republicans. Thus, they made a calculated decision to use the popular appeals and harangues of whites to assuage white anxieties. When discussing the support of the “republican masses” for a split electoral ticket in the 1880 election, the *People’s Advocate* announced that “There are thousands of native white men in the state more liberal than even the republican leaders are that will vote with the Negroes and for them even”. There was a caveat to this support, though. These native white liberals would not vote “for carpetbaggers nor under the republican banner—they see Confederate blood on it”.<sup>36</sup> The best way for Black Virginians to pursue their interests was to ease the anxieties of potential allies and to appear as simpatico with white concerns as possible.<sup>37</sup> Lost Cause rhetoric provided a unique tool.

And it was a tool they used for a larger purpose. For Black Virginians, and soon others both within Virginia and beyond, the Readjuster Party represented something bigger than just the state debt that brought it into existence. It represented “obedience to the Federal Constitution” and threatened to overthrow the “Bourbon element of implacable hostility to the National Government”. It meant the abolition of the poll tax and the protection of the public school system, which had been neglected and its funds diverted to interest payments. Most importantly, it meant the “repudiation of the color-line in politics”.<sup>38</sup> Seven months after Black delegates made these declarations in Petersburg, former president Grant echoed them, saying the success of the Readjusters meant “the emancipation of all the voters of the State”.<sup>39</sup> Independent movements seeking to challenge the Democratic Party were cropping up throughout the South, inspired by the early successes of the Readjusters and emboldened by Mahone’s stand in the Senate. Leading southern Democrats anxiously cried out that these movements could only succeed by the unification of poor and middling voters of both races. But those Black and white men were no longer to be held apart so easily. Black citizens as far away as Omaha, Nebraska, resolved that the political success of Black southerners “depends on a close alliance with the independent movement represented by Hon. Wm. Mahone”.<sup>40</sup> White independents, in turn, did “not feel degraded, but elevated” by such an alliance.<sup>41</sup> It did not diminish their dedication and loyalty to the South one bit. After all, they had fought and bled for the Confederacy as “privates” while the “fire eaters” hired substitutes and hid in “bombproofs”. The Lost Cause was *their* cause, not those who sought to make them “slaves” to an unresponsive Democratic Party.<sup>42</sup>

In short, white and Black Readjusters liberated themselves from their former leaders who had only made their lives worse and their poverty more unbearable. Their mistake was not in joining hands but in letting themselves be divided, misled, and misruled for so long. And while white men recalled their bloodstained loyalty to the Confederacy, Black men recalled their own fidelity during the war, when they steadfastly defended the homes and families of those who enslaved them. The myth of the faithful slave, perhaps, could communicate their worthiness as citizens and more importantly as southerners, a descriptor used almost exclusively for whites. It implied that the relationship between white and Black was naturally one of familiarity rather than hostility and reiterated that something had gone wrong. Finally, the widespread insistence on enslaved people’s loyalty allowed Black men and women to more forcefully condemn postwar laws that proscribed their rights and opportunities.

The myth of the faithful slave had its origins in the antebellum period as a response to abolitionist literature, particularly the narratives of those who escaped enslavement. Enslavers and their defenders attempted to rebrand the peculiar institution as benevolent and honorable rather than cruel and unjust. During and after the war, it was a propaganda tool to downplay the centrality of slavery in Confederate treason. Conveniently ignoring the never-ending anxiety of slave revolts before the war and the increasing exodus of enslaved people to US lines throughout the war, slavery's apologists argued that the continued presence and productivity of enslaved labor proved that the system was unobjectionable (See Foster 1987; Janney 2013; McElva 2007; Johnston and Wise 2013). The faithful slave myth was the oldest and possibly the most central tenet of the Lost Cause.

In the hands of the Black press, however, it allowed them to attack the very foundation of white supremacist opposition to the Readjuster coalition. The ever-looming specter that threatened every popular interracial movement in the postbellum South was that of "social equality". Superficially, this meant white and Black citizens acting and living as equals instead of coexisting as "naturally" superior and inferior races. Rhetorically, it was all about sex. "Social equality" conjured images of Black men consorting with white women, often portrayed as a Black rapist and a virtuous white darling. Not only would "social equality" literally and figuratively blur the color line, it threatened white male authority and control of *their* women (Among others, see Hall 1983; Gilmore 1996, chp. 3; Dailey 2000a, chp. 3; Bardaglio 1999, pp. 122–26). White coalitionists downplayed the specter as best they could. They insisted these coalitions were majority white (or at least white-controlled), that white supremacy was in no way at risk and, most frequently, declared that a recognition of political equality had nothing to do with social equality. But the growing prominence and power of Black Readjusters somewhat undercut these claims, just as declaring them too adamantly risked convincing Black voters that the Readjusters possibly were *not* the best vehicle for their advancement. This double edge dulled, however, when Black men recalled their role as protectors of white womanhood during the Civil War. While white supremacist opponents of the Readjusters could ignore these claims, they could not dispute them without belying either the entire Lost Cause or the legitimacy of the "social equality" bugaboo.

More than putting their opponents in a rhetorical bind, Black Readjusters used the ideal of the faithful slave to make some of their boldest attacks on white supremacy. One particularly egregious limitation on civil equality, which many Black men also saw as an infringement of their own claims to manhood, was a law that banned interracial marriage. Black Readjusters attempted to repeal the law, but it proved too much even for white Readjusters to support.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, Black Readjusters insisted their loyalty during the war proved that interracial marriage bans made no sense. One article in the *Virginia Star* noted that when "the white people went to war to rivet forever the shackles of slavery upon our limbs, they left their wives, children and aged fathers at home at the mercy of the people they would enslave". Those who wished to "commit outrage" on "these helpless ones," it continued, "would not have been permitted by the brave and faithful blacks to escape alive".<sup>44</sup> Other articles expressed the same sentiment.<sup>45</sup> Mythologized faithful slaves served as a powerful counterpoint to the more recently mythologized Black rapist. The notion that Black men posed any threat to the purity of white womanhood seemed ridiculous given that these very Black men defended that purity when it was most at risk.

Their record was clear, they insisted. But there was still a threat to society caused by interracial sex, and it lay on the other side of the color line. The true threat was "the villians [sic] who are forever prating about mixed marriages, mixed schools and social equality". In a reversal of the rhetoric used against Black men, it was these "fiendish and contemptible scoundrels" who were responsible for the "different species of the Negro race", innumerable "illegitimate offsprings [sic]", and countless "white Negroes". A decade before anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells denounced lynching and the misrepresentations of Black men as rapists, Black Readjusters similarly cast blame on elite white men with political power. They went even further to question the alleged purity of white women.



