Discourse Within Crisis: The Creation of West Virginia

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On June 20th, 1863, Arthur Boreman, the first Governor of the newly minted state of West Virginia, declared in his inaugural address that “our state is the child of rebellion”.¹

In stark contrast, Henry Wise, a former Virginian governor and Confederate General, would later describe that same West Virginia as the “bastard child of political rape”.²

Within the crisis of secession and civil war, Virginian political elites in Appalachia created a particular West Virginian identity and political discourse which rationalized the creation of a new state. That the Appalachian men used the moment of crisis to break off politically and discursively from their Eastern neighbors, shows how discourse can bind communities together and foster radical change; but the fracturing of this discourse after emancipation and the war reflects how divided this community was beneath that discourse. Discourses created within crises allow for, and even necessitate, radically new interventions, like separate West Virginian statehood and gradual emancipation, but can only do so by uniting variously different interests and people under a single identity which is ultimately unstable and too weak to create lasting political discourses.

This paper takes the creation of West Virginia as its setting and attempts to broadly analyze how discourse, within times of crisis, creates specific identities and logics which allow unique political action and identity. More specifically, how does discourse within a crisis make past institutions seem irrational enough to require new identities, communities, and institutions?³ For many West Virginians, older

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³ I owe my understanding of discourses and their use in understanding how actors theorize and understand their surroundings to the work of Hannah Rosen and her discussion of various discourses of sexuality, violence, and rape in the South during Reconstruction. “Discourse” represents the shared language and political terms which structure the beliefs, practices, and political options of those within a specific discursive community. Specific terms and logics are formed by those who at once create, and are governed, by this overarching discursive structure. Discourse certainly requires strategy and political framing of
understandings of class, regional, or political identity were no longer logical after Virginia seceded in 1861, and a new discourse was formed through a language of class, regional identity, and political legitimacy to make sense and benefit from the crisis. Richard Curry’s work on the realpolitik involved in the creation of West Virginia complicates the actors and interests at play in the creation of West Virginian statehood, but will not help us understand the experience of this moment or the various ways identity was created and broken during state creation. Indeed, complex political actors can not be rationally defined by “interests” alone, nor do these interests mean the same thing to the historian as they do to those who experienced it. Instead, a discursive focus allows historians to achieve the closest thing to the “direct” and “unmediated access to [the] ‘real’ experience of historical actors” by listening to their discourse in the words they left for historical record, rather than imposing specific meanings upon actors given their apparent “interests”.

Moments of crisis force individuals to reassess themselves in relation to the instability of the moment, but the discourses formed through this reassessment, though passionately performed, are quickly created and do not allow for lasting political institutions.

**Appalachia before the Initial Crisis of Secession**

Broad generalizations regarding the causality of West Virginian statehood are impossible to make given the Appalachian regions class, racial, and political complexities. Much of the “apologetic” and pro-Union historiography, led by historians George Ellis Moore and Charles H. Ambler, as well as Republicans of the time, described

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interests, but the specific terms used within West Virginian discourse was a part of a larger belief structure which provided the individual and community with a distinct identity, in ways that political rhetoric and framing of interests do not provide.

an overly simplistic narrative of West Virginian state creation, which makes eventual statehood seem predetermined. Indeed, for many of these historians, the eventual inclusion of West Virginia implied a static Appalachian identity as a region of closeted Unionists that composed a “northern wedge into the heart of the Confederacy”. The story is more complicated, and this pro-Union narrative tells us nothing about the West Virginians themselves and the statehood process. To sustain this simple narrative after Reconstruction, and thus support the weakening Republican control of West Virginia after the war, Union apologists minimized the reality of divided loyalties, internecine violence, and the subsequently traumatic divisions between families and communities which occurred throughout the process of state creation. Pro-Union historiography also hid the extent to which antebellum slavery and racial violence, as well as its continuities in the KKK and “Lost Cause” politics of the Post-Reconstruction West Virginia, were very much a part of the statehood movement, even if implicitly. Easily made depictions of Appalachia were always made with political purposes in mind, and for the most part, were simplified in order provide an easy and politically useful narrative of a complex, and at times disappointing story.

