

The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* brought tremendous upheaval to the state of Virginia, which had operated under deep segregation for decades. Under the influence of an extremely conservative political machine headed by Democratic Senator Harry Flood Byrd, Virginia enacted a strategy of total opposition to the Court's decision. The "massive resistance" movement, as Byrd called it, was loosely based on the doctrine of interposition and included several legislative attempts to impede integration in the state. Politicians sympathetic to the Byrd machine withheld state funding from integrated schools and created pupil assignment plans that awarded only a few token spots to black students at white schools. The movement, which most historians cite as taking place from 1954 to 1956, ultimately caused temporary school closings in Charlottesville, Norfolk, and Prince Edward County, Virginia.

While much has been written on the aftermath of the *Brown* ruling in the South, relatively few monographs have been published about Virginia's massive resistance in particular.¹ The majority of books specifically dealing with Virginian resistance were published in the 1960s and 1970s, a trend that presumably occurred because of the large interest in school integration during the Civil Rights movement. Until recently, books concerning Virginia's massive resistance sought to explain it only through the actions of conservative whites who adamantly opposed the

¹ For an overview of resistance to desegregation in the South, see Reed Sarrait, *The Ordeal of Desegregation: The First Decade* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950's* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Francis M. Wilhoit, *The Politics of Massive Resistance* (New York: George Braziller, 1973); J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration: 1954-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); George R. Metcalf, *From Little Rock to Boston: The History of School Desegregation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983); Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, vol. 11, *A History of the South*, ed. Wendell Holmes Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1995). For an overview of the political climate in Harry Byrd's Virginia, consult J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 1945-1966* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968); William B. Crawley Jr., *Bill Tuck: A Political Life in Harry Byrd's Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978).

desegregation decision. While these studies all indict the Byrd organization for fueling the massive resistance movement, they provide two different explanations of the machine's role: that massive resistance was a manifestation of the general popularity of Byrd's ideology in Virginia society, and that the Byrd machine specifically orchestrated the movement in order to regain power that had begun to wane in previous years. These views are obviously supported by differing conceptions of Byrd and the state of Virginia politics at the time of *Brown*.

The first studies of Virginia's massive resistance, and those upon which all other research on the subject is based, are Benjamin Muse's *Virginia's Massive Resistance* and Robbins L. Gates's *The Making of Massive Resistance*, first published in 1961 and 1962, respectively.² Relying mainly on primary documents and interviews, these classic accounts reveal the key facts of the ordeal but offer little interpretation of the situation, lacking the necessary historical hindsight to do so. Muse, a journalist hailing from northern Virginia and known for his opposition to the Byrd machine, provides the straightforward and simple interpretation that massive resistance was a product of the immense political prowess wielded by white supremacist politicians within the Byrd machine.

Gates's *The Making of Massive Resistance*, originally written as a political science dissertation at Columbia University, builds upon Muse's initial study by examining why the Stanley Plan, a strategy to withhold state funding from integrated schools, took precedent over more moderate pieces of legislation such as the Gray Plan. Gates also places blame on the Byrd organization, but takes Muse's analysis a step further by implying that Virginia's actions were not representative of the whole electorate but instead were influenced by a disproportionate number of whites from Southside Virginia, the area with the highest black population. Gates

² Benjamin Muse, *Virginia's Massive Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961); Robbins L. Gates, *The Making of Massive Resistance: Virginia's Politics of Public School Desegregation, 1954-1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964).

determines that while massive resistance was indeed a product of the Byrd machine, it was not a demonstration of hegemony but rather an outcome of Byrd's need to reinforce waning political influence. Subsequent studies of massive resistance in Virginia all use Gates and Muse as starting points for research and either restate or expand upon these original theories.³

The mid-1960s saw several accounts of massive resistance in Virginia. Bob Smith's *They Closed Their Schools* (1965) supplements Muse's and Gates's monographs with a specific study of the closing of Prince Edward County schools.⁴ Smith, at the time an associate editor of Norfolk's openly anti-Byrd *Virginian-Pilot*, uses several interviews with residents of Prince Edward to paint a picture of Virginia's "grim charade" of school closing in the county.⁵ *They Closed Their Schools* continues the trend of vilifying Byrd and provides little fresh analysis of massive resistance in general. In his 1967 book *The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1902-1965*, Andrew Buni presents a political history of the role of blacks in twentieth-century Virginia.⁶ Buni relies heavily on Muse and Gates, especially in the two chapters specifically examining massive resistance. *The Negro in Virginia Politics* holds to Gates's theory that massive resistance was a way for the Byrd organization to reinforce its dwindling influence in Virginia.