Noting that Black men could not marry white women without consent, Bragg's *Lancet* sarcastically asked why, if the Anglo-Saxon race were so pure, it was necessary "to enact a law preventing white women from marrying Negro-men?"<sup>46</sup> Another article in Bragg's paper earlier provided an answer: white men who "use[d] to alienate yourselves from your white wives" with Black mistresses were "afraid that God will visit you with the same treatment".<sup>47</sup> Black Readjusters used the faithful slave narrative to demand full equality before the law, redirect the onus of interracial sex onto white men, and insist that the status and protections of womanhood be extended to Black women as well.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, that such a legal double standard existed at all was the greatest affront to wartime fidelity. The Black press again and again asked what the reward for faithful service had been. Contrary to justice, it was "the abuse, ostracism and oppression of those who should have been the first to befriend him and the last to forsake him".<sup>49</sup> White supremacist violence and unequal treatment was rank hypocrisy and base ingratitude. More than this, it refuted and reversed claims that Black men betrayed their former enslavers by acting against them politically.<sup>50</sup> The war had irrevocably changed the situation. And while it might have been a tough lesson for old enslavers to learn, the *Lancet* insisted that "they must learn it as sure as fate that Negroes have rights that they are bound to respect".<sup>51</sup> Once this happened, the old bonds of familiarity and friendship that had purportedly been lost could be reconstructed.

The Readjuster coalition was proof of this. A "very noteworthy" feature of the 1881 Readjuster state convention, for instance, was the conspicuous presence of former Confederate soldiers "sitting side by side and voting for the same candidates" as formerly enslaved men.<sup>52</sup> The *New York Times* commented that "there was no herding of colored men in a particular corner" and that Black delegates participated as equals on committees and in the general proceedings.<sup>53</sup> William E. Cameron, who won the gubernatorial nomination, concluded his acceptance by proudly exclaiming he did not "propose to carry the war into Africa, but Africa into the war". He was loudly applauded.<sup>54</sup>

Black Readjusters especially applauded the willingness of white men to break down the color line in politics. Nowhere was this more the case than with William Mahone, whose war record had been constantly under attack by the "Democratic rebel brigadiers". The *Virginia Star* praised Mahone's rebellion against the Democracy as just a continuance of the bravery he had demonstrated on the field. His political independence did not stain his Confederate record; it exemplified the same manly stand he had taken in 1861.<sup>55</sup> When the Democratic press pointed out that many white Readjusters had previously condemned Reconstruction and "regarded Negro ascendancy as the utmost peril and evil," the *Petersburg Lancet* had a quick retort. "Do you expect to find them forever in the background, moaning because they were robbed of their slaves, whipped and made to surrender?" Of course not, it continued. White Readjusters "have been reconstructed" and "accepted the situation as it is".<sup>56</sup> Such self-reconstruction could even cleanse one of the darkest of sins. Mahone, "who had hurled hundreds of colored soldiers into the death-fraught crater of Petersburg," could be reborn as "The Coming Emancipator".<sup>57</sup> A.S. Pryor, the Black principal of Petersburg's colored schools, similarly declared that regardless of the past, "the Mahone of the present" "has proclaimed himself the champion of human liberties and rights".<sup>58</sup> With opponents challenging the Confederate and racial bona fides of white Readjusters, Black Readjusters bolstered their will. They certainly had not forgotten the past. But they saw forgiving and praising those white men willing to break from that past as crucial to holding together the coalition and thereby pursuing their interests.

These efforts were not always successful, but they did pay off. The most significant demonstration of popular support for a free ballot was the repeal of the poll tax. A capitation tax of one dollar funded the massively popular public school system. In 1876, the constitution was amended to make payment of this tax a prerequisite for voting. Ostensibly the goal was to better ensure the collection of money for the schools, but everyone knew the primary reason was to restrict the suffrage of Black and poor white voters.<sup>59</sup> To repeal this

amendment, however, two subsequent legislatures had to call for a re-amendment, after which it was to be submitted to a popular vote (that still required payment of the capitation tax). Readjusters in the legislature fulfilled their part in 1880 and 1882, and Virginians endorsed it at the polls by an overwhelming majority of 41,172, nearly 24 percent of the total votes cast.<sup>60</sup> Readjusters and the voters of Virginia insisted on three separate occasions that the ballot in Black hands was not to be feared.

Black Readjusters pushed their white allies even further in revolutionizing Virginia, helping to enact significant improvements in their political and economic standing. During the 1883 election, a circular signed by 27 Black legislators and officials, as well as 280 additional Black men from throughout the state, denoted what the Readjuster coalition had done in its brief tenure. In addition to repealing the poll tax, it had abolished the infamous whipping post, “a relic of the barbarous ages”. It had built and funded a Black asylum, appointed Black men to work in state offices, and hired 15 Black men as guards in the State penitentiary. Norfolk had a Black assistant postmaster while “more colored men than ever before” served in other Federal offices. Black men now also served on juries. Moreover, the Readjusters appropriated USD 100,000 to building a college “entirely in the hands of colored men”.<sup>61</sup> George Bragg later recalled that “it was a fixed rule” in party meetings that if the president was white, the secretary should be Black and vice versa.<sup>62</sup> As the *Virginia Star* declared, the Readjusters had “commenced the obliteration of the color line in politics and civil intercourse”.<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps most indicative of Black Virginians’ ability to rally white support, however, was in the public schools. The number of Black schools nearly doubled, the number of Black teachers tripled, and Black teachers received salaries equal to white teachers (Moore 1975a, p. 179). And, significantly, the Readjusters appointed Black men to school boards in Petersburg and Richmond. White opponents of the Readjusters often complained about white teachers being removed and Black teachers hired in their places. But putting Black men on school boards, where they would hold power over white women educators and white students, posed a major challenge to the interracial coalition.<sup>64</sup> Black Readjusters again attempted to hold it all together by easing white sexual anxieties.

