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“Let the Empire Come”: Monarchism and its Critics in the Reconstruction South

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Abstract:

In 1869, a monarchist newspaper, *The Imperialist*, caused a “sensation” across the Union. In the South, where it circulated widely, most conservatives read it as a Radical blueprint to dismember the republic. These critics used the paper to rally the white electorate, and their response sheds light on the “phantasms of fear” Mark Summers has argued characterized Reconstruction politics. But the weekly also found adherents in the South. Whether out of admiration for the nation-building efforts of European monarchies, contempt for black suffrage, or hostility to *Herrenvolk* democracy, they saw a strong centralized government with a king at its head as a path to stabilization that would maintain their power and authority. The monarchist moment in the South was fleeting and never attracted widespread support, but proclamations of fidelity to the principles of *The Imperialist* illuminate a rarely-explored variant of southern conservatism.

Text

In June 1869, four years after white southerners’ dreams of establishing an independent slaveholding republic had perished on the battlefield, a correspondent of the New York *World* traveling through the heart of the Deep South reported a surprising tendency among prominent conservatives. Their current “political conversation,” he noted, was no longer devoted exclusively to “secession, or the rightfulness of secession,” but the prospect of what he called “the Empire.” “So general, indeed, have I found the interest in this Imperialism business,” he concluded, “that I have sometimes thought the coming man, when ready for his coup d’etat, could make a very successful bid for Southern support.”¹

The curiosity he encountered had been piqued by the appearance of a novel publication in the North: the nation’s first avowedly monarchist newspaper. *The Imperialist*, bearing a crown on its masthead and proclaiming democracy “in its practical workings... totally inadequate to the wants of the American people,” had made its bow in Manhattan that April, and the one man definitely associated with it, the humorist William L. Alden, remembered it as a prank that had got out of hand.² Hoping to exploit what a century later Richard Hofstadter called American politics’ “paranoid style,” Alden reasoned that Republican and Democratic editors would blame one another for coveting the crown, generating vast amounts of free advertising for the publication in the process. To bait the trap, the publishers concocted a fanciful monarchist secret society, the T.C.I.O, and printed coded orders to the “Pro-consuls” of the so-called Empire of the West’s “Civil and Military” colonies in their columns, but they interspersed what their more skeptical readership recognized as playful satire with seemingly sincere reflections on history and

¹ S. D., letters to New York *World*, July 7, 14, 1869.

² *The Imperialist* was the creation of three New Yorkers, but only Alden ever admitted any involvement. His writing under his own name suggests his antidemocratic sensibilities were greater than he let on. See W. L. Alden, “In the Days of My Youth”, *M. A. P. (Mainly About People)*, February 17, 1900; New York *Times*, January 16, 1908; William L. Alden, “The Suffrage Paradox,” *North American Review* (April, 1888), 468. The best obituary for *The Imperialist* is Shirley Dare, letter to New York *Tribune*, November 6, 1869.

politics.³ The mixture of conspiracy and criticism proved potent, and the first issue soon sold out, persuading the investors to persist with the operation. By mid-May, the *Dallas Weekly Herald* could say of *The Imperialist* that “not even the assassination of a President on American soil created so decided a sensation as this.”⁴

The *Herald* was exaggerating, but rumors of an imperial plot captured Americans’ attention from Maine to California between the Spring and Autumn of 1869, and nowhere did the prospect of a crowned head seizing power attract more interest, indignation, and sometimes – as the *World* journalist suggested – eager anticipation than in the South.⁵ Over the preceding years, white southerners had grappled with the question of how to rebuild civil authority after the failure of secession and the destruction of slavery. Under the indulgent administration of Andrew Johnson, they were left to redraw the boundaries of their political communities with minimal interference from the Federal Government, but the triumph of congressional Republicans in the 1866 midterm elections brought Presidential Reconstruction to a halt. In the following months, legislators forged anew what it meant to be a citizen in the United States, bringing the vote to African-American men in the region, while sometimes denying it to ex-Confederates. As whites below the Mason-Dixon pondered the merits of monarchism, Congress considered a new amendment to the Constitution, a measure intended at the very least to eradicate the color line in voting rights. Supporters of the amendment saw it as the realization of the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence; critics, as the harbinger of a consolidated tyranny erected on the ruins of the Republic.⁶

With the wave of democratic reform that had ebbed and flowed from the revolutionary era nearing its high watermark, southern conservatives seized on the *Imperialist* in a frantic bid to turn back the tide. But the men the *World* journalist encountered on his travels did not always think alike. An awkward amalgam of former fire-eating secessionists, ardent unionists, proslavery ideologues, and conditional terminationists, they shared little beyond an animus to the racial politics of congressional Reconstruction and a conviction they were subject to the sway of a legislature with despotic designs.⁷ Thus while, as the *Mobile Register* put it in answering a

³ *The Imperialist*, April 24, 1869; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965). More recently, the conspiratorial nature of Civil War-era politics has been explored in Mark Wahlgreen Summers, *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and Michael T. Smith, *The Enemy Within: Fears of Corruption in the Civil War North* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press: 2011), 5-8. On fear of secret societies in the Civil War era, see Frank L. Klement, *Dark Lanterns: Secret Political Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

⁴ *Dallas Weekly Herald*, May 15, 1869.

⁵ See for example discussion of *The Imperialist* in the Bangor (Me.) *Daily Whig and Courier*, May 1, 1869; *Sacramento Daily Union*, August 21, 1869; *London Spectator*, May 15, 1869, 588-9

⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 185-216, 270-80, 445-8.

⁷ On the postwar planter class, see James L. Roark, *Masters without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 1977); Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); Dan T. Carter, *When the War Was Over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South, 1865-1867* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985). On southern conservatism, see Charles J. Holden, *In the Great Maelstrom: Conservatives in Post-Civil War South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002); Jack P. Maddex, *The Virginia Conservatives, 1867-1879* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970); Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1968); Terry A. Barnhart, *Albert Taylor Bledsoe: Defender of the Old South and Architect of the Lost Cause* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State

monarchist adversary, conservatives had a common wish “to fight the power of Mongrelism or Radicalism to its destruction,” they did not always agree on how to do so, with some in 1869 urging legal acquiescence to the postwar order, and others preaching violent resistance.⁸ More often than not, though, conservatives looked for deliverance in a national alliance, whether in the Democratic Party or a new movement. Moving in a political landscape in which rumors of conspiracy cast long shadows, they used *The Imperialist* to illuminate the treasonous designs of the Republicans and rally whites to the polls. This was precisely what the paper’s publishers intended when they provocatively called for a strong, central government, the abrogation of states’ rights, and a peaceful transition to hereditary monarchy.

What they had not counted on was the support such a program would find in conservative ranks. Defenders of the monarchist cause in the South were never more than a small minority, but as the *World’s* correspondent implied when he talked about sympathy for the movement among “old secession statesmen,” they were more influential than their marginal views might suggest. Almost always ex-Confederates who felt betrayed not just by the Democratic Party but by the political system as a whole, they read the Civil War as a chapter in the rise and fall of republics, and argued that like its predecessors, the United States had progressed too far down the course of empire for self-government. Their reflections on the fate of Roman or French liberty here were more than exercises in erudition. Instead, they enlisted history in their assault on the principles of Radical Reconstruction, as they attempted to show that without slavery, states’ rights, and a limited electorate the country would inevitably decay into an “absolute Democracy,” a majoritarian tyranny sustained by the votes of detested former slaves.⁹ With hindsight, such fears appear fanciful, and it is hard to muster any sympathy for those who held them, but as Gregory P. Downs has recently argued, the prospect of future civil wars seemed very real in the decade or so after Appomattox.¹⁰ Imperialism was simultaneously a way to critique the achievements of Reconstruction and a proposal of an alternative route to stabilization in which the power of the South’s self-styled best men would enjoy protection. In this respect, the imaginary Empire of the West performed a similar function to other shadow governments in the Civil War-era. To its southern adherents, indeed, it had elements in common with a better-known *imperium in imperio*, the “invisible empire” of the Ku Klux Klan. Each looked forward to a new antidemocratic order rising from the ashes of postwar America.

Monarchism, of course, was not the path conservative southerners eventually chose to follow as they moved to reclaim power. Yet it is surprising given how often southern whites talked about it over the middle decades of the nineteenth century that it has not drawn more historians’ attention. The strength of republicanism as an interpretive paradigm probably accounts for this lack of interest.¹¹ Over the past four decades, scholars have shown the malleability of American republicanism, lengthening the lifespan of a civic ideology that already reached from the Classical World to Renaissance Europe to such an extent that it is now arguably as important to making sense of the legacy of the Civil War as it is to the origins of the American Revolution. As its uses have multiplied, however, its essence has become less clear, and one of the few things its

University Press, 2011). The eclecticism of southern conservatives is aptly demonstrated in the index to Foner’s defining study of Reconstruction. Under conservatism, it reads ‘*See name of specific person or state.*’ *Ibid.*, 651.

⁸ *Mobile Register*, June 4, 1869.

⁹ *Memphis Public Ledger*, May 12, 1869.

¹⁰ Gregory P. Downs, “The Mexicanization of American Politics: The United States’ Transnational Path from Civil War to Stabilization”, *American Historical Review* 117 (April, 2012), 387-409.

¹¹ Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 4.

historians can now agree on is that their subjects rejected monarchy as a form of government.¹² Recent studies of transatlantic revolutionary and nationalist movements have tended to confirm that nineteenth-century Americans celebrated the spread of republican ideals and contrasted New World freedom to Old World despotism, but only the likes of Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have looked at the appeal of Caesarism as a form of government, and they finish their study of the South with the Civil War.¹³ Yet southern monarchists, however unpleasant their views might have been, could claim affinity with the American political tradition. While they pointed to the success of monarchy as an element of national cohesion in Europe, they drew on ideas familiar to their audience when they pointed to the corrupting role of parties in public life; echoed the assumption that only small, homogeneous communities were fit for self-government; and repeated the common, if exaggerated, claim that the Civil War had led to a dramatic centralization of power, turning a federated republic into something approximating Bonapartist France. For a few months in 1869, *The Imperialist* gave southern conservatives hope that men of property in the North shared their antidemocratic convictions, and though their readiness to embrace a phantom movement has all the makings of a Reconstruction-era farce, their intent at the time appears to have been deadly serious.