The late 1960s and 1970s saw further interest in Virginia's massive resistance and the role of Harry Byrd in the crisis. J. Harvie Wilkinson's *The Changing Face of Virginia Politics*

³ Muse himself builds upon his previous work, publishing *Ten Years of Prelude: The Story of Integration since the Supreme Court's 1954 Decision* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), a study of the effects of the *Brown* decision on the entire South.

⁴ Bob Smith, *They Closed Their Schools: Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1951-1964* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

⁵ *Ibid.*, vii.

For other personal accounts of life in Virginia during massive resistance, see Sarah Patton Boyle, *The Desegregated Heart: A Virginian's Stand in Time of Transition* (New York: Morrow, 1962), Virginius Dabney, *Across the Years: Memoirs of a Virginian* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978); Francis Picken Miller, *Man From the Valley: Memoirs of a 20th Century Virginian* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

⁶ Andrew Buni, *The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1902-1965* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967).

(1968) supports and expands upon Gates's initial argument by asserting that massive resistance was more of a "twilight performance where the hard-core coalition of the old Byrd organization hoisted its last great hosannas" than a show of strength at the height of the regime's power.⁷ In his 1976 monograph *The Crisis of Conservative Virginia*, James W. Ely reinforces Muse's argument that massive resistance came out of the engrained power of the Byrd organization. Ely's book is especially significant because although it supports a previous argument, it does so with the benefit of increased historical perspective and two decades of additional secondary resources.

After the popularity of monographs about massive resistance in the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s saw almost no books on the topic. Increased interest in the topic was shown in the 1990s, however, when two books attempted to correct a lack of attention to moderate opposition of massive resistance. Previous research, whether pro- or anti-Byrd, had typically only focused on white supremacist support of massive resistance. In his 1997 book *Standing Before the Shouting Mob*, Alexander Leidholdt examines the work of the *Virginian-Pilot's* editorial-page editor, Lenior Chambers, to oppose massive resistance and school closings in Norfolk at a time when speaking out against segregation was seen as extremist and treasonous.⁸ One year later, Matthew D. Lassiter and Andrew B. Lewis published a collection of essays that similarly aimed to examine the role of moderates during the crisis.⁹ Containing articles by J. Douglas Smith, Joseph Thorndike, and James H. Hershman, Jr., as well as works

⁷ J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 1945-1966* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968), 114.

⁸ Alexander Liedholdt, *Standing Before the Shouting Mob: Lenoir Chambers and Virginia's Massive Resistance to Public-School Integration* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

For another biographical view of a Virginia moderate during massive resistance, see John C Jeffries, Jr., *Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr.* (New York: Scribner, 1994).

⁹ Matthew D. Lassiter and Andrew B. Lewis, eds., *The Moderates' Dilemma: Massive Resistance to School Desegregation in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

by Lassiter and Lewis themselves, *The Moderates' Dilemma* examines the difficult position of those whites who dared to speak out against segregation.

The emergence of this new historical angle on massive resistance implies that research on the topic is far from finished. The majority of existing literature about massive resistance in Virginia was published within twenty-five years of the *Brown* ruling and seeks to explain the crisis based on the Byrd organization and white conservatives only. As Virginia moves further away from its segregated past and as new racial issues such as affirmative action arise in legislation and constitutional law, there are new angles to pursue in examining massive resistance. The future will perhaps see more research on white moderate opposition to the movement as well as monographs devoted solely to black action during the crisis. New angles and a changing political climate, however, do not diminish the movement's importance. In the words of federal judge J. Harvie Wilkinson, a respected scholar of racial politics, "massive resistance was truly Virginia's issue of the century."¹⁰ Continued examination of the existing literature on the issue as well as the emergence of new theories and angles will ensure that the legacy bequeathed to Virginia by the movement's ultimate demise will not be forgotten.

¹⁰ Wilkinson, *Harry Byrd*, 113.

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