

Tarter: A must-read for today's politicians

Historian Brent Tarter spent almost 40 years at the Library of Virginia in Richmond and probably has a more comprehensive view of Virginia's history than anyone living.

That's why I wholeheartedly recommend his most recent nonfiction book, "A Review of the Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia," published by the University of Virginia press.

Tarter assuredly does not subscribe to the romanticized and self-deceptive view of Virginia history

succumbed to by many popular Virginia history writers and journalists.

Interviewed recently on public radio, Tarter said that from the 1880s to the 1960s "(The Grandees) left out the black people, they left out the women, and maintained a political economy that favored the same sorts of people for generations."

The book is a stunning series of 15 essays, arranged chronologically from Jamestown settlement to the late 20th century. In them, Tarter portrays Virginia's government as always being under the domination of one or another undemocratic cabal.

Using the pejorative term "grandees" to refer to such cabals goes all the way back to a 1676 Declaration by Nathaniel Bacon during his Virginia rebellion. At various times, Virginia was controlled by tobacco planter oligarchs, land barons, railroad men and the "Byrdocracy."

In his 13th essay, "The Spirit of Virginia," Tarter observes that in the 20th century the eastern cliques were at long last challenged by pro-democracy leaders from western Virginia such as Martin Hutchison,

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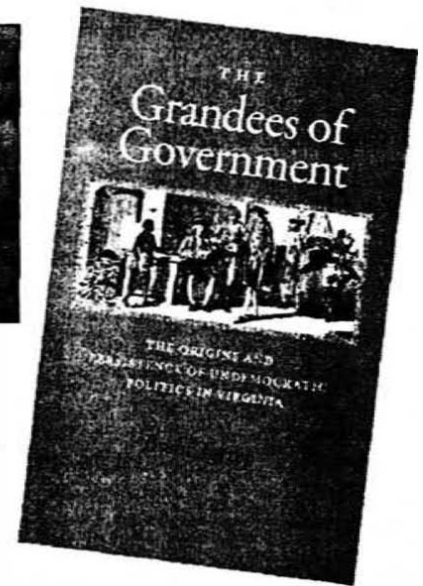


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Ted Dalton and Linwood Holton. Had there ever been an Un-Virginian Activities Committee of the Virginia House of Representatives, Tarter writes, such men would have come to its attention.

Tarter's thought-provoking book should be on the reading list of every elected official in Virginia. Go out and buy a copy for your favorite politician.

Mr. Glanville is a retired chemist living in Blacksburg. He has been publishing and lecturing for a decade about the history of Southwest Virginia.



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