Since the institution of the public school system after the Civil War, Black Virginians had taken a keen interest in better educational and employment opportunities in the schools. Initially hoping to have integrated schools, which were vociferously denied, they demanded “colored teachers for colored schools”. Seeing education as a means of moral and economic uplift that could possibly chip away at white prejudice, Black men and women expressed their “intention to wage relentless and eternal war” until opposition had ceased.<sup>65</sup> Black Readjusters made the case by portraying the call for more Black teachers as actually strengthening segregation and the barriers against social equality. Contrary to the claims of the Democrats, Black citizens of Petersburg said they did not want mixed schools. Borrowing the language of the numerous social equality doomsayers, they insisted that there was already “an unhealthy mixture”. White teachers were ill-equipped to instruct Black pupils, whom they viewed as naturally inferior. Black teachers, on the other hand, would not be hamstrung by such prejudice and would also be willing to mingle with students socially, thereby ensuring proper instruction—both educational and moral. Far from challenging the color line, they insisted that it be more firmly drawn and the schools “be *unmixed*”. Only then would the money spent in educating Black youth be anything more than performative.<sup>66</sup>

When the Democratic school board of Petersburg refused this request, the Readjuster governor removed the recalcitrant trustees and replaced them with new ones, including Black men. The *Lancet* exclaimed “we won” and said the action was “the direct result of agitating the question of negro teachers in negro schools”.<sup>67</sup> The *Chicago Conservator* praised the success and mocked those cautious Black leaders who “say we can’t afford to be [politically] independent”.<sup>68</sup> While Democrats denounced the removal of the old board, there was not much opposition to three Black men serving as trustees (Henderson 1980, pp. 138–39). This was not the case when Governor Cameron pulled the same move in

Richmond. Richmond Democrats immediately raised a furor, even challenging it in the courts. They again raised the cry of social equality, insisting that the Black men as school board trustees was a slippery slope to mixed schools and ultimately mixed marriages. Democratic cartoons depicted Black men holding the hands of—or spanking—tearful white girls as a warning of what would come. These cries of social equality did elicit negative reactions from many white men, including Readjusters, who thought the governor may have gone too far (Dailey 2000a, chp. 3). But the extent of white backlash to the presence of Black men on school boards should not be overstated.

Black Readjusters' efforts to ease white anxieties—both sexual and otherwise—were the primary reason the appointments had been made in the first place. And despite Richmond's race-baiting outrage, the work Black Readjusters had done did not simply evaporate. The *Lancet* chided one Richmond paper for its howls against Black school trustees, calling attention to the Petersburg board. Not only did Petersburg have Black trustees since the year before, but even more recently, the remaining Democratic board members nominated a Black brick mason to replace a trustee who had resigned. "Why did not our raving contemporary pour out its invective upon honest, and honorable Democrats of this City who actually voted for [a] 'Negro school trustee,'" it asked.<sup>69</sup> The Democratic *Fairfax Herald* conjectured that the indignation about Black school trustees was actually a Readjuster trap that the Richmond press bought hook, line, and sinker. It reminded fellow Democrats that this was not even the first time Black men had been appointed as trustees, and pleaded that it not be made the "pretext for raising the race issue" in the coming campaign. Agitating racial animosities would only do the Democrats harm, it concluded.<sup>70</sup> Republished in the Democratic *Petersburg Index-Appeal*, a Richmond correspondent of the *New York Herald* also pointed out that two previous Democratic governors had appointed Black school trustees. "But that was all right," he jeered. "What was good Democratic policy" then "is a readjuster infamy under Governor Cameron". In a roundabout acknowledgement of Black voting strength, this correspondent satirically noted that the Democrats would only *partially* draw the color line. They would guarantee to Black citizens every right and privilege granted by law, even the right to serve as governor or US senator, "with one single and *very insignificant* exception [emphasis added]". Even this partial color line, he continued, was further diluted, as the "democratic organs" of Richmond could support Black trustees, just not on an integrated board. The abolition of the poll tax had greatly increased the electorate, leaving things highly uncertain. Whatever effect raging against Black trustees would have on white voters, "it will certainly bring every negro to the polls in solid array against" the Democrats.<sup>71</sup> Another white "life-long Democrat" joined in criticizing the Richmond press. He insisted that there should be no sexual mixing of the races, but these objections were "cavil" that had nothing to do with promising Black citizens "all the rights which the law allows them". Just as Black Readjusters had insisted, he reminded white Democrats that if they only accorded Black Virginians justice, they would "march into the court of their late masters who are their natural and best friends".<sup>72</sup>

Despite these pleas, the Democrats firmly drew the color line in the November 1883 elections. They "Howled mixed schools and mixed marriages until they actually howled themselves into a belief that it was all so".<sup>73</sup> One Democratic club distributed cards stating that the core issue was "white government or negro".<sup>74</sup> Most notorious were events in the southwestern town of Danville. In October, several prominent Democrats published a circular in which they begged white Virginians to save them from the "awful state of *humiliation and wretchedness*" of coalition rule.<sup>75</sup> Distributed liberally throughout the state, the Danville circular raised racial tensions to a breaking point. Just three days before the elections the tension broke. A small street scuffle in Danville transformed into a massacre that left four Black men and one white man dead, the latter a case of "friendly" fire. Word of the bloodshed spread along rail and telegraph lines that a race war had commenced and white men "were being obliged to walk in blood to assert their rights".<sup>76</sup> Thousands of white Readjusters responded to the race-baiting by abandoning the Readjusters at the

polls, allegedly fearing that their white identities and consequent claim to the privileges of whiteness were at risk.<sup>77</sup> The Democrats won overwhelmingly.

Again, however, this apparent turn must be taken with a grain of salt, and Black coalition building must not be discounted. Democratic race-baiting was supplemented by overwhelming threats of violence, intimidation, economic coercion, and bribery of white and Black voters.<sup>78</sup> The Democrats had also largely copied the Readjuster platform (Moger 1942, pp. 186–87).<sup>79</sup> Moreover, they thoroughly reorganized the party machinery and heavily subsidized it with money from railroad corporations opposed to Readjuster reforms.<sup>80</sup> When some white Readjusters cast a Democratic ballot, they did so “with trembling hands”.<sup>81</sup> Disheartened by their defeat, most Readjusters viewed it as only a temporary setback. And far from abandoning the interracial coalition, many white Readjusters insisted they should double down and officially declare as Republicans. One man from central Virginia wrote that they had “made a mistake in not declaring, at first, openly for the Republican party”.<sup>82</sup> Richard A. Wise, whose father oversaw the trial and execution of John Brown and led Virginia’s secession movement, urged an immediate convention to “declare ourselves National Republicans” and plan for the next year’s presidential election.<sup>83</sup> While some viewed the results as an indication that the party should temporarily “put the colored people to the rear, by their own consent,” they did not disavow the interracial coalition.<sup>84</sup> In their efforts to ease white anxieties, Black Readjusters had seen a setback, but their labors were not fruitless.