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In the northern press, the first rumors of a monarchist conspiracy in New York appeared just three weeks after Grant's inauguration, and the accession of a general to the White House lent an air of plausibility to an imperial plot. Many southern conservatives had high hopes for the new president. They were well aware that Radical Republicans had accepted his candidacy grudgingly, and during the canvass, the candidate's refusal to be drawn on questions of policy raised expectations that like his predecessor, he would prove a thorn in the side of Sumner and his allies. The Memphis *Public Ledger*, one of the most unreconstructed ex-Confederate

¹² On hostility to kingship, see Andrew M. Fleche, *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), Kindle Version, location 269. On republicanism, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); J. Mills Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). On republicanism during and after the Civil War, see Smith, *Enemy Within*, 4-8; Andrew L. Slap, *The Doom of Reconstruction: The Liberal Republicans in the Civil War Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); James J. Connolly, *An Elusive Unity: Urban Democracy and Machine Politics in Industrializing America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). For critical takes on republicanism as an interpretive paradigm, see Sinha, *Counterrevolution of Slavery*, 3-5; Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept", *Journal of American History* 79 (June, 1992), 11-38; Jean Baker, "From Belief into Culture: Republicanism in the Antebellum North", *American Quarterly* 37:4 (1985), 532-50.

¹³ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2005, chapter 22. For other work on Americans and monarchy in the nineteenth century, see Frank Prochaska, *The Eagle and the Crown: Americans and the British Monarchy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Ian Walter Radforth, *Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Phil Roberts, "'All Americans Are Hero-Worshippers': American Observations on the First U.S. Visit by a Reigning Monarch, 1876", *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7 (2008), 453-77. On republicanism, see Timothy Mason Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Paola Gemme, *Domesticating Foreign Struggles: The Italian Risorgimento and Antebellum American Identity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

journals, praised the moderation of his cabinet picks and promised to “support his administration heartily” if Grant made good on his antipartisan rhetoric, while a paper opposed to Reconstruction in Arkansas called the new chief executive the man “best fitted” to “restore to the people their liberties and remove them from *future danger*.”¹⁴ As often, though, conservatives stuck to the script the Democratic Party had used in the national canvass the previous year, and cast Grant not as Washington reincarnate, but Napoleon. At the party’s 1868 convention, the vice-presidential candidate Francis Preston Blair decried Grant’s pacific promises as “the peace of despotism and death,” and editors below the Mason-Dixon Line frequently saw *The Imperialist* as the herald of a military dictatorship.¹⁵ Alden and his colleagues fed them bait by planting stories in the New York press that insinuated cabinet members or the genteel Union Leagues of East Coast cities were orchestrating the plot.¹⁶ Such speculation spurred a Mississippian to wonder whether “the only man who dared to dictate to Abraham Lincoln” might now “control the vast hordes who followed him to battle.”¹⁷

Whether conservatives actually believed such humbug matters less than what they did with the rumors. In retrospect, the actions of congressional Republicans after they wrested power from Andrew Johnson seem overly lenient. All but the most radical legislators clung to a traditional view of the relationship between the Federal government and the states, and fewer still contemplated the confiscation and redistribution of rebel land.¹⁸ But to a planter class emboldened by Johnson’s indulgence and accustomed to mastery the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 came as a rude shock. Dividing into military districts all but one of the states that had joined the rebellion, the acts empowered Union army officials to register African-American voters, and led to a spate of state constitutional conventions which affirmed the citizenship rights of black men. Where Radicals celebrated the end of the color bar, however, conservatives mounted ferocious opposition to the new order, turning to terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan to suppress Republican turnout, and sometimes defeating the new constitutions by persuading registered whites to boycott the polls. By early 1869, four states remained out of the Union as a result, but such tactics failed to forestall the election of Grant, and thanks largely to the votes of former slaves, almost all the former Confederacy was in Republican hands.¹⁹

The inversion of the antebellum order led some conservatives to see *The Imperialist* more as a commentary of their present condition than a prophecy of their future one. A Little Rock editor, for example, told his readers the weekly was “but an artifice to treat of the empire as something yet to be established in order to conceal the fact that the empire exists already.”²⁰ The belief that

¹⁴ Memphis *Public Ledger*, March 6, 1869; Little Rock *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, April 9, 1869. On conservative hopes for a Grant presidency, see Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 6-9.

¹⁵ *Official Proceedings of the National Democratic Convention, Held at New York, July 4-9, 1869*, (Boston: Rockwell & Rollings, 1868), 180.

¹⁶ New York *Citizen*, March 27, May 1, 1869. On these rumors in the South, see Milledgeville (Ga.) *Federal Union*, April 13, 1869; Atlanta *Daily Intelligencer*, April 14, 1869; Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, April 15, 1869; Pickens (S.C.) *Keowee Courier*, April 16, 1869; Nashville *Union and American*, April 16, 1869; Raymond (Miss.) *Hinds County Gazette*, April 21, 1869; Athens *Southern Banner*, April 23, 1869; Atlanta *Constitution*, April 28, 1869; Columbia (S.C.) *Daily Phoenix*, May 1, 1869; Athens *Southern Watchman*, May 5, 1869.

¹⁷ [Douglas Walworth], letter to Natchez *Daily Democrat*, April 13, 1869.

¹⁸ Michael Les Benedict, “Preserving the Constitution: The Conservative Basis of Radical Reconstruction”, *Journal of American History* 61 (1974), 65-90.

¹⁹ Michael Perman, *Reunion without Compromise: The South and Reconstruction: 1865-1868* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), chapter 10 and epilogue; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 332-3, 425-44.

²⁰ Macon *Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, April 9, 1869; Little Rock *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, April 23, 1869.

Radicals were erecting a “consolidated” or “centralized” military “despotism” on the ruins of the Republic was already an article of faith for opponents of Reconstruction, who disagreed only on how far the process had proceeded and what was the proper response.²¹ “We are, as a people, prostrate, silent, under the foot of the most gigantic and irresistible form of human tyranny”, the Arkansas journal insisted. Portents of empire were red herrings when the real issue at stake was the “absolute and avowed” system under which southern whites already lived.²²

Monarchist rumors, though, proved more useful to conservatives when they served as a warning, for the threat *The Imperialist* supposedly posed allowed them to cast themselves as vigilant patriots. Ex-confederates had always claimed they were the true protectors of the Constitution but northern voters were unconvinced. In the 1868 presidential race, the Democrats ran on a national platform that committed the party to undoing most of the Reconstruction legislation, and the sense that Seymour and Blair were still fighting the Civil War made it all too easy for Republicans to taint them with the mark of treason.²³ The crushing defeat that followed strengthened the hand of politicians who believed the party could never win national office while running on wartime issues and led a growing number in the North and South to embrace the “New Departure”: a program that publicly at least downplayed crude appeals to white supremacy and accepted the finality of the Reconstruction amendments. Unrepentant Confederates, however, were reluctant to forget the struggle, even if their memory of what it was fought over proved selective. In a torrent of books and periodicals that appeared in the years after Appomattox, intellectuals and politicians like Albert Taylor Bledsoe, Edward A. Pollard, and the vice-president of the breakaway republic Alexander T. Stephens emphasized both the legal and moral propriety of secession while casting the conflict as a battle between revolutionary centralizers in the North and conservative defenders of state sovereignty in the South.²⁴ Although historians have often seen these works as crucial in shaping the meme of the “Lost Cause,” all but Stephens’s attempt to demonstrate the patriotic aims of the Confederacy attracted little attention at the time.²⁵ The imperial plot, however, enabled newspaper editors to write the recent history of the Republic for a much larger audience.

These critics of Reconstruction read *The Imperialist* as a chapter in the past, present, and future of radical rule to decipher the treasonous intentions of Republican Party leaders. The conspiratorial story they told married classical republicanism and contemporary circumstance in a manner readers would have found familiar. The experience of past societies persuaded conservatives that power, left unchecked, would consolidate. Alert to this tendency to centralization, the Founding Fathers had wisely created a balanced government over the objections of the monarchist Federalist Party. In this framing of history, the greatest danger to liberty lay not in the turbulence of the people, but the corruption of their rulers; crowned heads

²¹ See for example “Chivalrous Southrons”, *Southern Review* (July, 1869), 96-128; *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, April 20, 1869; *Memphis Public Ledger*, June 16, 1869.

²² *Little Rock Daily Arkansas Gazette*, April 9, 1869.

²³ William Earl Parrish, *Frank Blair: Lincoln's Conservative* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 254-8.

²⁴ Terry A. Barnhart, *Albert Taylor Bledsoe: Defender of the Old South and Architect of the Lost Cause* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 192; Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1968), 112.

