James Lawson Kemper and the Virginia Gubernatorial Election of 1873

By EDGAR E. NOEL*

HE MORNING of July 3, 1863 dawned clear and warm. By noon there was a fresh breeze, and both armies welcomed the cooler air as they watched each other across the bright, sunlit fields and gullies of Gettysburg. At 1:00 P.M. the great concentrated mass of Confederate guns suddenly opened their furious cannonade.1 The third and last day of the battle of Gettysburg was underway.

When the Confederate guns ceased fire, the troops under the command of General George Pickett moved out of the woods and

formed for the assault.

The brigade assigned to Pickett's right flank was under the command of a brigadier-general, a Virginian from Madison County, James Lawson Kemper.2 Though a lawyer by profession, this capable civilian soldier had seen duty from Bull Run through Antietam to Gettysburg. Now a seasoned veteran, he advanced with his men giving orders to keep the lines dressed and the men moving forward.3

In the late afternoon sun, forty-two regimental flags floated with a myriad of color over the three great lines of 15,000 infantry that started their magnificent charge of nearly a mile toward Ceme-

tery Ridge.4

The Union troops protected in part by crests of the ridge and by stone walls, held their fire, watched admiringly, and waited. The on-coming lines marched quietly without the customary "Rebel Yell",5 and when they had closed to about 100 yards, the Union brigades opened fire with a sweeping blast. The Confederate lines underwent a sudden transformation in the dense cloud of smoke and dust of the concentrated fire, and blankets, rifles, parts of bodies and knapsacks were hurled into the air.6

The flanks of the advancing line were shot to pieces, and the Virginia brigade on the right recoiled with dead and wounded dropping left and right. Among those wounded was the civilian

soldier from Madison County.

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Eleven years later, on the afternoon of January 1, 1874, a small group of men left the capitol building in Richmond, Virginia, and walked through the brisk winter air to the Executive Mansion in the northeast corner of the Capitol Grounds. A few minutes before, the joint assembly of the state legislature had confirmed unanimously the vote for Virginia's first native-born governor since the Civil War. This group of men was now on its way to inform him of his official election and to administer the oath of office.⁷

At the Executive Mansion they were met by the retiring governor, Gilbert C. Walker. Ushered into the western reception room of the mansion, they were greeted by the governor-elect. He was a man of medium height and compactness of build whose manly bearing concealed his fifty years in a stature which reflected former military service. At times, if he turned too quickly or made an abrupt movement, his face would wince an instant in pain. The cause was an old war wound from Gettysburg which still gave him trouble.⁸

The striking feature of this man was his handsome and patrician face. His head was large with a broad forehead and a receding hairline of black hair. The dark eyes, somewhat deep set and bright, denoted a softness. Yet the nose was strong and the line of the mouth, though full, was firm and determined. His thick black beard, short and well trimmed, covered a square jaw and chin. This man not only looked like a leader; he was a leader, and Virginia had now chosen James Lawson Kemper as it next governor.

To James L. Kemper, it was a day of victory, not so much for himself as for the state he loved. The past years were filled with bitter memories of Civil War and Reconstruction. Now the people were looking to him to plot and give direction to Virginia's future. This he would try to do, but more especially, the memories of the recent bitter campaign against the radical Republicans and the election of 1873 were not to be forgotten.

Virginia in 1873 viewed the approaching gubernatorial campaign and election with unusual interest. Owing to the Civil War, the Negroes were free, and under Reconstruction the old social, economic, and political customs of a century had been swept away. The people, white and Negro alike, were in a state of flux, and

life as both had known it was legend.