White Readjusters combined the memory of the Lost Cause with their continued hope in the ultimate success of the coalition, despite Democratic race baiting and violence. John Booker wrote from Hampton, outside of Norfolk, that he was “more determined than ever”. The “shot gun policy” used by the Democrats, he insisted, was simply the work of the same men “who during the late war either filled a bomb-proof position or remained at home”.<sup>85</sup> R. Randolph Stevenson agreed. Noting his faithful service during four years of war, he was “proud of the record of the ‘Lost Cause’”. But he had accepted the results of the war and was disgusted by the murders in Danville and elsewhere. The “blood of the defenseless negroes,” would only strengthen the cause of the Readjusters. “Victory,” he concluded, “sometimes ends in defeat”.<sup>86</sup> The hoped-for liberation of Virginia and the South from Democratic tyranny and race hatred was still a possibility.

Four years after the *People’s Advocate* expressed that there were thousands of white Virginians who would vote with and for Black men but could not do so under the Republican banner since they “see Confederate blood on it,” the unthinkable happened.<sup>87</sup> At the Richmond Theatre, the Readjusters met in convention and declared themselves the official Republican Party of Virginia. George Bragg, who had only recently reached voting age despite being a staunch proponent of the Readjusters for years, later wrote that “this convention marked the formal entrance into the Republican party of thousands of men who in all their past lives had voted only the Bourbon Democratic ticket” (Bragg 1926, p. 15). Disparagingly, the Democratic *Richmond Dispatch* mocked that “the salt and the pepper were well mixed. Side by side and elbow to elbow the colored and the Coalition white brother dwelt harmoniously”. Capturing the apparent irony of the mish-mashed Lost Cause interracialism, the *Dispatch* pointed out there was barely “the faintest applause” when the band played “Dixie,” it being “the wrong tune to play for a convention one third negroes”.<sup>88</sup> Yet Bragg’s *Lancet* again rejoiced that “Carpet baggers” and “gripsackers” no longer controlled the party. For anyone who still doubted the good feeling that existed between white and Black Readjusters-turned-Republicans, it concluded, the convention would have given lie “to his bias[ed] utterances”.<sup>89</sup>

Ultimately, the interracial coalition never regained the power they once had. When the Democrats took control after the 1883 elections, they immediately started building barricades to prevent another popular uprising. They revised city charters to make their governments less democratic, redistricted the state to assure Democratic supremacy, and passed an election law that placed election machinery firmly in Democratic hands (Wynes



1961, pp. 39–41). Nevertheless, despite the deck being increasingly stacked against them, the Republicans continued to pose a formidable challenge. In 1884, Democratic presidential candidate Grover Cleveland carried the state by only about 6000 votes, and that margin decreased to about 1500 votes four years later (Blake 1935, pp. 230, 242). Despite gerrymandered districts and the new election law, in 1886 the Republicans carried 6 of 10 congressional seats, with a Labor Party candidate taking another seat from the Democrats.<sup>90</sup>

The 1885 gubernatorial contest between John S. Wise and Fitzhugh Lee demonstrated the complex and confusing combinations of the Lost Cause and interracial politics within the new electoral context. Wise, the son of arch-secessionist Henry Wise, and Lee, the nephew of Robert E. Lee, faced off in a spectacular campaign. Parading astride “Uncle Robert’s” saddle, Lee allegedly said he respected the old carpetbaggers and scalawags more than the new Republicans. Conversely, the Republicans contended that Lee was a far cry from his revered uncle, saying that even his own soldiers refused to vote for him. In the end, Lee carried the state by a majority of nearly 16,000. The Republicans cried fraud, pointing out that the self-proclaimed party of white supremacy performed surprisingly well in Black majority counties. George Bragg later wrote, however, that “General Lee . . . was extremely popular and beloved by thousands of the colored race; and a number of them, despite their allegiance to the Republican party, voted for him”. In short, fraud may not be the complete answer, but even Democrats argued it explained a lot. Some, including a Democratic governor, reportedly believed Wise actually won by 25,000. Wise’s son later insisted his father received a significant number of votes from Confederate veterans despite the “propaganda . . . designed to clothe the popular revolt of 1885 with the aspect of a combination between disloyal [white] Virginians, Carpet-baggers and Negroes”.<sup>91</sup> Commenting generally on elections after the Democrats took power in 1883, an avowed enemy of the Readjusters-Republicans and staunch opponent of Black suffrage asked if the prize was worth the price. He declared “it very soon became a serious question which was worse, a negro government or a white government resting upon stuffed ballot boxes” (Royall 1909, pp. 201–2). Whether Black Republicans willingly voted for the candidate of white supremacy, white Confederate veterans voted willingly against him, or both had their votes stolen, the results reveal very little about the viability of interracial politics.

Democratic victory did not imply opposition to interracialism or that race baiting—without the supplements of fraud, corruption, violence, bribery, restrictive voter laws, economic coercion, etc.—was an effective argument against it. Just the same, a willingness to engage in interracial politics did not imply the absence of white supremacist beliefs. Indeed, interracialist reformers often argued that cries of “Negro rule” were simply cowardice, as white supremacy was an established fact—whether “naturally” (according to some) or in terms of actual political and economic power.<sup>92</sup> But this is beside the point. Attempting to prove or disprove the sincerity of white interracialists is both ahistorical and folly. It presumes that whites are predisposed to believe racist fearmongering while at the same time ignoring that fearmongers cry the loudest when whites explicitly disregard those fears.<sup>93</sup> More importantly, it not only centers the actions and reactions of white interracialists, but it does so at the expense of their Black allies. Its unintentional conclusions are, at best, that Black coalitionists were dupes or pawns or, at worst, invited white backlash by pushing their demands too insistently.<sup>94</sup> It implies that the hopes and labors of Black coalitionists were ultimately moot; the development and outcome of the interracial movement was entirely dependent on a presupposed white hostility to those hopes and labors.<sup>95</sup> Rather than attempting to isolate the cause of interracial movements’ defeat by working backwards, then, it is more informative to focus on the labor invested in building those movements from the presumption of hope and (albeit constrained) possibility.