There was a history of tensions between Eastern and Western Virginia, but only after Virginia seceded were these past conflicts deemed tyrannical enough to require separate statehood. The 1851 Virginian Constitutional Convention was just one site where Eastern “tidewater aristocrats”, by sheer political and economic power, forced

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5 John Inscoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2008) 275
6 Ibid, 256
7 Ibid 275
Appalachian mountain politicians into a “perpetual minority in State politics”. Held within this subordinate position, West Virginia state representatives were at the mercy of their neighbors, which allowed representatives from the East to pass disproportionate tax laws which favored slave property, and focus tax revenue towards the infrastructure of the East. Likewise, for much of the Antebellum period, Appalachia was seen and invoked pejoratively as “backward” by virtue of its relative poverty and lack of a robust plantation economy. These conflicts do not however, necessarily foretell a new state. Tensions aside, a shared history and culture prove that “southern highlanders were also southerners—sometimes foremost, sometimes more secondarily”, but never in a monolithic fashion that can easily explain dismemberment and state creation. All discourses are strategically employed in specific contexts, and we see this in the ways that Appalachian men variously and fluidly defined themselves in relation to the rest of Virginia and the South as a whole. Just like the fluid nature of regional identity, the institution of slavery was remarkably complicated, denying the notion that West Virginia was an abolitionist creation.

The strength of slavery and racism as a political, economic and social institution in Appalachia denies the notion that West Virginia was a wholly abolitionist region prior to secession. Slavery existed in the Northwest, and was a powerful political and economic institution, but it paled in size compared to slavery in the East, even if “former slaves themselves bore witness to the fact that bondage in the Southern highlands was no

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9 *Ibid* 298-99
10 Inscoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance* 5
11 *Ibid*, 6
less abusive than elsewhere”.\textsuperscript{12} The power of slaveholding elites in western Virginia, though not as all-encompassing as their fellows in the East, was still strong—especially in local politics.\textsuperscript{13} Nonetheless, slavery was not an essential institution, and in western Virginia, like most of the South, “the boundaries between slavery and freedom where always harsh and menacing but…sometimes [more] permeable and flexible than we might imagine”.\textsuperscript{14} Likewise, slaveholders participated in all stages of the statehood movement, even after gradual emancipation was adopted, reflecting how the institution of slavery in Appalachia never implied a static identity to the region or its slaveholders. Indeed, for many Appalachian communities, divisions between class, slavery, and race were flexible and at times interchangeable.

Appalachian class-consciousness was mixed with regional and racial identity, making it hard to identify any coherent class stance on slavery, secession, or the Confederacy. Frederick Law Olmstead, a journalist and travel writer from the North, described how the poor “mountainmen” of Appalachia “seemed equally contemptuous of slaves, their masters, and the institution itself” but these views were deployed inconsistently and strategically.\textsuperscript{15} Olmstead, at times, recognized that the “core of whatever opposition mountaineers felt toward slavery” consisted of both class sentiment against the wealthy, as well as a deeply rooted racism, rather than an egalitarian ethos or spirit of solidarity.\textsuperscript{16} A distinct anti-slavery element would be added to the discourse on West Virginian identity, but only with the external pressure of the federal government.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 31
\textsuperscript{13} John Inscoe, \textit{Race, War, and Remembrance}, 30
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid 61
\textsuperscript{15} Frederick Law Olmstead quoted in John Inscoe’s, \textit{Race, War, and Remembrance}, 25
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid 26
and it would remain deeply racist. Ultimately, class, race, and regional identity could be made coherent, but only with a crisis and a new discourse made from that crisis.

The First and Second Wheeling Conventions: Legitimacy within Crisis

After Virginia seceded in February, 1861, political leaders in western Virginia, some of whom had been to Richmond and voted against secession, convened a retaliatory convention a few months later in Wheeling, Virginia. At the Wheeling Convention, Representative John Carlile, declared that Confederate attacks on Harpers Ferry, Fort Sumter, and federal customs houses proved the Confederacy’s intention in “inaugurating a war without consulting those in whose name they profess to act”, thus defining a moment of political crisis which requires action.\(^\text{17}\) Carlile participated in debates at the Richmond Convention, where the delegates extensively debated slavery and “states-rights” within the Union, but he framed the crisis in terms of a “West Virginian” identity and Confederate usurpation of power. Carlile did not forget about the importance of slavery, but as a leading political figure Carlile had authority to define and name the debate as he saw fit. Slaveholding and moderate Democrats like Carlile did not want to discuss slavery, since many of them either obtained wealth and political power through the institution or considered it benign. Others knew that it was a potentially divisive topic, so they focused on regional and class identity, which helped create a discourse initially devoid of slavery.