In the gubernatorial election of 1869, the conservative Republican nominee, Gilbert C. Walker, a carpetbagger from Norfolk, had defeated Henry H. Wells, the radical Republican candidate. His victory was due to the support of a new political party in the state — a combination of Confederate Democrats, conservative

Republican, old-line Whigs, and Negroes. This group, known simply as the Conservative Party, was soon to become the dominat-

ing political force in Virginia politics.9

The center of the Conservative Party's power was in Richmond, and its rising control of state politics was realized by the fear of Negro-radical rule, by its effective organization, and by its shrewd manipulations. Having the influence of business and railroad groups on their side, the Conservatives had access to lavish campaign funds for their political battles. Most of the press of the state supported the new movement, and the press in turn, such as the *Dispatch* and *Enquirer* in Richmond, were controlled or closely

associated with these business and railroad groups.10

At the same time that Walker was elected governor, the native white Virginians voted to adopt the Underwood Constitution, named after the constitutional convention's president, John Curtis Underwood. This document had originally placed severe restrictions on the white population and particularly on those who had served in the Confederate Army or government. Also all persons were disqualified from holding public office who would not take a test oath to the effect that they had not voluntarily aided the Confederacy. The Virginians objected to these restrictions, and after sending a committee of nine to discuss the matter with President Grant in Washington, they agreed to accept Negro suffrage in return for a constitution expurgated of these objectionable features. Thus, the Underwood Constitution was adopted, but the harsh test oath and disfranchising clauses were rejected. Also, the General Assembly approved by substantial majorities the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, and having thus fulfilled the requirements imposed by the Federal Government, President Grant on January 26, 1870, signed an act of Congress which admitted the state of Virginia to representation in the Congress of the United States.11

Although Reconstruction was officially over by 1870, Virginia was far from being "reconstructed." The state's valuable holdings in the stock of its own railroads were sold by an act of the General Assembly at immense loss in order to finance the government. These state roads fell into private hands, usually those of expanding Northern railroad systems. Next, the Assembly passed the Funding Act of 1871. This act fastened upon the impoverished, war-broken state an annual interest upon the funded debt almost equal to the entire revenue of the state. These acts were obtained by corrupt pressure methods of a combination of bankers, bondholders, and

railroads, and these groups came to share a high degree of influence

over the Conservative Party.12

Into this political scene, with its scars of war and resulting years of Reconstruction governments, came in 1873 many of the old political leaders. Their return to Virginia politics had been made possible by the removal of the test oath and disfranchising clauses in the Underwood Constitution. The same qualities that had brought them to the front in times of war, now brought them to the front in political affairs. In the popular mind, their rank and service in the Confederate Army made them heroes. One such leader was James L. Kemper.

Kemper was born in Madison County, Virginia, on June 11, 1823. He attended Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) at Lexington, Virginia, where he received a Master of Arts degree. After graduation he studied law in Charleston, Virginia (now West Virginia), and in 1847 after scarcely finishing his law studies, he was commissioned a captain in the United States volunteers. He joined the army in Mexico and served there until

the end of the Mexican War.14

Upon returning from Mexico, Kemper resumed his practice of law in Madison County and built up a successful practice. In 1853, he was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates and served there as his county's Democratic representative until the beginning of the Civil War. Esteemed for his honesty, industry, and pleasing disposition, he rose as a respected leader in state politics. He also served as president of the Board of Visitors of Virginia Military Institute and took a great interest in the development of that institution. In his final year in the House of Delegates he was unanimously elected Speaker and served until 1861 when he accepted the appointment of colonel of the Seventh Regiment of Virginia Infantry from Governor Letcher.

With his regiment, Kemper fought at the battle of First Bull Run under the command of Colonel Jubal A. Early. In May, 1862, he was promoted to brigadier-general and commanded a brigade at the Seven Days Battle around Richmond. He and his brigade did service at South Mountain and Antietam, and soon after the return of the Army of Northern Virginia from this campaign.