Black Virginians knew the political economic environment in which they operated, and they worked with what they had. Responding to critiques that Black men were drawing the color line by voting so solidly for the Readjusters, a writer in the *Petersburg Lancet* insisted that they were not “tenaciously wedded [sic] to the Readjuster party, because it is a perfect party”. They supported the party because “it with all its imperfections is the best

under circumstances". Moreover, the article continued, given the number of Black men in the party, the Readjuster Party was *their* party.<sup>96</sup> And Black Virginians did all in their power to make their party succeed. Black women, according to Bragg, were the most ardent supporters and "took care that the men under them, or in anyway connected," supported the Readjusters.<sup>97</sup> In turn, Black men went to work to convince potential white allies their interests were the same. One tool they used to ease white allies into supporting their goals was the Lost Cause. They denounced carpetbaggers to air their own grievances while repeating the argument that their true political kinship lay with native white Virginians. Meanwhile, the myth of the faithful slave reinforced this bond at the same time it challenged the myth of the lustful Black rapist and assuaged anxieties regarding Black men serving as school trustees.

During the 1880s, the Lost Cause was far from monolithic, and its usefulness was just as much political as cultural. And just as white southerners contested each other's ownership and control of the Confederate heritage, bending and molding its images and symbols to their own ends, so too did Black southerners. Their mythologized fidelity to their enslavers served to bolster their claims to the privileges of citizenship and their identity as southerners. Their defense of the records of white Confederate veterans against those who called them traitors did the same. Together, as southerners proud of their past loyalties yet accepting and welcoming change, they could rebuild the imagined past of friendship and familiarity and bring about a better future.

It is impossible to measure the ultimate effects of using the Lost Cause to bolster interracial political action. Without the efforts of Black Readjusters, the party would not have had the successes it did, it certainly would not have pursued its social reforms so forcefully, and it would not have led thousands of white men to proudly stand as Republicans. Even when a prominent white Readjuster expressed that Black men should temporarily step back after the defeat of 1883, he stated that his concern was not with the appointment of Black school trustees, for it was only "the necessary and logical outcome of open 'coalition'".<sup>98</sup> Notably, this was months after he had been seriously injured in a duel defending the coalition (Moore 1975b, pp. 274–75). Yet there were limits and possible downsides. Virginia's anti-miscegenation laws remained on the books, so Black Readjusters did not overcome every instance of white supremacist anxiety.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, the question remains about the strategy's long-term effects. While it led to significant results and progress, there is also a chance that it reinforced the notion and "naturalness" of a proscribed and deferential "place" for Black men and women. As was the case with any combination of protest and accommodation, there was a definite tradeoff.<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, Black Readjusters believed the Lost Cause possessed more than one prescribed use and consequently viewed it as an effective tool in coalition building, consequences be damned. The potential upside far outweighed the potential downside. As Bragg and others insisted, "the great masses of our people looked . . . to Freedom".<sup>101</sup> Disappointment, there was plenty. Yet hope remained. Captain R.A. Paul, who had greeted the Readjusters hesitantly declared in 1885 that, having accepted the hand of Black men, the coalition "defeated the most tyrannical political party that ever governed a free people" and the prospects of Black Americans were "bright and glorious".<sup>102</sup> Their labors to build and sustain a coalition were messy, complicated, and rife with contradictions. That is politics. Behind it all was hope. One white Democrat who was convinced by their message wrote that "apparent interest is usually forward and obtrusive; real interest is frequently hidden or obscure" (Blair 1889, p. 142). Black Readjusters used the Lost Cause to lift the veil that had been placed by "bad men" and consequently led many white Virginians to wonder, "are not our interests the same?"<sup>103</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Harpers Ferry Hopes Dr. Bragg Will Stay Home,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 10 October 1931 and “Speeches Made at Dedication of Uncle Tom-Pappy Monument at Harpers Ferry,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 October 1931, clippings in Afro-American Newspapers, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries [hereinafter cited as Du Bois Papers].
- <sup>2</sup> Carl Murphy to Walter White, 15 October 1931, Du Bois Papers.
- <sup>3</sup> George F. Bragg, Jr. to W. E. B. Du Bois, 29 December 1931, Du Bois Papers.
- <sup>4</sup> Designed for a brief discussion about Bragg’s use of the Lost Cause and Black people’s diverse and complex uses and responses to ambiguously conflicting legacies of slavery, see [Clark \(2005, chp. 4, particularly 179–87\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> “The Bourbon Farce,” *Petersburg Lancet*, 22 March 1884.
- <sup>6</sup> “Speeches Made at Dedication of Uncle Tom-Pappy Monument at Harpers Ferry,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 October 1931, Du Bois Papers.
- <sup>7</sup> As I will argue below, this unintentionally implies that Black people were naïve or misguided in supporting these movements. It also improperly assigns blame for these coalitions’ defeat on the coalitions themselves, despite the widespread acknowledgement of fraud, corruption, and violence. Implicitly, the movements were ultimately doomed to failure by irreconcilable divisions, most commonly along racial lines. Underlying this flawed conclusion is a presumption that the “winners” were not internally divided and/or were inherently more capable of overcoming those divisions, most commonly by exploiting racial divisions.
- <sup>8</sup> George F. Bragg, Jr. to Carter G. Woodson, 26 August 1926, *The Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 4 (October 1926): 677–78.
- <sup>9</sup> “An Appeal to the White People of the South,” *Virginia Star*, 11 November 1882.
- <sup>10</sup> Scrapbooks, Volume IX, 37, William Mahone Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University (hereinafter cited as WMP). This scrapbook contains reports of the rest of the proceedings as well as those of various county conventions to elect delegates.
- <sup>11</sup> This process of states aiding the flow of foreign capital into internal improvements that were otherwise seen as too risky was known as hypothecation. For a more detailed account of this process see [Nelson \(1999, chp. 1\)](#). See also [Goodrich \(1949\)](#); [Pearson \(1917, pp. 1–7\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> Opposition to readjustment was not limited to the Republicans. Many Virginia Democrats also condemned readjustment as a stain on Virginia’s “honor”. In fact, the debt issue divided both parties.
- <sup>13</sup> *People’s Advocate* quoted in “Repudiation in Virginia,” *Virginia Star*, 27 September 1879.
- <sup>14</sup> “The Great Leader of His Race, Frederick Douglass, Comes Out for the McCulloch Bill,” Box 209, Folder 10, WMP.
- <sup>15</sup> *People’s Advocate* quoted in “Repudiation in Virginia,” *Virginia Star*, 27 September 1879.
- <sup>16</sup> See [Jenkins \(2021\)](#). The strongest opponent of the Readjusters, William L. Royall, cast the blame for what he saw as “repudiation” on Black voters in his history of the debt controversy, subtitled his work “The Negro’s Vicious Influence in Politics,” see [Royall \(1897\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> “Repudiation in Virginia,” *Virginia Star*, 27 September 1879. [Kendi \(2016\)](#) argues that “uplift suasion” failed as a strategy because it takes for granted the presumptions of white supremacy—that Black people are ultimately to blame for inequality due to their “failure” to act “correctly”. Consequently, this strategy unintentionally reinforces the very systems it is meant to upend.
- <sup>18</sup> H.H. Riddleberger, who was second only to Mahone in composing Readjuster financial policy, had earlier denounced investigations into the Ku Klux Klan as hoaxes in the paper he edited. William E. Cameron, who would become Governor, had allegedly denounced Black suffrage and called for Black men’s “perpetual exclusion”. Scrapbooks, Volume 1B, pp. 64, 71–74, WMP; “Read Their Record,” Broadside 1880. D18 FF, Library of Virginia.
- <sup>19</sup> “The Second District,” *Petersburg Lancet*, 26 August 1882.
- <sup>20</sup> Cornelius L. Harris, Lewis Lindsay, M.N. Wooldridge, W.H. Anderson, and Richard Wooldridge to William Mahone, 15 September 1879, Box 16, WMP.
- <sup>21</sup> J.D.B. Rusk to William Mahone, 7 November 1879, Box 16, WMP. Correspondence indicates the efforts of white Readjusters to bring Black Republicans to their side. See C.B. Langley to William Mahone, 12 November 1879; D.J. Goodwin to William Mahone, 12 November 1879; L.L. Lewis to J.B. Meade, 14 November 1879, Box 16, WMP.
- <sup>22</sup> *People’s Advocate*, 18 March 1880.
- <sup>23</sup> “Republicans vs. Readjusters,” *People’s Advocate*, 27 March 1880.
- <sup>24</sup> *People’s Advocate*, 18 March 1880.
- <sup>25</sup> “Republicans vs. Readjusters,” *People’s Advocate*, 27 March 1880; [Pearson \(1917, pp. 136–37\)](#); [Rachleff \(1984, pp. 98–100\)](#).