In defining their actions, the men at Wheeling appropriated the language of the Constitution and our revolutionary past to valorize their actions and demonize the Confederacy. To many, the very act of convening was a “virtual concession of the doctrine of secession” since there was no legal basis for their convention, nor was this

\(^{17}\) John S, Carlile, *Proceedings from the First and Second Wheeling Conventions*. June 14\(^{th}\), 1861
convention wholly representative of western Virginia. Nonetheless, in this extraordinary context, the Convention at Wheeling was imagined as more a “revolutionary project” to reestablish and defend true American values rather than an act of “formal law” or interest based politics. Given the dire need to defend American principles in this “revolutionary” context, the men at Wheeling had no problem demonizing the Confederate secession as a “usurpation” and “military despotism”, when they seem to be doing the same thing. Ostensibly, everybody at Wheeling believed that the “creation of West Virginian had no parallel” given this threat to American values; which made questions regarding formal law “relatively unimportant” in relation to the alternatives of Confederate rule, or inaction due to legal quibbles. What exactly were these “values”, and why were they so different from the values of the Confederacy, especially when slavery remained an avoided topic, was never entirely defined in specific terms. Once their Convention was deemed necessary and just, the men at Wheeling came to describe, indeed create, a West Virginian people as legitimate and separate from the Confederates in the East.

Legitimacy was defined with a new construction of who “the people” were in relation to Confederate violence and secession. At the onset of the Wheeling Conventions, Senator Carlile read a “Declaration of the People of Virginia”, stating that the secessionists had abused the “true purpose of all government” in protecting and supporting the “people”. The men at Wheeling answered a call to defend and “take such

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18 D. B. Dorsey, *Proceedings from the First and Second Wheeling Conventions*. June 14th, 1861
19 Ibid
20 John Carlile et al, *Proceedings from the First and Second Wheeling Conventions*, June 13th, 1861
22 John Carlile et al, *Proceedings from the First and Second Wheeling Conventions*, June 13th, 1861
action as…the loyal citizens of Virginia” demanded, as if there already were a specifically defined “citizen” to defend. “True” and “loyal” Virginians could be separated by the victims in the West, and those who, by their own volition, destroyed a once unified Virginia. Therefore, Confederate loyalty and support for Richmond’s “mob rule”, became synonymous with malice, immorality, and the “usurpation” of power from the “true” Americans in West Virginia. Loyalty and the possession of true values can not be easily defined, but once a specific definition is practiced and believed, the legitimacy of West Virginians is easy to make, since “mob rule” was incomprehensible with Virginian and American values. Within this discourse, complex questions regarding class, slavery, sectionalism, and Federalism were tabled in relation to the terms used to define the “people”. Certainly, violence was a real experience for many in Appalachia, but violence on its own does not create specific identities and meanings about people and politics in the same way that a specific discourse regarding violence can. For these Unionists, Confederate violence helped define this new West Virginian people, which necessitated an accompanying government.

Once a legitimate people were established and believed, the political community at Wheeling proceeded to rationalize a legitimate government for these “people”. Carlile noted that government was the “agent of the people governed”—and when that “agent” ceased to serve the “people”, it became void. The “people” were not an empirically defined group, but a discursively created body to better understand history and politics. Likewise, within this discourse, state creation was less an economic or political interest,

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23 John Carlile et al, Proceedings from the First and Second Wheeling Conventions, June 13th, 1861
24 Ibid
25 Ibid
26 John S. Carlile, Proceedings from the First and Second Wheeling Conventions June 14th, 1861
but an act which is rational by virtue of the near mythical, and wholly idealized, “true” people. Carlile’s claim that the Wheeling government was the “creature of the people” made sense within the political discourse at Wheeling, even if the continued guerrilla violence, instability, and questionable election results denied a popular mandate. Self-defense of this separate “people” and government further enabled the now “Reorganized Government of Virginia” to appeal for Union military assistance in the fight against the Confederacy.