²⁵ Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 49-50.

came to the fore, one southern journal argued, when “those in authority... usurp and exercise despotic powers in the name of republicanism.”²⁶

In the Early National Era, so this narrative went, a vigilant citizenry was alive to such threats, but the rise of an “abolition-disunion” party with Caesarist ambitions brought new dangers.²⁷ Republicans “educated their people to believe... that the South was a horde of ignorant savages whom it were God’s service to subjugate and reform,” then stirred up sectional hostilities until patriotic citizens in the slave states were left with no alternative to “peaceable Secession.”²⁸ When Lincoln vowed to keep the Union together, his followers preached “loyalty,” “liberty,” and “emancipation” while practicing “hatred,” “revenge,” and “treachery,” and then after his death, shadowy secret societies and congressional machinations tightened their grip on power.²⁹ But perhaps their most devious trick, conservatives alleged, lay in the enfranchisement of former slaves. What might have been interpreted as an extension of the democratic principle was instead an attempt to “so cheapen” the “right of suffrage” that the ballot-box itself would be brought “into contempt.” “They understand well, one journal insisted, “that the lawless and anarchical proceedings which for some years have disgraced the country are directly calculated to disgust the people with our present system of Government, and to put them in a frame of mind that would lead to no opposition to an Imperial usurpation.”³⁰ All this was prologue to the coming coup: the design for which a monarchist journal now brazenly published. A Nashville paper predicted “that in less than four years, the prominent leaders of the Radical party in this country, will be as open and frank in the advocacy of imperialism as for ten years, they have been false and insidious in their ostentatious devotion to republicanism.”³¹

By lending weight to the idea of a Radical plot to incite civil war, debase the electoral system, and substitute a hereditary monarch for the checks and balances of the Constitution, *The Imperialist* allowed southern conservatives to claim they were the real defenders of the republic. “If this be true, there is treason in it,” one newspaper opined in publishing rumors of Grant’s support for the conspiracy, “more than there was in secession, more than Jefferson Davis, judged even by his political enemies, ever committed.” Even longstanding opponents of disunion saw monarchism as a grave danger. To Andrew Johnson, returning to Tennessee after his turbulent presidency, *The Imperialist*’s appearance vindicated the stand he had taken over the preceding years. Just a few days after the first issue reached the South, he brandished a copy of the paper at a speech in Memphis, warning his audience the “thing” was “thrown out as a feeler by an ambitious Congress, ready to come forward to usurp your liberties.” Over the following months, as he toyed with the idea of running for governor and embarked on an unsuccessful bid for a Senate seat, Johnson built up the threat of empire repeatedly, claiming in June “there was much more in the Imperialist movement than appears on the surface.” Four years after the journal’s demise he was still carrying a copy to persuade visiting journalists of the strength of an incipient Caesarist movement in America. Republicans accused Johnson of coveting a crown himself, but by exposing the supposed Radical plot, the paper unwittingly demonstrated that in using executive power, the former president was the protector rather than destroyer of constitutional

²⁶ Columbus [Ga.] *Daily Enquirer*, May 12, 1869. See also *Atlanta Constitution*, April 6, 1869; *New Orleans Crescent*, April 7, 1869; *Mobile Register*, April 13, 1869; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, April 25, 1869.

²⁷ *Dallas Weekly Herald*, May 15, 1869.

²⁸ *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, May 4, 1869; *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, April 23, 1869.

²⁹ *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, May 11, 1869.

³⁰ *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, April 23, 1869. See also *Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, April 16, 1869; Letter to *Dallas Weekly Herald*, July 10, 1869.

³¹ *Nashville Union and American*, April 16, 1869.

liberty. With his own administration presumably in mind, he declared he “would much prefer a wiser judiciary and just Prince” to a legislative branch “more despotic than any one man.”³²

The Imperialist therefore enabled the transformation of traitors into patriots and would-be kings into defenders of the republic, but in providing conservative southerners with a script to rewrite the nation’s recent history, the paper offered its readers below the Mason-Dixon Line more than mere exoneration. Calculating conservatives used the specter of monarchism to repair the alliances through which they had exerted a disproportionate degree of control over national politics in the antebellum era. The Democratic Party loomed large in their calculations here and partisan journals urged northern voters to join their southern counterparts in resisting imperial encroachment. Talk of Radical connivance in the imperial movement could usually be traced to Democratic papers like the Newark *Journal* and New York *Citizen*, and by publishing excerpts, their partisan allies in the South reminded readers they had friends in the loyal states.³³ Only concerted action at “*the ballot box by the National Democratic Party*” could save the republic according to one Alabama journal.³⁴ Even those who doubted the wisdom of northern voters hoped monarchism could unite citizens across sectional lines. A correspondent to a Memphis paper, for example, claimed imperialism “would prove a blessing in disguise if it serves in the end to arouse the misguided masses of the North to a sense of their danger, and unite them with the people of the South in a final struggle for constitutional liberty”.³⁵

Such pleas for the Democratic Party to resume its antebellum role as the patriotic defender of limited government and states’ rights were sometimes tied to calls for a renewal of “natural alliance” between the South and West.³⁶ Until slavery extension drove them apart, southern and western voters had often voted together in presidential elections against New England, and optimistic ex-Confederates believed that they would soon return to each other’s embrace. In 1867, indeed, the arch-conservative George Fitzhugh urged his fellow southerners to steer clear of monarchist movements by reminding them that internal improvements binding the South and Old Northwest would “unite distant peoples on terms of amity” and counterbalance the strength of the Northeast in Washington.³⁷ By 1869, however, the Federal debt offered firmer ground for friendship. During the Civil War, the government had sold bonds in exchange for devalued paper money, with the promise to pay the interest in gold. Southern resistance to meeting the debt was never likely to win much support in the loyal states, but on the cash-poor periphery of America’s economic empire, citizens vented their anger that precious specie was falling into the pockets of wealthy financiers based in East Coast cities and Europe. In 1868, Democrats considered following the lead of their party in Ohio, which had run successfully on a platform to pay the interest in greenbacks the previous year, but the threat of losing support in New York moderated their stance.³⁸ Not without earnest, *The Imperialist* declared itself the bondholders’ champion, and claimed a “strong central government is the only salvation for the creditors of the nation.”³⁹

³² Paul H. Bergeron (ed.), *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, vol. 15 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 449, 596, 598.

³³ See for example *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, April 23, 1869; *Atlanta Constitution*, May 2, 1869.

³⁴ *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, 16 June, 1869.

³⁵ A Young Republican, letter to *Memphis Public Ledger*, May 3, 1869.

³⁶ See for example *Macon Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, April 16, 1869.

³⁷ George Fitzhugh, “Monarchy in America”, *Debow’s Review* (March, 1867), 277-8.

³⁸ George T. McJimsey, *Genteel Partisan: Manton Marble, 1834-1917* (Ames: Iowa State University Press), 1971, 119-30; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 311.

³⁹ *The Imperialist*, May 1, 1869.

Southern critics gladly linked Radicalism, Wall Street, and empire.⁴⁰ As one Deep South paper put it, the monarchist journal had become “the official organ of the most powerful men in the so-called or pretended Republican party,” and advanced “the views of the great monetary interest.”⁴¹ Another warned that “purse-proud aristocrats” would “enslave a great people” to “fill their own coffers.”⁴² Andrew Johnson, convinced both major parties were riddled with traitors, used these fears as he sought to build a new political movement. To strike back at the “bonded aristocracy” of the North, he envisaged the South and West uniting, though he was unconvinced even this regional alliance could ward off the coming coup.⁴³ His administration journal in Washington saw empire as the final “crowning demand of the bondholders who manage the Radical party.”⁴⁴

This might be read as a prologue for three decades of simmering hostility between Wall Street and the West which would culminate in the presidential election of 1896 but in 1869 it came to little. As a “party game,” the monarchist scare did generate some winnings, with one citizen in Tennessee promising Johnson he would labor “until all idea of the Empire ceases,” while Cincinnati Democrats established a new party, with national ambitions, which equated repudiation with resistance to imperialism.⁴⁵ Yet the immediate political fallout from the imperial conspiracy barely corresponded to the interest it engendered. With state legislatures generally out of session and an off-year election in most southern states this might not seem surprising but conservatives may have elided the topic when campaigning to avoid exposing the divisions in their own ranks. The question of how to pay the national debt had already exposed a deep rift in the national Democratic Party between its Wall Street and western wings, and for southern whites wary of property confiscation, repudiation threatened to establish a troubling precedent.⁴⁶ Nor did other issues raised by *The Imperialist* bring wealthy southerners together. By 1869, plenty of conservatives had reluctantly reconciled themselves to *de jure* black suffrage in the hope of ending Confederate disfranchisement and splitting the Republican vote, but this course was hard to reconcile with the hard line message that African-American enfranchisement was a diabolical plot to discredit self-government. The paper itself, meanwhile, divided opinion between those who saw it as a tool of or a reaction to the ruling party.⁴⁷

Perhaps for these reasons, most conservative critics of empire below the Mason-Dixon Line fell back on what they could agree on, prescribing as the antidote to imperialism a return to the Constitution of old: a compact they fondly remembered as the guarantor of the rights of states, property, and (white male) electoral minorities. Over and over again the cry came for a

⁴⁰ See for example Nashville *Union and American*, April 16, 1869; Memphis *Daily Avalanche*, April 23, 1869; Athens *Southern Watchman*, April 28, 1869; Jacksonville (Al.) *Republican*, May 2, 1869; Atlanta *Constitution*, May 2, 1869.

⁴¹ Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, 23 April 23, 1869; Galveston *Tri-Weekly News*. 1869 Aug 16.

⁴² Athens *Southern Watchman*, April 28, 1869.

⁴³ Trebla, letter to Alexandria *Louisiana Democrat*, July 14, 1869.

⁴⁴ Washington *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 20, 1869.

⁴⁵ On conspiracy as a “party game,” see Mark Wahlgreen Summers, *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), chapter 4. Thomas R. Barry to Andrew Johnson, June 12, 1869, in Bergeron (ed.), *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, vol. 16, 29; William Cornell Jewett to Andrew Johnson, April 18, 1869, in Bergeron (ed.), *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, vol. 15, 598; Cincinnati *Commercial*, April 17, 1869.

⁴⁶ See for example the conservative Orange Court House *Native Virginian*, January 31, 1868, which saw repudiation of the public debt as tantamount to “chaos, anarchy.”

⁴⁷ See for example Macon *Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, April 16, 1869.

republican restoration rather than a lurch into empire.⁴⁸ *The Imperialist* therefore had its uses for white southerners hostile to Reconstruction, for it enabled them to play down the place of slavery in the sectional conflict, vindicate their resistance to Republican rule, and demand a return to what they insisted were the first principles of the Union, whether through the agency of the Democratic Party or a new political movement. But even the call to wind back the clock was riven with contradictions. Ultimately, southern critics claimed, the responsibility for Radical rule lay in the decisions of a sovereign people, yet it was that electorate that was now being held up as the last best hope of the republic. Could a corrupted body of voters, their ranks swelled by the enfranchisement of supposedly ignorant ex-slaves, really restore the organic law of 1787, conservatives wondered? As the publishers of *The Imperialist* had predicted, Democratic partisans had little choice but to say yes, and in drawing attention to the paper through their apocalyptic warnings of an approaching empire they helped bolster its circulation to 10,000.⁴⁹ What Alden and his collaborators might not have expected, though, was the response of more pessimistic citizens below the Mason-Dixon Line. For them, the monarchist movement in the North was not an indispensable enemy, but a potential ally in a struggle against the democratic principle.