- For Mahone's insistence on an independent ticket, the effect of the straightout Republican ticket, some of the divisions among the Readjusters, and subsequent desire to break away from the Democratic Party, see correspondence to H.H. Riddleberger from Mahone and others in Box 1, Folders 5–6, Harrison Holt Riddleberger Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary (hereinafter cited as Riddleberger Papers). See also [Moore \(1974\)](#), pp. 73–77; [Dailey \(2000a\)](#), pp. 51–55).
- "Republicans vs. Readjusters," *People's Advocate*, 27 March 1880.
- "The Lightening Vat!" in Box 1, Folder 8, Riddleberger Papers.
- For more on the national and international conjecture about and the reaction to Mahone's vote in the Senate, see Scrapbook 20, WMP.
- "The Colored Normal and Collegiate Institute", *The People's Advocate*, 25 March 1882.
- "Virginia Politics," *Petersburg Lancet*, 9 September 1882.
- "Our Nominee," *Petersburg Lancet*, 19 August 1882. They contrasted Jorgensen from the Readjuster candidate, B.S. Hooper, "a man who is a Virginian, and in every way interested in the material advancement of the State which he represents".
- Petersburg Lancet*, 5 August 1882.
- Resolutions of the March 1881 Colored Convention, Box 27, WMP. While the resolutions passed by the convention did represent the sentiments of most Black voters, it was by no means universal. A group of delegates bolted the convention and published their reasons for disagreement. At issue were continued doubts about white Readjusters' commitment as well as a desire to maintain an independent Republican organization. The convention was marked by accusations of intrigue by white Readjusters and Straightout Republicans. See "An Address to the Republicans of Virginia and Our Sympathisers beyond the Borders of this Commonwealth" in Scrapbook 17 and "The Lion of the Hour," *Minneapolis Press*, March 16, 1881 in Scrapbook 19, WMP. This also calls attention to the conclusions scholars can make regarding divisions among Black southerners about independent movements in general. As sociologist Joseph [Gerteis \(2007\)](#) argues, continued Black *electoral* support for the Republican Party did not imply opposition to third parties. Nor did organizational segregation imply overt opposition to interracialism. Indeed, Gerteis insists, "organizational 'biracialism' was often in service of sustained 'interracialism' in practice". Historian Omar H. [Ali \(2010\)](#) makes similar conclusions, noting that the choices available to Black Populists about political independence, coalition, or fusion depended highly on local circumstances more than simple ideological or racial differences. R.A. Paul noted the compatibility between electoral support and independent organization in "Capt. R.A. Paul Expresses His Views, *Virginia Star*, April[?], 1881, in Scrapbook 20, p. 12, WMP.
- "Virginia Politics," *Petersburg Lancet*, 9 September 1882; "Why Leave the Republican Party", *The People's Advocate*, 25 March 1882. See also [Dailey \(2000a\)](#), pp. 53–55).
- "Republicans vs. Readjusters," *The People's Advocate*, 27 March 1880.
- This line of thought is similar to that of [Jordan \(2001\)](#) in his work on the black press during World War I. "In an arena in which deviant political views were marginalized or ignored," Jordan contends, African American editors, "sought to present their ideas as akin to mainstream political views". This was all the more valuable as a function of protest when it is remembered that the possibility of violence was high.
- Resolutions of the March 1881 Colored Convention, Box 27, WMP.
- Ulysses S. Grant to James D. Brady, 4 October 1881, reprinted in *Richmond Whig*, 5 August 1882, in Scrapbook 29, pg. 55, WMP.
- Quoted in "Mahone," *Richmond Whig*, 10 May 1881, in Scrapbook 20, p. 53, WMP.
- Richmond Whig*, 18 May 1881, in Scrapbook 20, p. 58, WMP.
- "The State's Threat," *Richmond Whig*, 22 April 1881, *Salem Register*, 22 April 1881, in Scrapbook 20, pp. 2, 7; "Southern Independentism," [1882], "William Mahone," *The National Republican*, [1882], "Private True" Clipping [1882], in Scrapbook 29, pp. 16, 55, 140–48, WMP. For a more detailed discussion of the Readjusters' competing claims to the Lost Cause, see [Levin \(2005\)](#).
- Shed Dungee, a black representative in the House of Delegates tried to repeal the law just months after taking office after the 1879 elections, but was defeated. See Virginia Legislature, *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1879–1880*, 466. Armistead Green of Petersburg also attempted to repeal the law, but it was sent to die in committee. See Virginia Legislature, *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1881–1882*, 333; [Dailey \(2000b\)](#).
- "An Appeal to the White People of the South," *Virginia Star*, 11 November 1882.
- "The Bourbon Farce," *Petersburg Lancet*, 22 March 1884.
- Petersburg Lancet*, 19 May 1883.
- Petersburg Lancet*, 4 November 1882. The above exemplifies the "rhetoric of corruption" common in Southern "reform" politics that linked assertions of political corruption with racial corruption. See [Nelson \(1999\)](#), chp. 5; [Barnes \(2019\)](#).
- The *Virginia Star*, for instance, declared that the "stronger" race should "Treat our women with the respect due to their sex". "An Appeal to the White People of the South," *Virginia Star*, 11 November 1882.
- "The Bourbon Farce," *Petersburg Lancet*, 22 March 1884. Also see, "To Your Tents, O Israel," *The People's Advocate*, 10 November 1883.