At times, the statesmen at Wheeling would describe their “revolutionary” act as, in fact, not being revolutionary at all, but a defense against Confederate aggression. Governor Francis H. Pierpont of the “Reorganized” government at Wheeling, noted that whatever the outcome of the war, their political institution would be legitimate since their actions were “neither revolution nor rebellion” since they were “merely doing what we were bound to do in this exigency”. On October 24th, 1861, several months after the “Reorganized” government was federally recognized, a referendum on dismemberment passed, further reiterating in the political discourse how their act was a defensive, even conservative, motion. That the “conservative” and “defensive” nature of the dismemberment referendum made sense alongside previously held claims of “revolutionary” action, reiterates how discourse shapes meanings and “truths” in a highly decentralized and contextual fashion. When a moment called for “revolutionary” dialogue, Dorsey’s aforementioned claims regarding American principles, history, and morals made sense; yet when a defensive and ostensibly legal approach was needed, conservative claims could be made without making the entire discourse incoherent.

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27 John S. Carlile, *Proceedings from the First and Second Wheeling Conventions* June, 14th 1861
28 Francis H. Pierpont, *Proceedings from the First and Second Wheeling Conventions*. June, 17th 1861
Class too became an important function in defining West Virginian purpose and identity. In his inaugural address as the governor of the Reorganized State of Virginia, Francis H. Pierpont declared that the Confederacy had instilled through terror and violence, a “new doctrine” which divided “the people into two classes; one they call the laboring class, the other the capital class”, which eliminated the democratic power of free citizens.29 Pierpont reminded his constituents that America was not a nation of privilege and class, but of free individuals. In Pierpont’s constructed narrative of West Virginian and American identity, “legislation” was not limited to the educated and wealthy, but shared with the “laboring class”.30 Similarly, Representative Granville Parker, who helped create the West Virginian Constitution, understood that Confederate violence stemmed from a class driven desire to “deliver over West Virginia, with tightened chains and a broken spirit, to her former oppressors”, the plantation owners and politicians of Eastern Virginia.31 Parker and Pierpont raised the fear of class oppression to justify statehood and self-defense, but neither men were actually speaking of radical wealth redistribution in West Virginia, nor are they calling on the existence of an actual class based revolt against the wealthy—indeed, it is the wealthy elite who lead the creation of West Virginia, not the poor.

That the creation of West Virginia occurred within the context of actual violence allowed much of this discourse to appear true. Throughout the establishment of the “Reorganized” government and then statehood, the West Virginian political elite never had “efficient control over more than half of the counties in the new state” due to

29 Francis H. Pierpont in George E. Moore, Banner in the Hills, 231
30 Ibid, 231
31 Granville Parker, The Formation of the State of West Virginia and other Incidents of the Late Civil War, (Wellsburg, WV: 1875). 359
Confederate and guerrilla violence. The Unionist leaders qualified much of their politics “in terms of the violence perpetrated against their constituents” at the hands of violent “mobs” and “assassins.” In a similar fashion, Representative Kellian Whaley likened the actions of guerillas and Richmond supporters in West Virginia as a “reign of Terror” against the “morally and politically” distinct West Virginians. Claims of violence allow for a weak state such as the Reorganized Government of Virginia at Wheeling to claim legitimacy because the perpetrators of violence are identified and understood as immoral aggressors. Imbued with all the aforementioned discursive elements, the complexities of internecine violence in Appalachia can be contained within the West Virginian political discourse.