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“I have conversed with many of the people upon this subject,” one resident of Memphis wrote of monarchism a few weeks after news of *The Imperialist* reached the South, “and find that many of our best men and truest capitalists and most substantial citizens indorse most heartily the movement intended to be inaugurated.”⁵⁰ Between April and September 1869 similar professions of support from below the Mason-Dixon Line featured regularly in the columns of the New York weekly. From the Deep South, a Confederate veteran claimed four Alabaman papers had all but thrown in their lot with imperialism, and “in one year the white men of this State can be united almost to a man in your platform.”⁵¹ A North Carolinian gave his blessing to the “wise and just” cause, while a fellow tar-heeler, reputedly “one of the ablest and best men” of the region, commended the inauguration of a “great movement” which “will be hailed with delight throughout the whole country.”⁵² A citizen in Tennessee was “satisfied that the Empire will be the true solution to all our political troubles.”⁵³

While these pledges of fealty need to be read with a skeptical eye there is plenty of corroborating evidence to suggest their authenticity. Tempting though it must have been, *The Imperialist* does not appear to have carried fabricated correspondence or altered the content of its editorial exchanges, and whenever they could, its publishers printed letters under names

⁴⁸ Dallas *Weekly Herald*, May 15, 1869; Milledgeville (Ga.) *Southern Recorder*, April 20, 1869; S., letter to Milledgeville (Ga.) *Southern Recorder*, May 11, July 6, 1869; Milledgeville (Ga.) *Federal Union*, May 11, 1869; Columbus (Ga.) *Daily Enquirer*, May 12, 1869; A Young Republican, letter to Memphis *Public Ledger*, May 3, 1869; Memphis *Daily Avalanche*, May 4, 6, 1869; Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, May 21, June 9, 1869; Alexandria *Louisiana Democrat*, June 23, 1869.

⁴⁹ Alden, “Days of My Youth”, 157.

⁵⁰ Letter to *The Imperialist*, April 24, 1869.

⁵¹ Letter to *Ibid.*, May 1, 1869.

⁵² Letter to *Ibid.*, May 8, 1869; S., letter to Goldsboro (N.C.) *Messenger*, reprinted in *The Imperialist*, May 8, 1869.

⁵³ Letter to *Ibid.*, May 1, 1869.

traceable in the census.⁵⁴ Other sources, meanwhile, affirm the popularity of the paper's ideas. Even a critic of monarchism conceded "speculation is rife concerning the merits of Imperialism as contrasted with republicanism," while in Alabama, a paper conceded that several of its contemporaries "have been speaking very freely here of late in favor of establishing in this country an imperial throne."⁵⁵ The admission of a Mississippi journal that interest in the empire was growing "among the southern men" is borne out by rising circulation.⁵⁶ A book dealer in Mobile had to order an extra thirty copies in early July, and barely a week after the appearance of the first issue, a New Orleans stationer was advertising *The Imperialist* alongside a select handful of long-established northern publications like *Godey's Lady's Book*.⁵⁷ "The few copies of your first issue which found their way to this city," a resident there wrote, "have met with a reception accorded to no Northern publication within the past ten years."⁵⁸ While a mixture of curiosity and political calculation help account for such interest the journal's audience included a significant minority of conservatives who nodded in agreement with the monarchist agenda. "Send me your paper, beginning with the first number" the Memphis correspondent asked, for "everybody wishes to see it."⁵⁹ The *World's* reporter does not appear to have been far off in predicting that if imperialism took off as a national movement it would find "men and money" in the South.⁶⁰

Most of these followers were monarchists of the moment: their flirtation with imperialism a deliberate warning to northern voters that conservative patience with Reconstruction was wearing thin. "His Imperial Majesty" Ulysses S. Grant, the Macon *Georgia Weekly Telegraph* declared after hearing of *The Imperialist* for the first time, would be "an improvement on what we have got now," and doubted if a hundred whites could be found in the state "who would not hold up both hands for some autocrat to substitute his single will for all this bald and ridiculous imposter of a government."⁶¹ This preference for living under the heel of what an Alabama paper called an "Imperial Executive" rather than an "Imperial Congressional Oligarchy" appeared repeatedly in commentary on the scare; "it is better to be under *one* despot than a *thousand!*" an Athens journal concluded in a not untypical vein.⁶² Even Andrew Johnson, who more than any other prominent politician had latched onto the sensation, sometimes struck a similar note. Given the choice "between taking one individual who was honest, wise, patriotic and just, as my ruler or my master," he announced on a visit to Washington in July, "I would take him in preference to that Congress, composed as it has been of numbers who are irresponsible, capricious and corrupt."⁶³ Imperialism here served more as a yardstick to measure the degradation of the republic than a serious proposition.

Yet at times the cry for a dictator from the South suggested deeper malaise with the nation's democratic experiment. Johnson's battles with congressional Republicans convinced many white

⁵⁴ According to the Library of Congress Chronicling America database, there are no extant copies of several of the papers that more or less supported *The Imperialist*. The complaint about the paper printing private correspondence appears in the Memphis *Public Ledger*, May 17, 1869.

⁵⁵ Jacksonville (Al.) *Republican*, June 19, 1869.

⁵⁶ Spectator, letter to Memphis *Daily Appeal*, May 26, 1869; Macon (Miss.) *Beacon*, May 29, 1869, reprinted in Memphis *Public Ledger*, June 4, 1869.

⁵⁷ Robert W. Offutt, letter to *The Imperialist*, July 10, 1869; New Orleans *Crescent*, April 18, 1869.

⁵⁸ *The Imperialist*, May 8, 1869.

⁵⁹ Letter to *Ibid.*, April 24, 1869; *Ibid.*, April 24, 1869.

⁶⁰ S. D., letter to New York *World*, July 7, 1869.

⁶¹ Macon *Georgia Weekly Telegraph*, April 9, 1869.

⁶² Montgomery *Daily Advertiser*, May 27, 1869; Athens *Southern Watchman*, April 21, 1869.

⁶³ Bergeron (ed.), *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, vol. 16, 52.

southerners that an executive elected nationally every four years offered them more security than a legislature beholden to local interests and chosen twice as often. One Arkansas journal, which hoped Grant would follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, called the presidency “the chief obstacle to the accomplishment” of imperial designs, and predicted that allies of the Radicals would soon set about abolishing the office entirely.⁶⁴ The paper imagined the new incumbent in the White House as a second Washington, who would restore good government, then relinquish power to the civilian authorities. Fantasies about the rise of such a military strongman were not a new phenomenon in the South. Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have shown the fascination of the antebellum planter class with the likes of Caesar, Cromwell, and Napoleon, and even before the Civil War some of their subjects had looked forward to a moment when the American people would need to invest such a figure with extraordinary powers. Towards the end of the conflict a “surprising number” of Confederate politicians and journalists asked for what Paul D. Escott has called “a generalissimo” to “tackle the South’s problems boldly, effectively, and with more genius and less restraint than the president.”⁶⁵ With the fate of the region still undecided a few years on these aspirations lingered in certain quarters, and conservatives’ fixated on the enigmatic Grant as the man most likely to achieve them.

George William Bagby, who had served as an occasional correspondent for one of the Confederate newspapers to embrace Caesarism in 1864, seems to have been in this camp, though it is sometimes hard to tell. A former editor of the influential *Southern Literary Messenger* and a prominent humorist who in 1860-61 had championed secession in Virginia, Bagby fell on hard times after the conflict, and wound up editing a small weekly paper, *The Native Virginian*.⁶⁶ His editorials on Grant, which mostly preceded publication of *The Imperialist*, simultaneously mocked the general’s reputation while extolling him as a prospective emperor. Bagby’s biographer, writing well before the revisionist historiography of the 1950s, saw these interventions as a “high strung individual’s reactions to the terror of the Reconstruction”; Grant’s ascent to the imperial throne, he argued, was actually a “political nightmare” for the editor, who as a more recent historian has pointed out, often saw the world through a “libertarian” lens.⁶⁷ Yet while Bagby sometimes hid his true intent behind the veil of satire, his frequent calls for a strong executive appear to have been in earnest, and when *The Imperialist* appeared he welcomed a paper that will convince the “American people of the great truth... that the unity of this country can be preserved by an Imperial government.” Reminding readers of his wartime work for the *Richmond Examiner*, which had called for a form of military government, he argued if anything the monarchist movement had arrived too late. Thereafter the *Native Virginian* veered, sometimes aligning itself with imperialism, sometimes adopting the standard Democratic Party line that it was a Radical plot, but the sense the South’s salvation lay in the extension of executive power was palpable. “For the present her interest is in an Emperor instead of a mob of Masters, miscalled a Senate,” the paper had claimed in 1868, and it did not abandon this position

⁶⁴ Little Rock *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, April 23, 1869.

⁶⁵ Genovese and Fox Genovese, *Master Class*, chapter 22; Paul D. Escott, *Military Necessity: Civil-Military Relations in the Confederacy* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 152.

⁶⁶ Frederick S. Daniel, *The Richmond Examiner during the War; or, the Writings of John S. Daniel* (New York, 1868), 14-5.