- For more on the reactions and thoughts of enslavers and enslaved people during the Civil War and the uncertainties it generated, see Litwack ([1979] 1980, pp. 3–63).
- Petersburg Lancet*, 23 June 1883. This was almost certainly an allusion to the words of Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney in the *Dred Scott* decision.
- “Enthusiastic and Confident,” *New York Tribune*, 4 June 1881, in Scrapbook 20, p. 65, WMP.
- “The Readjusters’ Convention,” *New York Times*, 4 June 1881.
- “Their Ticket,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 4 June 1881.
- “Mahone, the Coming Emancipator,” *Virginia Star*, 30 April 1881. For more, see Levin (2005).
- Petersburg Index-Appeal*, quoted, and response in *Petersburg Lancet*, 28 October 1882.
- Williams (1885, pp. 16–17); “Mahone, the Coming Emancipator,” *Virginia Star*, 30 April 1881.
- “The Colored People,” [*Richmond Whig?*], September 1882, in Scrapbook 29, pp. 89–90, WMP.
- See “The Capitation Tax,” [*Richmond Whig?*] in Scrapbook 13, pg. 66–67, WMP; Wynnes (1961, pp. 13–14).
- “Free Suffrage,” *Richmond Whig*, 6 June 1882 in Scrapbook 28, p. 72, WMP; Virginia Legislature, *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1881–1882*, 27, 66, 390; “Mayo In By One Vote,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 19 November 1882; Wynnes (1961, pp. 24–25).
- US Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Report on the Danville Riot*, 48th Congress, 1st Session, 1884, no. 579, pp. 787–91 (hereinafter cited as *Danville Report*. Significantly, the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State University) was the first fully state-funded four-year institution for Black students in the US.
- George F. Bragg, Jr. to Carter G. Woodson, 27 July 1926, *The Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 4 (October 1926): 672. Moore (1975a, p. 183).
- Quoted in a circular to Republicans and Coalitionists of Brunswick County, 5 April 1883, in Scrapbook 31, WMP.
- For more how this posed problems for the coalition, see Dailey (2000a, chp. 4) and Dailey (2000b).
- “Professor Wiley Lane,” *Petersburg Lancet*, 23 June 1883. See also *Petersburg Lancet*, 12 August 1882 (quoting the *Richmond Whig*, a white paper owned by William Mahone) which said that the education of students in their political rights would make black men “feel a respect for himself” upon which would follow the “respect of all good men”; “Temperance,” *The People’s Advocate*, 4 March 1882; “To Parents,” *Petersburg Lancet*, 9 September 1882; *Virginia Star* quoted in “Our Colored Public Schools,” *Petersburg Lancet*, 1 July 1882.
- Petition to the Petersburg School Board quoted in *Petersburg Lancet*, 15 July 1882. See also, Dailey (2000a, pp. 70–74). Dailey points out that the school board denied this petition, eventually hiring two Black teachers, though not placing them.
- “We Won,” *Petersburg Lancet*, 19 August 1882. See also, “Victory,” *Petersburg Lancet*, 2 September 1882.
- Chicago Conservator* quoted in *Petersburg Lancet*, 2 September 1882.
- Petersburg Lancet*, 23 June 1883.
- Fairfax Herald* quoted in *Petersburg Index-Appeal*, 9 July 1883.
- “Political Issues in Virginia,” *Petersburg Index-Appeal*, 12 July 1883. On the willingness to accept Black trustees on separate boards, see “The Public Schools,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 12 May 1883.
- C.S.H. to the editor of the *Norfolk Landmark* quoted in “The Color Line,” *Petersburg Index-Appeal*, 26 June 1883.
- A.A. MacDonald to Mahone, 10 November 1883, WMP.
- Card from Executive Committee of the Waynesboro Democratic Club, 29 October 1883, Box 175, WMP.
- “Coalition Rule in Danville,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/coalition-rule-in-danville-october-1883/> (accessed on 21 September 2017).
- W.O. Austin to Mahone, 26 December 1883, WMP. For a detailed study of events in Danville, see Dailey (1997).
- Correspondence about the demoralizing effects of the Danville Circular and massacre as well as other issues like “mixed school” can be found in Boxes 81–83, WMP. On racial identity and whiteness, see Dailey (2000a, chp. 5).
- Among many others, see W.P. Dryden to Mahone, 7 November 1883; J. H. Ballard to Mahone, 8 November 1883; W.E. Sims to Mahone, 8 November 1883; Stewart M. Lewis to Mahone, 8 November 1883; M.B. Wood to Mahone, 8 November 1883; J. A. Harrold to Mahone, 8 November 1883; George S. Stevens to Mahone, 8 November 1883; Henry J. Wale to Mahone, 14 November 1883, in WMP.
- Dailey misdates the Democrats’ cooptation of the Readjuster platform and consequent shift to a more liberal approach to after the 1883 election. While their tenure in office began in the winter of 1883–1884, the Democratic platform created in July 1883 details the policies she notes, namely the debt settlement, taxation, and school appropriations. Dailey (2000a, pp. 156–57); “This Way, Freeman!,” *Richmond Dispatch*, 26 July 1883.
- The selection of John S. Barbour, a railroad president, to chair the reorganized Democratic Party was largely due to his connections with corporate capital. Moger (1968), 53. Readjusters insisted they were beaten by railroad money. Among others, see “The Bourbon Blizzard,” *The National Republican*, 12 November 1883 and “Riddleberger,” *Woodstock Virginian* [1883], in Scrapbook 31,

WMP; G.R.C. Phillips to Mahone, 13 November 1883, WMP. On the Readjusters' "war on the railroads," see James W. McCarrick to Mahone, 8 October 1883, WMP; "The Coupon War," *Petersburg Index-Appeal*, 23 March 1883; "The Issues to Be Decided," Broadside 1883. F85, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia. See also Barnes (2021).