External State Creation

Though West Virginian politicians treated their actions as democratic in its own right, their statehood movement required federal support, which forced the federal government to weigh in on the discourse and politics of Wheeling. On May 29th, 1862, Representative Willey presented Congress with a bill for the proposed new state of West Virginia. Fears of illegality were raised when, in October of 1861, the Reorganized Government’s referendum on “dismemberment” was passed with a low voter turnout and a questionably high success of eighteen to one in favor of dismemberment. The continual presence of Union troops throughout the state making process “undoubtedly strengthened the loyalty of the northwestern people” but by that logic, it coerced and

32 Richard Curry, A House Divided, 8
34 Kellian Whaley, Speech Delivered in the House of Representatives, July 11th, 1862, (Washington: Scammell & Co., Printers, 1862) 6-7
35 Richard Curry, A House Divided, 80
intimidated those against statehood. Indeed, even Moore, who is relatively uncritical of the West Virginian statesmen, believed that West Virginians participating in these elections endured “intimidation, military interference, and fraudulent voting”. Legality aside, West Virginian politicians, and Ambler and Moore after them, cite several “informal polls” as proof of Union and pro-statehood sentiment; but these can not be a trusted definition of popular opinion. Ultimately the federal government believed in the necessity of a new West Virginian state, even if this belief was based on different motives and rationalizations than those used in Wheeling.

Indeed, Lincoln took the legal problem of West Virginian independence seriously, and agreed with the men at Wheeling that the interests of the country took precedence over constitutional conformity. President Lincoln disregarded the claims that low voter turnout, questionably high favoring of dismemberment, and the military presence under which referendums occurred affected the legality of the outcome. Lincoln further explained to critics in his Cabinet that the federal government could not retain its sovereignty and indulge the “constitutional constructions by which men in open rebellion…[are] to be accounted, man for man, the equals of those who maintain their loyalty to it”. Civil war forced the government to make a distinction between the rights and liberties of those who remained loyal, and the rebels who may use the Constitutional law to deny those loyal citizens their rights. By dividing the region into two separate

36 George E. Moore, A Banner in the Hills, 75.
37 Ibid, 147
38 Granville Parker, The Formation of the State of West Virginia and other Incidents of the Late Civil War, (Wellsburg, WV: 1875). 92-95
39 Abraham Lincoln quoted in George E. Moore, A Banner in the Hills, 235
40 Ibid
peoples, Lincoln explicitly approved and helped create a discursive distinction between peoples and communities in Appalachia.

Even though President supported the creation of West Virginia, he did so in terms of military and political expediency, rather than the terms and discourse used by the West Virginian politicians. Lincoln, like Representative Dorsey at the Second Wheeling Convention, noted that “the division of a state is dreaded as a precedent”, but it was “a measure made expedient by a war”. Nonetheless, Lincoln declared West Virginian statehood in terms which the West Virginian’s denied themselves, that in fact, “the admission of West Virginia is secession”—whereby the only meaningful difference is that it is “secession in favor of the Constitution” rather than against it. Lincoln believed separate statehood was ultimately constitutional, but his theory of constitutionality rests within a particular moment of crisis and a national security discourse. Given Lincoln’s national security framework, specific policies become available and denied to him. West Virginian secession is acceptable within this framework so long as it is secession based on specific Constitutional principles. Indeed, Lincoln’s language invoked national security, but could coexist, and eventually be inducted, within the more particular West Virginian discourse regarding regional, class, and political identity.

More specifically, Lincoln understood the West Virginian secession in terms of the fight against the slave-power of the Confederacy, not in terms of West Virginian identity or self-defense. For Lincoln, the admission of West Virginia would make “that much slave soil to free” and cause a severe “encroachment upon the cause of the

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41 Abraham Lincoln quoted in George E. Moore, *A Banner in the Hills*, 236
42 *Ibid*, 237
rebellion”, namely slavery.\textsuperscript{43} Lincoln simultaneously denounced the Confederates as apart from their neighbors in West Virginia, but did so in a manner which united West Virginian purpose against the institution of slavery. Union apologists like Moore note that “slavery proved to be the most avoided topic” of the entire enterprise in Wheeling before Lincoln and Radical Republicans in Congress required, in December of 1862, a gradual emancipation clause.\textsuperscript{44} For those that accepted, if begrudgingly, the necessity of gradual emancipation, Lincoln’s terms were adopted within the West Virginian discourse. For those that could not reconcile their identity with gradual emancipation, the discourse and political community established at Wheeling was effectively destroyed, and we see this in the Copperhead movement and divisions between “radicals” and “conservatives” at Wheeling.