⁶⁷ Joseph Leonard King Jr., *Dr. George William Bagby: A Study of Virginian Literature, 1850-1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), 145; Debra Van Tuyl, “George William Bagby Jr.: Confederate ‘Croaker’”, in *Knights of the Quill: Confederate Correspondents and Their Civil War Reporting*, eds. Van Tuyl, Patricia G. McNeely and Henry H. Schulte (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2010), 502.

until July 1869, when perhaps with the promise of an office in a “redeemed” government, Bagby settled down to toe the partisan line for an upcoming state election.⁶⁸

The Imperialist's editors skillfully exploited the response to their paper in the South. Whether to embarrass the self-serving politicians who had declared the journal a Radical plot or to sell more copies to sympathetic conservatives, the writers played to the prejudices of gentlemanly planters, promising them a privileged place in the Empire of the West. Admittedly, the paper never abandoned its fierce nationalism, and occasionally acknowledged a mild preference for the Republican Party on the grounds that its followers were bringing imperialism ever closer. But plenty of column inches in each issue were given over to attacks on black suffrage, congressional corruption in Washington, and withering portraits of Radical politicians like Benjamin F. Butler. By June, the paper was hinting Robert E. Lee might be the man to don the imperial purple while calling for payment of the Confederate debt.⁶⁹ Such proposals did not always sit well with their intended audience. White southerners had already begun the process of sanctifying Lee as a hero of the Lost Cause and the idea that he might be called upon at the dismemberment of the republic, one journal protested, “blasphemes the holiest trophy of Southern valor.”⁷⁰ A Charleston paper, meanwhile, reminded conservatives that the money they had invested in the Confederate cause was gone forever to dissuade them from falling for *The Imperialist*'s charm.⁷¹

Yet as Spring turned to Summer in 1869 there was a perceptible change in the reporting of the paper in the South. Instead of reading the weekly as a blueprint for a Republican dictatorship, editors began to see it as an “ably edited” northern critic of Reconstruction.⁷² Rumors of the involvement of Grant's cabinet or even the president himself in the enterprise gave way to the reprinting of lengthy extracts bemoaning some aspect or another of Radical rule and even – albeit more rarely – expressions of outright support.⁷³ This drove up interest in the paper. In early June a Montgomery news-dealer reported that circulation had increased from five to seventy-five inside two weeks, and a journal that would have once been seen as a “nuisance,” in “many houses and hotels... is to-day lauded with praise.”⁷⁴ Ironically, though, the monarchists of the moment *The Imperialist* cultivated envisaged a quite different emperor to the one the weekly had in mind. Where some southerners salivated at the prospect of a Caesar sweeping away the relics of radical rule, the New York weekly pictured a figurehead on the throne restrained by a mixed system of government which stood somewhere between the England of Queen Victoria and the France of Napoleon III. Convinced that the checks and balances of the old republic were gone, the likes of Bagby struggled to imagine power as anything other than

⁶⁸ Bagby was made state librarian after the conservative victory in Virginia in 1869. Even in 1880, though, he still toyed with the idea that Grant should serve a third term. See Van Tuyl, “George William Bagby Jr.,” 511, and Maddex, *Virginia Conservatives*, 141.

⁶⁹ *The Imperialist*, June 19, 1869.

⁷⁰ *Atlanta Constitution*, June 3, 1869; see also *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, May 27, 1869; *Macon Daily Telegraph*, May 30, 1869.

⁷¹ *Charleston Daily News*, July 15, August 4, 1869.

⁷² *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, June 9, 1869.

⁷³ Papers that made a serious case for imperialism include the *Memphis Public Ledger*, *Mobile Tribune*, *Native Virginian*, and *Natchez Daily Democrat*. Other journals in Kentucky and Alabama appear to have editorialised in favour of a monarchy, while several more stated they would take an empire over the current Congress. While it cannot be ruled out that editors were deliberately seeking notoriety to boost circulation, this does not appear to have occurred to anyone at the time, and with the exception perhaps of Bagby's weekly, seems unlikely.

⁷⁴ See for example *Milledgeville (Ga.) Federal Union*, May 18, 1869; *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, May 21, 1869; *Atlanta Constitution*, June 1, 1869; *Charleston Daily News*, June 2, 1869. E. W. Moffitt, letter to *The Imperialist*, June 12, 1869.

absolute, and suggested that the only question was who would wield its scepter: a demagogic congress or a military strongman. They repeatedly expressed their preference for the latter.

Ironically, these conservatives' sense that power was absolute and indivisible had come as much from their revolutionary experience of waging war, than it had, as they preferred to claim, their chastening encounter with military occupation afterwards. Without ever following through on the suggestions of the Richmond *Examiner* to appoint a military dictator, Jefferson Davis's administration erected the most centralized state the North American continent has ever seen to take on a major industrial power. This precarious experiment in nation-building required the abandonment of long held traditions of limited government, respect for property rights, and eventually even their cherished institution of slavery, and as each of these pillars of southern exceptionalism fell conservatives found room to compare their society not only to the North, but also to European powers where national consolidation was taking place under "prominent minds" who had infused "new life, vigor and patriotism into the stagnation of monarchy."⁷⁵ "It matters not under what system of government we may live," a Memphis monarchist could argue in 1869, for "that system is best which will afford us the greatest amount of protection to life, liberty and property."⁷⁶ Another resident of the city expressed similar sentiments: "If there is merit in anything... we do not now question whether it be the pet scheme of a foreigner... but our consideration is what practical good or general utility?"⁷⁷ The state-led modernization under way in the likes of France and Germany provided one model for these conservatives of a more permanent imperialism than those flippantly raising the cry for a Caesar intended.

The most influential exponent of such a program, William M. Burwell, never referred directly to *The Imperialist*, but he shared an admiration for the centralized government of Bonapartist France with the monarchist journal, which flanked the crown on its masthead with Napoleon III's dictum "The Empire is Peace." Burwell was a Virginian who like many antebellum Upper Southerners looked forward to the gradual transformation of the region into a mixed economy based on free white labor.⁷⁸ Despite preaching the gospel of the New South in the heyday of the Old, he threw in his lot with the Confederacy, and in 1864 co-founded a periodical in Richmond to support the "sacred cause" of independence. The first issue of *The Age* went through the motions of proclaiming fidelity to the shibboleth of states' rights before joining its counterpart *The Examiner* in demanding stronger government. Burwell though wanted something quite different to Bagby's temporary Caesar. Drawing on a dialectical approach to history and government, he showed how mankind had developed through "a succession of negatives," which ultimately revealed "that human happiness does not consist in absolute despotism nor pure Democracy" but rather, he implied, through service to the higher ideal of the state. His immediate concern here lay in securing diplomatic recognition for the South. Nations rose and fell, he argued, on their capacity to "sustain a blockade or resist an invasion," but this only came through "moral and industrial development," which it was the obligation of those in power to pursue. Modern states mobilized the resources of their territory and people, which enabled him to explain to skeptical slaveholders how the Tsar had emancipated the serfs to "add to the physical capacity and

⁷⁵ Charles F. Schmidt, "Monarchies and Republics", *Debow's Review* (February, 1867), 156. On the Confederate state, see Escott, *Military Necessity*, xiv; Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 2, 58-9; Brian Balogh, *A Government out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 285.

⁷⁶ A.L.S. [Alfred L. Swingley], letter to *Memphis Public Ledger*, May 13, 1869.

⁷⁷ J.S., letter to *Ibid.*, April 29, 1869.

⁷⁸ William M. Burwell, *Address Delivered before the Society of Alumni of the University of Virginia at Their Annual Meeting, June 29, 1847* (Richmond: Shepherd and Colin, 1847), 7, 13-4.

industrial resources of the empire.” Beyond his half-hearted protestation of fealty to the Confederate Constitution, Burwell had little to say on the machinery of government, for what mattered was the final product: domestic contentment and the security of the state.⁷⁹

Over the course of Reconstruction Burwell developed these ideas more systematically by advocating a French road to modernization. In 1868, he acquired control of *Debow's Review*, and although he failed to restore the antebellum fortunes of the journal, he turned its pages into a forum for merchants, planters, and intellectuals to discuss plans for the social and economic development of the region. Both as a writer and editor, Burwell found inspiration for the South in Louis Napoleon's transformation of France. The nephew of the first emperor, Louis Napoleon won election to the presidency of the Second Republic after the 1848 Revolution, launched a coup four years later, and ascended to the throne as Napoleon III. During his two decade long reign, he oversaw a vast program of public works, which ranged from railroad building to the reconstruction of much of central Paris. Burwell saw such projects as proof of the axiom he had put forward in the *Richmond Age* that “nations are respected according to their power.” “Native genius cannot remain concealed,” he argued of the Second Empire. “It belongs to the State, and it will be reclaimed and developed on State account.”⁸⁰ Three years later, in 1869, Burwell returned to the same theme, arguing that with states' rights dead, “the South” needed “an example” to follow. As lingering bad blood made southerners wary of looking to the North, he urged conservatives to study instead the self-strengthening underway in the likes of Austria, England, Germany, Italy, and above all France. Proposing “Louis Napoleon as a model for the South,” he reminded readers how the emperor ensured “[e]ach individual was trained to public usefulness.”⁸¹ Most critics of Radicalism in the South accused putative “imperialists” of destroying the liberty of white citizens, but Burwell saw the individual as a servant of the higher ideal of the nation.

Over the course of Reconstruction *Debow's Review* revisited the Bonapartist theme. Another writer in the journal, a Midwesterner with southern sympathies, called the French emperor the “greatest statesman of modern times,” and conceded that monarchy, “with all her odious features, contains more of vitality” than republican government.⁸² The same month *The Imperialist* appeared, meanwhile, the Louisianan Dr. J. E. Nagle penned a fawning portrait of Louis Napoleon's reign. Like his editor he drew parallels between the Old World and the New. “Twenty years ago,” Nagle began, “France was in a condition of insecurity and doubt, which resembled very closely the present political situation of these United States.” Having shown how the emperor's “inventive genius developed the resources of his country,” he urged “the Southern people” in particular to “recognize in him a great example.” They should learn from Napoleon III, Nagle concluded, “that not only popular happiness, but political freedom, can alone be secured by means which add to the wealth, numbers, and intelligence of the people.”⁸³

But the southern conservatives who shared Burwell's admiration for the Second Empire in the late 1860s did so more often for Napoleon III's apparent ability to master popular passions, than out of any love for the developmental state he oversaw. Enthusiasm for Bonapartism was by no means universal in conservative circles, where the principle of centralization often seemed like a template for Radical Republicanism, but it was hard for southerners not to compare the relative

⁷⁹ “Traits of the Age”, *Richmond Age* (January, 1864), 1-4.

⁸⁰ William M. Burwell, “Louis Napoleon”, *Debow's Review* (March, 1866), 240.

⁸¹ William M. Burwell, “Louis Napoleon as a Model for the South”, *Debow's Review* (November, 1869), 936-7

⁸² Schmidt, “Monarchies and Republics”, 149, 151.