"The Significance of Blood," *Richmond Whig*, 13 November 1883, in Scrapbook 31, WMP.

George S. Stevens to Mahone, 8 November 1883.

Richard A. Wise to Mahone, 9 November 1883. Wise said that such a move would better allow them "to control the negro vote". This comment demonstrates the clear white supremacist views of most white Readjusters, a point I do not challenge. But it is also a strategic comment in that the continued presence of a "straightout" Republican Party in addition to the Readjusters divided, even if only minorly, Black votes. John Booker, of Hampton, had noted that in the 1883 spring elections, the Democrats and "Straightouts" combined forces to defeat the Readjusters. He predicted that placing "ourselves squarely upon the Republican platform" in the upcoming elections "will not only retain all our white voters but entirely break up the Straightout wing". John Booker, to Mahone, 26 May 1883. The combined efforts of Democrats and Republicans was most notable in the Democratic endorsement of Williams C. Wickham, who had been a primary leader of Virginia's Republican Party and strong opponent of the Readjusters. See "Senatorial District Nomination," *Richmond State*, 8 August 1883 and "Organized to Win," *Richmond State*, 9 August 1883, in H.T. Wickham Scrapbook 1, p. 44, Series 7, Box 32, Wickham Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

W.C. Elam to Mahone, 16 November 1883, WMP.

John Booker to Mahone, 12 November 1883, WMP.

R. Randolph Stevenson to Mahone, 12 November 1883. Stevenson's letter was apparently published as "A Veteran Ex-Confederate Gives His Views," most likely in the *Richmond Whig*. Stevenson gave permission to publish but asked that it be anonymized. This is important for historians to keep in mind. Many white Southerners supported such interracial movements, but, due to fears of social or economic ostracism, as well as violence, hesitated to make their sentiments known publicly.

"Republicans vs. Readjusters," *People's Advocate*, 27 March 1880.

"Mahone the Master," *Richmond Dispatch*, 24 April 1884.

"The Convention," *Petersburg Lancet*, 3 May 1884.

Interestingly, this demonstrates the early dependence of the Democrats on the party machine created by John S. Barbour and funded by his railroad connections. After the party spurned Barbour by not electing him to the Senate to succeed Mahone, he left Virginia "to ease his defeat". A younger faction sought to challenge Barbour's leadership, and his sabbatical from Virginia politics may have been to show that the Democrats needed him more than he needed them. Upon his return, the Democrats regained their supremacy, winning the next three elections under his guidance. Particularly noteworthy was that the Labor candidate won the seat Barbour vacated, despite his district being a Democratic stronghold. See Quinn (1966, pp. 63–67); William Mahone, *Mahone's Six Years' Service in the Senate of the United States, and the Record of His Democratic Predecessors* . . . (Washington?, 1887), p. 18.

See Wise (1905, pp. 362–71); *Shenandoah Herald*, 14 August 1885; "Elections in Other States," *New York Times*, 5 November 1885; "An Issue Vanishing," *New York Times*, 21 November 1885; Bragg (1926, pp. 16–17); Jennings C. Wise to Nelson M. Blake, 17 July 1930, quoted in Blake (1935, 232n190). For more on critiques of Democrats winning in Black majority counties as an example of the "rhetoric of corruption" used by interracial movements, see Barnes (2019).

For examples of this, especially in response to the violence at Danville, see Scrapbook 31, WMP. See also Barnes (2019, pp. 186–87); Kendi (2016).

As Barbara Fields argued, this is "a strikingly romantic vision of solidarity as the state of nature for white people . . . On the far side of the color line, it seems, universal brotherhood and equality prevail". Fields (2001, p. 53).

One particularly egregious example of this, from a sympathetic author, is in James Tice Moore's conclusion that "Indeed, in the final analysis [Black Virginians] had probably been too successful for their own good . . . [they] attempted to move too far and too fast in their drive for equality . . . Black votes had made the Readjuster regime possible; black militancy, in turn, had made the Readjuster collapse inevitable". See Moore (1975a, p. 186).

This type of scholarship places non-white people in what Denise Ferreira Da Silva (2007) calls "affectability". Even when the scholarship is sympathetic, it reproduces the very strategies of power that assumes that whites are capable of full self-determination while non-whites are not; their fate is entirely outer-determined.

"What He Said," *Petersburg Lancet*, 28 April 1883.

George F. Bragg, Jr. to Carter G. Woodson, 26 August 1926, *The Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 4 (October 1926): 677; Bragg (1926, p. 7).

W.C. Elam to Mahone, 16 November 1883.

Dailey points to the centrality of anxieties around interracial sex in limiting the Readjusters' program of reform as well as the perceived threat posed by the Readjusters' insistence on Black political and civil rights. Although the failure to abolish Virginia's anti-miscegenation law did not "challenge the construct of 'race' outright," interracial sex stood at the bottom of the perceived slippery slope created by the Readjusters' "undermining [of] the customary privileges of whiteness". See Dailey (2000a, pp. 77–102, 153–54).

- 100 This is ultimately an example of ideological hegemony as limiting the terms of debate in a way that ultimately reinforces the dominant order. Consequently, new ideas/movements can be simultaneously conservative in their framing and radical in their intent. See Davis (1987); Fields (1990).
- 101 George F. Bragg, Jr. to Carter G. Woodson, 26 August 1926, *The Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 4 (October 1926): 677; “The Colored People,” [Richmond Whig?], September 1882, and “An Appeal Against Beckley and Straightoutism,” *Richmond Whig*, 22 September 1882 in Scrapbook 29, pp. 89–90, 107.
- 102 Quoted in Williams (1885, pp. 64, 68).
- 103 “An Appeal to the White People of the South,” *Virginia Star*, 11 November 1882

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