Kemper's brigade was incorporated in Pickett's Division.¹⁷

As a soldier, Kemper was a capable and valued officer, and he was respected and greatly admired by his men. Colonel Walter Harrison, inspector-general of Pickett's division, in his book, *Pickett's Men*, said: "General Kemper... with all the courage and

pure chivalry . . . combined the solid qualities and sound judgement of a practical statesman. In battle or council he was an officer of superior capacity, and his career in arms is a demonstration of what excellence may be attained by the highest type of citizen soldier."¹⁸

In 1863, Kemper marched with the division into Pennsylvania and led his brigade in the famous and disastrous Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. Here he was severely wounded and left on the field for dead. Found by Federal troops, he was taken prisoner and sent to a Union hospital. Late in 1863, upon written certificates of several Federal surgeons that he would soon die, Kemper was exchanged for Brigadier-General Charles K. Graham, a Union general who had been slightly wounded and captured by the Confederate troops at Gettysburg.¹⁹

After his exchange and return to Richmond, Kemper slowly recovered. Still unable to return to field duty, he was assigned to the command of the local forces in and around Richmond, the reserve forces of Virginia, and the Bureau of Conscription. While in this position, he received in June, 1864 his commission as a major general in the Confederate Army.²⁰ He continued to hold this

command until Richmond fell in the spring of 1865.

When Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Kemper left the army and returned to his law practice in Madison County. During Reconstruction, he concentrated his efforts on reviving his practice, and by 1870 had become a successful member of the bar. Always keeping an interest in politics, he became an active member of the new Conservative Party and aided in the election of Walker in 1869. By 1873, he was already a recognized candidate for the Conservative nomination for governor.

As early as January of that year, Kemper was receiving letters from supporters all over the state. One letter from William Pope

Dabney of Montpellier in Powhatan County began:

Allow me to congratulate you upon the "Manifest destiny" which will make you the next Governor of Virginia. Your long and prominent position in our Legislature, your army record, your residence in a County which represents the sympathies of East Virginia and the Valley . . . will undoubtably insure you the nomination of the Conservative Convention. . . .21

By June and July, just prior to the party conventions, the letters were pouring into Kemper's law office. General William H. Richardson, Virginia's Adjutant-General, wrote Kemper a short note on June 2, and mentioned that he had seen Kemper's name

printed frequently in the Richmond papers in connection with the governorship. He concludes:

Such praise was certainly flattering and is characteristic of this early correspondence, most of which touched on Kemper's fine war record. Richardson does mention, however, that the Richmond papers were already grooming Kemper for the Conservative nomination. The reason for this support from the press is wrapped up in the complex railroad interests at the time and in the personality of a railroad magnate and rising political boss, William Mahone.

After the Civil War, Mahone, who had been a major-general in the Confederate Army, bought up several short and largely state owned railroads under the legislative acts of 1867 and 1870. He was elected president of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad, and subsequently of the Southside Railroad, between Petersburg and Lynchburg. The Virginia and Tennessee Railroad ran from Lynchburg to Bristol, and Mahone hoped to buy up this road also, and thereby consolidate the three lines under his control. He was seconded in his efforts by the stockholders of the other lines, but the people and press of Lynchburg were opposed to such consolidation.²³

The editor of the Lynchburg Daily and Semi-Weekly News was a former colonel in the Confederate Army, Robert E. Withers. He and his newspaper persistently opposed Mahone's consolidation plan, and as a result, Withers incurred the hatred of Mahone. After some political maneuvering, Mahone won the consolidation and the resulting line was named the Atlantic, Mississippi, and Ohio Railroad (later renamed the Norfolk and Western Railroad).²⁴

Now, in 1873, Kemper's leading opponent for the Conservative Party's nomination for governor was this same Lynchburg editor, Robert E. Withers. Unlike Withers, Kemper had supported Mahone's efforts for the consolidation plan. Also Mahone, through his influence, now dominated most of the state's newspapers, especially the *Richmond Whig*, and it was obvious whom these newspapers would back for the nomination.

Still, it should not be blandly accepted that Kemper was the figurehead of the "Mahone Machine." He did not solicit Mahone's

support, and it was more to his good luck or perhaps political foresight that he had favored Mahone's consolidation plan. Now that Kemper and Withers were major contenders for the nomination, Mahone with his powerful influence had to pick the man to support, and it is natural that he would favor Kemper.

The Radical or Republican Party was far from being confident in these pre-election months of 1873. They had lost the last gubernatorial election to Walker who had been backed by the growing conservative faction. Now, with the return of the old political leaders in full force into state politics under the Conservative banner, the Radicals realized that their political hold on their white supporters would be weakened. Many voters would be swayed over to these "native-son" leaders. The present campaign, especially for the carpetbaggers, would be a life or death struggle to regain their former prominence, and if they lost this election it would in all probability mean the end of their political power in Virginia. One thing they were sure of, their ace in the hole, a black one — the Negro vote. But would that be enough?