⁸³ J. E. Nagle, “Napoleonic Policy”, *Debow's Review* (April, 1869), 292, 295-6.

tranquility in France over the preceding two decades with the turbulence that had torn apart the American republic.⁸⁴ In the *Native Virginian*, for example, Bagby lifted an extract from a travel narrative on the Second Empire, highlighting the phrase “life and property are wonderfully safe” in an implicit contrast to the South, while a pro-monarchist newspaper in Tennessee signed some of its articles with the Bonapartist rallying cry “the Empire is Peace.”⁸⁵ Conservatives’ admiration for Napoleon III rested above all here on his seeming capacity to restrain the license of a people who, as Nagle put it, were “intoxicated with the gas of liberty.” He “dared to rule the nation only as it could be governed,” and in doing so, brought order out of the “chaos of anarchy.”⁸⁶ “Napoleon has held his throne,” a Charleston paper argued along similar lines, “by virtue of his intellect and his thorough mastery of the passions and motives which control human nature.”⁸⁷ Some, like Burwell and Nagle, saw the emperor as a system-builder, often casting him as paving the way for the gradual restoration of political freedom as education and economic development readied the people for citizenship; others read him in the romantic vein as a charismatic genius upon whose death “France will be remitted back to her original elements.”⁸⁸ Either way Napoleon III illustrated the necessity for strong leadership in a polity in which almost a century of revolutionary tumult had revealed the “multitude” were incapable of self-government. And this was the most valuable lesson conservatives drew from the Second Empire after the Civil War.

Beneath much of the support for imperialism in the South, indeed, lay fears that the republic had degenerated into the kind of democracy that before the Bonapartist stabilization had periodically rocked France.⁸⁹ In the antebellum era, it had been commonplace for citizens to assume that black slavery protected white liberty, whether because the presence of a “mudsill class” to perform manual labor impeded the development of a proletariat, or on account of the existence of an aristocratic element in the form of a planter elite capable of exerting disinterested civic leadership. Slaves, however, had won their freedom, and Congress had turned the landless bondsman into a voter. Even southern conservatives who reluctantly accepted the principle of black suffrage refused to publicly acknowledge its moral right, and warned instead that a government resting on the votes of those whose “proper sphere” was the “corn and tobacco field” had little hope of enduring.⁹⁰ By 1869, African-Americans had been casting ballots for two years already in the South with no sign of the sky falling in, but the combination of disgust and apprehension whites accustomed to mastery felt at seeing their former slaves line up at the polls drove some into the imperial camp. The *Mobile Tribune* endorsed the monarchist movement when it found *The Imperialist* proclaiming “the superiority of the white race” while an Alabaman announced the “people of the South preferred military rule to Negro carpet-bag government.”⁹¹ “Shall we have the negro to rule over us – the beast heretofore used to till our fields – or should

⁸⁴ For criticism of the Second Empire in the South, see “The Gobemouchian Ideal of Government”, *Southern Review* 4 (1868), 189-201; J. N. C., letter to Charleston *Courier Tri-Weekly*, June 15, 1869; Gamma, letter to New Orleans *Picayune*, June 20, 1869. Some suspected Napoleon III was behind *The Imperialist*. See letter to Columbus (Tx.) *Colorado Citizen*, May 6, 1869.

⁸⁵ *Native Virginian*, December 4, 1868; *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, June 12, 1869.

⁸⁶ Nagle, “Napoleonic Policy”, 293.

⁸⁷ *Charleston Courier Tri-Weekly*, May 29, 1869.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ There are parallels here to the discourse of “Mexicanization”. See Downs, “Mexicanization”, 395-6.

⁹⁰ Milledgeville (Ga.) *Southern Recorder*, April 20, 1869.

⁹¹ Quoted in *The Imperialist*, April 24, 1869; Letter to *The Imperialist*, May 1, 1869.

we prefer the wise and judicious government of a one-man power?" asked a supporter of the empire in Memphis.⁹²

Such views chimed with conservative critics of monarchism in the region, who either read *The Imperialist* as evidence of northern whites' disgust at the coming of black suffrage, or saw the extension of voting rights to African-American men as the penultimate act of an imperial plot. But unlike advocates of a return to the *Herrenvolk* principle (one Louisiana paper declared "*Restoration of the White Republic, or death*" were the only alternatives to empire) southern imperialists seemed suspicious of even a racially pure electorate.⁹³ They diagnosed the Military Reconstruction Acts less as a deformity grafted onto the political system and more as the natural outgrowth of years of debasing the franchise, for the susceptibility of northern voters to silver-tongued rabble-rousers before the Civil War had already damned democracy. The appearance of a monarchist newspaper in 1869 emboldened these conservatives to speak out. Douglas Walworth, a Mississippi editor whose musings on the empire supposedly attracted "very favorable comment" in Natchez, warned of "worshiping at the shrine of an unknown God, the sovereignty of the people" and suggested the nation had taken the wrong turn in rejecting the Federalists in the election of 1800.⁹⁴ His view was echoed in New Orleans where a correspondent argued "[o]ur government began to decline rapidly when it opened the floodgates that led to the polls."⁹⁵ Bagby's *Native Virginian* concurred, declaring democracy had withered "because the unlettered and landless masses are incapable of choosing proper rulers."⁹⁶ "Is it better to bow our necks to the feet of that great unwashed, many-headed tyrant, the people," a Mississippian asked, "or to follow in the train of an emperor?"⁹⁷ Even the *Mobile Tribune*, which came out in support of *The Imperialist* after reading its attack on black suffrage, argued that Radicalism was "Democracy taken in its primary sense, or power in the mob carried to extremes."⁹⁸ It asserted "the intellect and respectability of the South" would regain their "power and influence" when "the coming man" seized power.⁹⁹ Monarchists struck at the principle of power deriving from the will of a propertiless and uneducated electorate, and not solely at the extension of the vote to black men.

To justify their assault on America's nascent democracy, southern imperialists turned to history, drawing lessons from the past to proclaim the Empire inevitable. Like other conservatives, they took it as an axiom that the Founding Fathers had established a beneficent system of government, and only the malevolent actions of demagogues in the North, who had stirred the passions of the people in the debates over slavery, had brought this down. They agreed too that Radical Republicans used the war as a cover for establishing a centralized despotism. But where most Southern Democrats called for a return to the principles of Washington's generation, monarchists saw time as cyclical, and insisted the republican moment had passed;

⁹² Memphis *Public Ledger*, May 13, 1869.

⁹³ Alexandria *Louisiana Democrat*, June 23, 1869.

⁹⁴ Douglas Walworth, letter to Natchez *Daily Democrat*, April 20, 1869. On conservative hostility to white voting, see Foner, *Reconstruction*, 331.

⁹⁵ H.P., letter to *The Imperialist*, June 5, 1869. If correspondence in *The Imperialist* is anything to go by, New Orleans appears to have been a hotbed of antidemocratic politics. See also Orleans, letter to *The Imperialist*, June 5, 1869; letters to *The Imperialist*, June 12, 1869; B.C.A., letter to *The Imperialist*, June 12, 1869.

⁹⁶ Natchez *Daily Democrat*, April 23, 1869; *Native Virginian*, April 23, 1869.

⁹⁷ Anonymous, letter to Natchez *Courier*, April 19, 1869.

⁹⁸ Quoted in *The Imperialist*, April 24, 1869.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Mobile *Daily Register*, May 16, 1869. For similar sentiments, see Memphis *Public Ledger*, May 12, 1869; Anonymous, letter to *The Imperialist*, May 15, 1869.

revolutions, as a Tennessean imperialist claimed “*never go backwards.*”¹⁰⁰ The Civil War had determined that the United States could not escape the inexorable fate of the republics that had preceded it, and the fertile soil in which a balanced government had once taken root was now exhausted. No longer enriched by slavery, and plagued by class conflict and immigration, it offered barren ground for a commonwealth to take root. Above all, though, experience taught monarchists that the sheer size of the Union made popular sovereignty impractical.

“Republicanism on a scale of magnitude has ever been anything else but a failure,” the Natchez *Daily Democrat* explained, for even if citizens could assemble together as they did in Athens “the passions of men and local interests would overcome and trample under foot the dogma of self-government.”¹⁰¹ “If we see by repeated history that democratic governments are short lived, and that, when once admitting change or outliving the issues and feelings that called them into existence, they must soon cease to live,” the Tennessean concluded, “then let us, in the name of reason, heed the lessons of the past” and “change it into an Empire.”¹⁰²

By declaring the failure of republicanism a historically ordained fact, southern imperialists narrowed the choices available to their fellow conservatives, offering them a debased democracy in which demagogues preyed on a corrupted people, or a stable empire in which partisanship had no place and property would be secure. Doing so enabled them to address their anxieties about land redistribution and the extension of the franchise in a more coherent manner than a national Democratic Party riven with divisions over Reconstruction and with its own agrarian wing. Indeed imperialists claimed that they were the rightful heirs of America’s republican tradition. Steeped in classical learning, and lacing their philippics with the language of passion, corruption, and decay, their pleas for monarchy rarely denied the superiority of a mixed form of government in which power ultimately derived from the people; Washington’s administration, monarchists wrote, “was the purest the world ever saw.” They merely added the caveat that as in France, the Union had progressed too far to endure in such a form. Like early propagandists of the Lost Cause, then, they saw secession as a desperate bid to save the republic of the founders. But as one Memphis monarchist put it, “we of the South, who sought to maintain the Constitution, as understood by its framers, failed.” The Confederacy’s defeat meant the death of states’ rights and confirmed the principle of unchecked majority rule. Compelled to choose between the tyranny of the majority or the guiding hand of a protective emperor, some southern conservatives looked around, observed the relative stability of France, Germany, and Britain over the preceding couple of decades, and declared their preference for the latter. “The Empire,” the Tennessean concluded, “is our only salvation.”¹⁰³

The Imperialist pandered to the antidemocratic instincts of these conservative southerners while holding out the promise of national reconciliation. The paper plagiarized the work of C. C. S. Farrar, a Mississippi planter who wrote a book during the war blaming an excess of democracy for the twin follies of abolitionism and secession; echoed Calhoun’s warnings of majoritarian rule; and saw, in a manner that became commonplace in the 1870s, troubling parallels between the extension of voting rights to white immigrants in the North and black freedmen in the South.¹⁰⁴ In doing so, it gave hope to southern monarchists that the democratic tide was turning

¹⁰⁰ Letter to Memphis *Public Ledger*, April 27, 1869.