Gradual Emancipation and the Fragility of Discourse within a Crisis

After deliberating the constitutionality of West Virginian statehood throughout the fall of 1862, Lincoln and Radical Republicans in Congress accepted the publically ratified and proposed Constitution so long as a gradual emancipation proviso was added. Gradual emancipation was raised earlier during the Constitutional Convention in January of 1862, when Reverend Battelle presented moral arguments against slavery—but a vote ended the possibility of emancipation and the topic was not raised unto Representative Willey presented his amendment in February of 1863.\textsuperscript{45} Willey did not propose his amendment with an “argument on the morality of slavery”, rather Willey described

\textsuperscript{43} Abraham Lincoln in George E. Moore, \textit{A Banner in the Hills}, , 235
\textsuperscript{44} George E Moore, \textit{A Banner in the Hills}, , 143
\textsuperscript{45} Reverend Battelle, \textit{Debates and Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention of West Virginia. January 27\textsuperscript{th}, 1863}
gradual emancipation it terms of regional identity and class oppression. Willey argues that “true” West Virginians should desire gradual emancipation so that they would no longer “remain connected with Eastern Virginia…[and] be embarrassed and burdened by laws and a state policy well adapted to protect and promote” slave-power and the subsequent oppression of the lower class. Willey avoided moral claims for strategic reasons, but more importantly, his amendment was proposed in a manner which was acceptable within the already established discourse surrounding West Virginian and class identity against the oppressive elites in the East. For Republicans like Willey, the political discourse could be changed to understand gradual emancipation, but it did so with as much of the older terms and meanings as possible.

The Willey Amendment was unanimously passed by the West Virginia’s Constitutional Convention on February 12, 1863, but spoken of in conservative and typically racist nature the West Virginian politicians. Indeed, Representative Stuart, of Dodderidge County, remarked that he would “let the slaves go to the devil” so long as he obtained “the new state”. Slavery itself was barely critiqued by those in Wheeling; rather slavery became an institution irreconcilable with Virginian identity, not an immoral institution in its own right. Representative Stuart called practiced West Virginian discourse with a passionate racism, claiming that their West Virginian integrity and institutions are more important than the “little interest [we] may have in a few little

46 Waitman Willey, Debates and Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention of West Virginia. February 12th, 1863
48 Stuart Chapman, Debates and Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention of West Virginia. February 16th, 1863
Negroes”. By accepting the Willey Amendment, the men at Wheeling incorporated gradual emancipation into the discourse of West Virginian identity, making opposition to slavery a performance of West Virginian citizenship. Not all of the politicians accepted the Willey Amendment, but they could only deny it by removing themselves, or being removed, from the accepted West Virginian political discourse.

When pro-slavery advocates like Carlile opposed the Willey Amendment and attempted to stall the statehood process, they were almost immediately seen as “outside” and ostracized from the political discourse of West Virginia. Representative Parker noted how “Carlile and his confederates” continually opposed the Willey Amendment even after they were in the minority. Described variously as “traitors” and “wolves in sheep’s clothing” these anti-emancipation advocates were likened and associated with the Confederates, in contrast to the “loyal slaveholders” who accepted gradual emancipation and just compensation as good West Virginian should. If gradual emancipation had been pursued purely through a rational choice of interests, then surely loyal slaveholders would have received the same treatment as Carlile and Davis, but they did not. A distinction was made through conceptions of identity, not through one’s interest. More specifically, Carlile was not deemed a traitor because he supported slavery; he was a traitor because he betrayed West Virginian principles and supported class oppression and the Confederacy.

49 Stuart Chapman, *Debates and Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention of West Virginia. February 16th, 1863*
50 Granville Parker, *State Formation, 504*
51 *Ibid, 507*
That many of the now ostracized politicians became fervent supporters of the Copperhead movement, and would later support ex-Confederates and other conservatives after Reconstruction, reflects how fragile discourse and political community actually is within moments of crisis. Both a Republican stereotype for moderate Democrats in the North, as well as a slogan for conservative and reactionary Democratic politics, the Copperheads significantly disagreed with Republican policies like “the confiscation acts, suspension of the write of habeas corpus…and the emancipation proclamation”.\textsuperscript{52} To Copperheads, the Republicans were not just “undermining civil liberties” but were “destroying the Constitution”.\textsuperscript{53} Representative Davis deemed abolition and secession the “twin brothers” of radicalism and extremism against the freedoms of states.\textsuperscript{54} Representative Davis, Carlile, and other Copperheads understood abolition as giving radical powers “contrary to the spirit and letter of the Constitution”.\textsuperscript{55} Not one year earlier, Copperheads in West Virginia, like most politicians at Wheeling believed in their “radical” defense of the Constitution; now the West Virginian political body became split between conservatives and the “abolitionist radicals” or “northern fanatics”, ironically mirroring much of the language used by secessionists in the Confederacy.

That the “Copperheads” in actuality were loyal members of the Union did not stop Republicans from thinking and speaking of them as decidedly apart. Indeed, West Virginian “radicals” like Battelle and Willey saw the Copperhead movement as not simply “unenlightened or reaction” but subversive and “treasonous” to the Constitution.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 30
\textsuperscript{54} John Jay Davis quoted in Richard Curry’s A House Divided, 109
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 109
\textsuperscript{56} Richard Curry, "Copperheadism and Continuity", 30
Truth, and the actual nature of men like loyal men like Davis and Carlile did not matter within a discourse of crisis and unity. Being labeled or defining oneself as a “Copperhead” implied a specific set of meanings, and allowed specific polices. For Republicans, this included ostracism and forced oblivion in politics during, and immediately following the war. Though a minority during the war, the Copperheads must not be dismissed as inconsequential, since this group saw race, class and political identity in a fundamentally different way than the Republicans in Wheeling. Indeed, during Reconstruction, a Copperhead alliance with ex-Confederates, who now shared a more similar discourse, proved “irresistible” and fostered a retreat from Reconstruction, race violence, and the eventual appointment of ex-Confederate Henry Mason Matthews as governor of West Virginia in 1877.57 Discourse may be just words, but when firmly believed, these words become the basis for political and material realities within communities.

Conclusion

Willey’s amendment expelled the discursive lie that there was consistent West Virginian unity in anything other than political discourse. After the war, a new conflict over different conceptions of political identity ensued; where Copperhead newspapers like the Wheeling Register would “not recognize the state of West Virginia”, and Republicans like Willey “revealed” a Copperhead conspiracy to destroy West Virginia and the Union together.58 In performing this discourse Republicans systematically disenfranchised returning Confederate soldiers, and required loyalty oaths for political

57 Richard Curry, A Reappraisal of Statehood Politics in West Virginia, 421
58 Richard Curry, A House Divided, 131-132
Likewise, Copperhead and conservative political leaders “succeeded in laying the groundwork for the reemergence of conservatism” against the “radicals” by uniting, through a common white-male and pro-slavery discourse, the Copperheads with Confederates and disgruntled ex-slaveholders. There can be debate and disagreement over interests within those of a single political discourse, but not disenfranchisement and violence and the systematic belief that opponents are entirely separate and incomprehensible within the political establishment. Much of the political gains made during the war were lost as this once united political body began unraveling.

Political identities and discourses raised through the fires of crisis and war prove an unstable basis for lasting government. Granted, American society is premised on belief structures and a particular American discourse. We believe in the authority of the Constitution, our representatives, and institutions—and we reproduce this belief by practicing our American identity throughout our lives. By following the rules and performing the rules, American identity and purpose can become a useful tool to understand and act within the world—but the lessons of West Virginian state creation show us that discourses and identity are not made of stone, but words. Identity and purpose are moving targets which change over time, but it is in moments of crisis where discourse has the most potential for radical change, for good or ill. Gradual emancipation radically confronted the rules of discourse and community at Wheeling after secession, in the same way that terrorism and rising poverty confront the very discourses we hold sacred now. Economic collapse and our enemies abroad are in no way comparable to the momentous crisis of Civil War, but even in these moments, we can see the threat of

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59 Richard Curry, *A House Divided*, 134
60 Ibid, 133
our entire system of beliefs quiver. It is in moments like these where seemingly benign statements defining who is “in” and who is “out” of the community allow for radical action, be it war abroad or protests in the streets. The moment of West Virginian state creation was indeed a unique moment in our history, but through it we can better see how various discourses, however fragile and tenuous to the moment, structures how we see ourselves and how we react to particular crisis of the moment, be it secession and civil war, or threats to our livelihood in the 21st century.
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