¹⁰¹ Natchez *Daily Democrat*, April 25, 1869.

¹⁰² Letter to Memphis *Public Ledger*, April 27, 1869.

¹⁰³ Letters to *Ibid.*, April 27, 29 1869.

¹⁰⁴ *The Imperialist*, April 24, May 15.

above the Mason-Dixon Line.¹⁰⁵ “It is surprising to find with what general interest this to us new topic, has been considered not only by the people of the South, but of the North,” the *Natchez Daily Democrat* noted approvingly. Despite “a suppression of utterance,” imperialism had long been “expected by the thinking minds of the nation”, but has now “burst upon the Western continent, with a brilliancy of conviction that has blinded the sight of many true patriots who have been groping in the shadow of delusive Republicanism.”¹⁰⁶ Men of “intelligence, moral worth, patriotism, and wealth” had lined up behind the movement in New York, a North Carolinian mistakenly asserted, while an anti-imperialist paper in Memphis printed a letter from a correspondent who hoped that if a “a great Conservative party” failed to spread across the nation, imperialism would “command and enforce our protection” instead.¹⁰⁷ In that city, the prospectus for a new paper, apparently unconnected to the Manhattan weekly, appeared at the end of April, and declared its support for “a limited monarchy somewhat similar to that of Great Britain.” Due to make its bow on July 4, the *Southern Imperialist* called itself “purely national in character,” and boasted that though one of its editors was a southerner, the other heralded from New England.¹⁰⁸ With state sovereignty a casualty of the Civil War, southern monarchists saw the interests of property safeguarded best by a national figurehead presiding over a strong, central government.

While support for a hereditary form of government could be found from Virginia to Texas, and seems to have been particularly strong in Gulf Coast cities like Mobile and New Orleans, the debate in Memphis reveals how imperialism entangled with Reconstruction politics. A few weeks after the northern weekly first appeared, the city’s *Public Ledger* carried an anonymous letter suggesting “a great government of peace” would be superior to “hybrid republics” that were “bastard scions from the blasted tree of liberty,” and printed the prospectus of the *Southern Imperialist* two days later.¹⁰⁹ This drew censure from its readers, but on May 8, *The Imperialist* published what was meant to be confidential correspondence from two Confederate veterans – the *Ledger*’s editor, Julius J. DuBose, and his associate, Alfred A. Swingley – which agreed empire was the “one escape” from the “mad vortex” of the war years and declared “the great mass” of the southern people were “ready to embrace” it. Though DuBose complained about this “betrayal of private trust,” he stood by the letter’s sentiments, and over the following weeks turned his paper into a firm advocate of imperial government. “Multitudes are more liable to do wrong than a few sober and discreet men,” it argued, “whose duty it would be at all times to watch over the public interest.”¹¹⁰

Like other monarchist sympathizers in the South, the *Ledger*’s imperialism located the nation’s present condition in the long stream of time. Swingley in particular moved easily between philosophical history and contemporary politics, citing “natural laws” to conclude that the

¹⁰⁵ See for example [Douglas Walworth], letter to *Natchez Daily Democrat*, April 20, 1869. On growing antidemocratic sentiment in the North, see Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chapter 7; Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), chapter 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Natchez Daily Democrat*, April 25, 1869.

¹⁰⁷ *The Imperialist*, May 8, 1869; S.S.R., letter to *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 17, 1869.

¹⁰⁸ *Memphis Public Ledger*, April 29, 1869.

¹⁰⁹ Letter to *Memphis Public Ledger*, April 27, 1869.

¹¹⁰ J. J. Dubose and A. L. Swingley, letter to *The Imperialist*, May 8, 1869; P. L. Mitchell, letter to *Memphis Public Ledger*, April 28, 1869; T. L. K., letter to *Memphis Public Ledger*, April 30, 1869; *Memphis Public Ledger*, May 28, 1869.

republic had “passed beyond the period when concessions are made for the public good,” while assailing Radical leaders as “national vampires” who were “polluting the ballot-box with an infusion of the basest ignorance to be found on the continent.”¹¹¹ The *Ledger* here took its stand in the knowledge that the future of Reconstruction in the state was at stake. Alone among the former Confederacy, Tennessee avoided military reconstruction in 1867, and black suffrage came about as a result of local initiative rather than congressional fiat. The Republican governor William G. Brownlow’s administration nevertheless faced fierce opposition, but conservative critics, many of whom were disfranchised on account of their wartime treason, were deeply divided themselves.¹¹² By early 1869, several of the leading newspapers in Memphis were ready to swallow African-American enfranchisement, on the grounds that ex-Confederates in the west and Johnsonian unionists in the mountainous east would then either out-vote or control the black minority. “Give us universal suffrage,” the *Avalanche* argued in February, “and the destiny of the South is in the hands of the white man.”¹¹³ DuBose’s *Ledger* abhorred such logic in part because it held large segments of the white electorate in contempt. Johnson, a hero to Tennessee’s unionists but also an ally of many erstwhile rebels in Memphis after leaving the White House, was a “*low minded plebeian*” according to one of the paper’s correspondents.¹¹⁴ But the *Ledger*’s objections owed more to the racism of its proprietor. It asked the *Avalanche*, for instance, “whether or not it would prefer Imperialism to the negro despotism of the present State government?”¹¹⁵ By mid-May it was presenting a stark choice to the state’s conservatives: “Negro Equality or Imperialism.”¹¹⁶

The *Ledger*’s contempt for democratic rights is evident too in its support for another invisible empire in the South. During the Civil War, DuBose served as adjutant to the Ku Klux Klan’s first Grand Wizard, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and Swingley also fought under the cavalry leader’s command. Although Forrest had distanced himself from the movement by 1869, the Klan still enjoyed support among conservatives in West Tennessee, and even newspapers like the *Avalanche* that reluctantly admitted the principle of African-American voting rights sympathized with the night-riders. After the election of 1868, however, Brownlow toyed with the idea of moving against the Klan by sending in black militia to the worst-affected areas, and wealthy opponents of Reconstruction – Forrest among them – even petitioned for Federal intervention as an alternative: a clue, perhaps, to why the *Ledger* preferred a strong central government to states’ rights. The prospect of armed former slaves keeping the peace persuaded conservatives to make a desultory attempt rein in white terrorism, but DuBose, who was almost certainly a Klansman himself, remained unapologetic. In February, his paper called the Klan “the legitimate progeny of the times,” as “the people of the South” had nothing to protect themselves against “black freedmen” who “were made to believe, by the common enemy, that they were equal, if not superior, to the white man.” The Klan, the paper insisted, “finds its justification in the wants of

¹¹¹ A.L.S. [Alfred L. Swingley], letter to Memphis *Public Ledger*, May 13, 1869.

¹¹² On Brownlow’s administration in Tennessee see Noel C. Fisher, *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 168-9. For work more or less shaped by the Dunning School, see Thomas Benjamin Alexander, *Political Reconstruction in Tennessee* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1950), 74-5; James Welch Patton, *Unionism and Reconstruction in Tennessee, 1860-1869* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), vii; E. Merton Coulter, *William G. Brownlow, Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937).

¹¹³ Memphis *Daily Avalanche*, February 11, 1869.

¹¹⁴ Fayette, letter to Memphis *Public Ledger*, 20 April, 1869.

¹¹⁵ Memphis *Public Ledger*, May 12, 1869.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, May 14, 1869.

the people.”¹¹⁷ Like the monarchist movement the *Ledger* endorsed later that Spring, then, the Klan’s legitimacy to DuBose and his allies depended entirely on the widely-held belief among southern conservatives that the legally constituted authorities lacked authority. While the paper supported the night riders’ violent assault on supporters of the Republican Party in Tennessee, it waged rhetorical war on a Reconstruction settlement that many of its rival publications were willing to throw in their lot with. In this regard, imperialism offered an alternative to both the futile quest of turning back the clock and the admission of defeat of the so-called “New Departure”.

Like the Klan, moreover, monarchists hid behind a veil of ambiguity. Sympathetic papers in the North depicted terrorist activity in the South as nothing more than high jinks, an idea Klansmen deliberately cultivated, Elaine Franz Parsons has shown, through their elaborate costume and ritual.¹¹⁸ The masks southern imperialists wore were only of the rhetorical variety, but they left their readers unsure about the strength and intent of the movement. Bagby, who made a career out of satire, printed violent threats supposedly placed by the Klan, mocked Grant’s abilities, yet called for an empire (presumably under his leadership) to unify the nation.¹¹⁹ These contradictions confused conservative critics. An Alabama journal which accused the *Mobile Tribune* of “attempting to be smart at the expense of common sense” in backing a monarchy, left open the possibility its contemporary was “only joking,” and that its editor might be “surprised at our stupidity in not being able to comprehend its hidden political inspirations.”¹²⁰ A paper in Arkansas meanwhile suggested that if there really was an imperial secret society, “we shall believe it to be just about as visionary and indefinite in its purposes” as the “ku-klux klan, which we never believed to have any substantial existence.”¹²¹

Such comparisons to a very real white supremacist movement may seem misplaced given that nobody died in taking a stand against imperialism but in the *Public Ledger* and elsewhere the boundaries between political violence and monarchism blurred. In imagining how a change in the organic law might come about it harbored few illusions, hoping “that the new goddess that presides over the destinies of the empire should be baptized with blood.” “We want a new and correct test for future loyalty,” the daily declared, “and such can only be given on the battlefield.”¹²² “By the power of bayonet,” it argued a couple of days later, northern and southern whites “can say to these carpetbaggers, abdicate your power and flee from the country.”¹²³ The *Ledger*’s giddy anticipation of a new civil war found a faint echo in a Klan-like threat to one of its conservative critics. After the *Memphis Appeal* accused the paper of backing a Radical cause, it retorted that if such libels continued, its rival “will be involved in a discussion which seems now so terrible a nightmare that haunts its peaceful dreams.”¹²⁴ Another monarchist paper, the

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, February 1, 5, 1869. On the Klan in Tennessee, see Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 28-46, 175-85; Alexander, *Reconstruction in Tennessee*, 176-198.

¹¹⁸ Elaine Frantz Parsons, “Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan”, *The Journal of American History* 92 (2005), 811-36.

¹¹⁹ *Native Virginian*, April 3, 10, August 7, 1868.

¹²⁰ *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, June 16, 1869.

¹²¹ *Little Rock Daily Arkansas Gazette*, April 6, 1869.

¹²² *Memphis Public Ledger*, May 12, 1869.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, May 14, 1869.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, May 31, 1869.

Mobile *Tribune*, suggested that editors who called for a restoration of the old order “ought to be stoned to death.”¹²⁵

By backing the Klan and the empire the *Ledger* waged war on Reconstruction on two fronts, but the extent of support for monarchism proved embarrassing to erstwhile conservative allies, who quickly went from fighting an imaginary imperial movement in the North to dueling with a seemingly very real one in the South. Critics of monarchism in the region sometimes expressed bemusement, mocking the aristocratic pretensions of men like “Juke” Dubose, or, in the case of an Atlanta storekeeper, claiming the regal engravings on his ivory-handled tooth-brushes revealed the strength of imperialism in the city.¹²⁶ But across most of the South, editors tended to deal respectfully with conservatives’ argument for a change in the political system, and often declared that if deliverance from Radical rule was not forthcoming soon, the monarchist moment may come: an echo, perhaps, of the relationship between conditional unionists and fire-eaters in the 1850s. Not untypical was one citizen in Memphis, who called imperialism a “doubtful” restorative, yet only urged the people to “defer” its consideration.¹²⁷ More, despairing of the support the movement was attracting in the region, tried to remind their compatriots what it stood for. Alarmed at the willingness of southern whites “to fly from the ills they now suffer to others they know not of,” a journal in Jacksonville reminded citizens that the empire was “not a democratic, but a radical conception.”¹²⁸ By considering the case for monarchy, though, such journals lent imperialism a measure of legitimacy, and tacitly acknowledged its appeal. Even Northern Democrats, who still clung to the idea that the Republican Party was masterminding the conspiracy, had to admit “imperial feeling is growing” below the Mason-Dixon Line.¹²⁹

Conservative northerners too sometimes nodded in agreement when reading *The Imperialist*, but in contrast to their southern counterparts, there were few public professions of fidelity to the monarchist cause, a point Republicans gleefully noted. Charged with sponsoring *The Imperialist* when it first appeared, they could now show that the only avowed supporters of the monarchist movement were “the masses of the unreconstructed throughout the South,” who “boast that the plot has been gradually maturing ever since the accession of Andrew Johnson.”¹³⁰ To them, imperialism was the death rattle of the chivalry, and the bloodthirsty pronouncements of the *Ledger* illustrated treason still festered in the rebel states. Yet for the publishers of the Manhattan weekly their success in the South proved a double-edged sword. While the paper’s popularity made the venture profitable, it threatened to turn satire into sedition. *The Imperialist*’s founder, Alden, reputedly left the journal when he found the “sentiment controlling Southern and South-Western rebel enthusiasm was too exciting” for him, and his fellow conspirators shut it down in September, just six months after its sensational debut. The weekly, its obituary writer claimed, “died of its own success,” killed by the “ghost of the Rebellion” whose restless spirit its creators had foolishly stirred.¹³¹

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¹²⁵ Quoted in *Native Virginian*, July 2, 1869.

¹²⁶ *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, May 12, 1869; *Atlanta Constitution*, July 18, 1869. For an editorial spat over monarchism in Alabama, see criticism of the *Mobile Tribune* in the *Mobile Register*, 16, 19, 21, 1869; *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, June 16, 1869.

¹²⁷ *Spectator*, letter to *Memphis Daily Appeal*, May 26, 1869.

¹²⁸ *Jacksonville (Al.) Republican*, June 19, 1869.

¹²⁹ *Bellefonte (Pa.) Democratic Watchman*, June 25, 1869.

¹³⁰ H.A.G., letter to *Cincinnati Commercial*, May 3, 1869.

¹³¹ Shirley Dare, letter to *New York Tribune*, November 6, 1869.

The *Southern Imperialist* never did appear on July 4. In March, Brownlow took up a vacant seat in the Senate, leaving Tennessee in the hands of a wartime unionist, Dewitt Clinton Senter. After infighting split the Republican convention for the August election, Senter allied with ex-Confederates, and quietly ensured they could register to vote. With the Democrats not running a gubernatorial candidate, Senter easily defeated his official Republican opponent, and conservatives acquired a controlling hand in the State Legislature, which they quickly used to repeal anti-Klan legislation and remove disabilities on the franchise. A constitutional convention the following year affirmed black suffrage, as the Fifteenth Amendment required, but in a harbinger of the disfranchisement laws of the 1890s, paved the way for the introduction of a poll tax.¹³² As in Virginia, where a conservative victory in 1869 gave Bagby a job in the state government, party politics had proved the doubters wrong and redeemed the states from “Radical” control. Over the following eight years, the remaining nine states of the former Confederacy would fall into conservative hands, with the supposed “despotism” in Washington offering little in the way of assistance to beleaguered southern Republicans. Sensing the way the wind was blowing as former rebels registered to vote in June, and perhaps increasingly aware that imperialism in the North was a mirage, Dubose retreated from openly advocating a monarchy, and returned to the Democratic fold; the *Public Ledger*’s flirtation with the New York weekly seems to have been quickly forgotten. A curious addendum to the story of southern imperialism suggests the changing mood. In 1871, according to the recollections of an Atlanta journalist, “a splendid talker” named Bradfield appeared at the offices of the *New Era*, and drew up a prospectus for a monarchist journal in the city. Soon after, though, a Texan arrived with the “mission to carry the imperialist back to the lunatic asylum from which he had escaped.”¹³³ In the space of a few months, the empire had gone from an idea with “much popularity” to the vision of a madman, though the ease with which Bradfield secured credit for the venture suggest the market for monarchism outlived the conservative victories of 1869.¹³⁴

The conservatives who rode to power in Tennessee and Virginia that year had little sympathy for the strong central government of the Empire of the West. Nor did the “Redeemers” who used vote-rigging and violence to reclaim the rest of the South over the following years. Their power depended on a supine state that would turn a blind eye when southerners ignored the letter of the Reconstruction settlement. When former slaves, carpetbaggers, and scalawags controlled southern state governments, the Federal government offered a possible route to salvation; once “home rule” (a thin euphemism for conservative supremacy) had been secured, however, any aggrandizement on the part of Washington lawmakers posed a threat. Thus the fear of imperialism remained, but without the hope it had sometimes inspired among conservatives in 1869. In 1873, concocted rumors of Grant seeking a third term filled southern newspapers, who denounced the incipient “Caesarism” of the administration.¹³⁵ Then in 1876, and again in 1880, prospectuses appeared for new monarchist journals, presumably to embarrass the ruling party in the presidential canvass. Neither acquired anything like the following of *The Imperialist* but whoever conceived them evidently remembered the strange career of the 1869 journal.

¹³² Alexander, *Reconstruction in Tennessee*, 197, 199, 215-38; Fisher, *War at Every Door*, 170-1; 9, Perman, *Road to Redemption*, 12-3.

¹³³ *Atlanta Constitution*, August 18, 1900.

¹³⁴ S.D., letter to *New York World*, July 7, 1869.

¹³⁵ Mark W. Summers, *The Press Gang: Newspapers and Politics, 1865-1878* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 268-74.

The monarchist weekly may be more relevant, then, for the fears it stoked rather than for the support it attracted. Suspicions about the centralization of power hamstrung Republican administrations after the war, weakening both their commitment and capacity to enforce the civil rights legislation passed in the wake of the conflict. By raising the specter of a consolidated despotism, southern critics of *The Imperialist* helped to ensure that Reconstruction proceeded little further than the Fifteenth Amendment, which, in the form it finally passed Congress a few weeks after the journal had folded, proved far too easy to circumvent. Large numbers of Republicans abandoned their own party when two years later the Enforcement Acts – an attempt to rein the Klan – seemed to infringe on states’ rights. In a civic culture still steeped in republicanism, fear of the republic giving way to an empire extended well beyond the South, shaping the choices made by citizens who had welcomed the coming of black suffrage.¹³⁶

Yet the warmth with which some southern conservatives greeted monarchism is revealing. While most conservatives in the former Confederacy never backed the movement, several did so publicly, and many more probably shared the paper’s views privately. Abandoning states’ rights as a lost cause, they seized on the success of monarchies elsewhere, attacked the principle of democratic government, and argued that history had proven resistance to the empire was futile. Horrified most of all by black suffrage, they were suspicious of white voting rights too, and while eventually they found other ways to reclaim power their hope of forging an alliance with men of wealth and talent in the North suggests some of the first stirrings of the counter-revolution of property that would rein in democratic rights over the final decades of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the imperialist movement was indeed prescient, for it tied southern conservatives’ longstanding mistrust of self-government to growing northern concerns that the suffrage had expanded too far and too fast.

Whether southern monarchists ever believed the United States would give way to the Empire of the West is harder to say. For most, imperialism married their longstanding suspicion of democracy to the tactical exigencies of postwar politics, and like Dubose and Bagby, they appear to have quickly abandoned the cause when circumstances changed. But the excitement *The Imperialist*’s engendered in parts of the South suggests needs explaining. As Downs has recently pointed out, when we view Reconstruction from the perspective of citizens at the time, the stability of the republic was by no means assured.¹³⁷ The Empire of the West, foolhardy though it now seems, offered an alternative route to stabilization: one that while accepting the result of the Civil War promised to restore South’s conservative elite to its antebellum dignity, relegate former slaves to a position of political impotence, and control the passions of men. For Swingley, out of the “dark night” will come “a new order of things, purified in the fire of revolution.” “Manifest destiny,” he concluded, “has marked out a course through which we must pass.”¹³⁸

¹³⁶ The consequences of the conspiratorial style of postwar politics are addressed well in *Ibid.*, 274 and Summers, *Party Games*, 69.

¹³⁷ Downs, “Mexicanization”, 391.

¹³⁸ Milwaukee *Daily Sentinel*, August 22, 1876; Baltimore *Sun*, October 18, 1880.