With these problems and pressing questions in mind, the Republican Convention assembled in Lynchburg on July 30th. About half of its delegates were colored. After much speech making and general confusion, Robert W. Hughes, from southwestern Virginia, was nominated for governor, C. P. Ramsdell, a carpetbagger from an eastern county, for lieutenant-governor, and David Fultz, an old Union man, from Augusta County, for attorney-general. Thus every faction of the Party and every section of the

state were represented.

Hughes had been an editorial writer of great ability on newspapers in Washington, D. C., and Richmond, Virginia, and was a former secessionist. Here was the Republican answer to any "nativeson" candidate of the Conservatives. Now a Democrat turned radical Republican, he agreed to run on a platform that was by far the best the Party had offered in Virginia.²⁷ It was in favor of the taxation system of the state constitution; it favored the payment of the public debt of the state, but without oppressive taxation on the citizens; it favored the abolition of partisan supervision to allow the right of suffrage to every voter according to the dictates of his own conscience; it recommended that efforts be made by state representatives in the National Congress to abolish the tax on tobacco; and it advocated reform in the administration of justice, with justice to all irrespective of race, color, condition, or political sentiment.²⁸ But even with a good platform, Hughes was handi-

capped by his supporters, for he had with him the remainder of

the carpetbagger element and nearly all the Negroes.29

The real issue of the campaign, however, was not to be over platforms or even political personalities. It was to be basic and bitter, and whether Hughes wanted to or not, or whether he had to because of his supporters, he sounded the first shot in his Lynchburgh speech:

Study the character of the laboring population all over the world, and where will a laboring class anywhere be found so exemplary in their conduct, so elevated in their morale, all things considered, as the Negro population of Virginia? 30

The ugly battle of the campaign of 1873 was on, the worst race

struggle in an election in Virginia political history.

A week later on August 6, the Conservative Convention convened in Richmond. It was one of the largest and most enthusiastic meetings ever held by the party.³¹ Because of a bad cold, Kemper did not come to Richmond, but Withers was there and he was "by no means sanquine of success"³² in gaining the nomination. When the proceedings began for the nominations, ex-General Jubal A. Early read in Kemper's support extracts from a letter sent by the absentee:

I... have not directly or indirectly sought the office [of governor]; have stuck through thick and thin to the maxim (so often used by ... James Madison) 33 ... that a position of that sort ought neither to be sought nor declined, and am not expecting, and don't mean to be disturbed by expecting the nomination; that if, however the office should be conferred upon me, I should be every inch the Governor, and should, so far as I know how, dispense impartial, scrupulous, and fearless justice to all interests and men. . . .34

The letter was cheered by the delegates, and in the balloting Kemper won the nomination. The Convention recognized that Withers was the next best man and nominated him for lieutenant-governor, and Raleigh T. Daniel, a prominent lawyer and party leader of Richmond, for attorney-general. The nominations like those of the Republicans were mindful of harmonizing the contending factions and sections: Kemper from the Valley, Withers of the southwest, and Daniel of the east.³⁵

The platform adopted by the Convention was similar to that of the Republicans. It promised to guarantee exact and impartial justice; to support the Grant administration; to promote general education for white and colored races respectively and to support

internal improvements.36

On August 9, Thomas S. Bocock, president of the Convention, formally informed Kemper by letter of his nomination. "The entire unanimity," he wrote, "with which your nomination was made, and the great enthusiasm which has everywhere greeted its announcement, constitute . . . a sure guarantee of your success." 37

In his reply, dated August 12, Kemper accepted the nomina-

tion and concluded:

Under Conservative auspices, Virginia is today happily free from the worst calamities which have befallen other States similarly situated but differently governed . . . We will go forward with the work of restoring our beloved Commonwealth . . . by ignoring resentment and passion and yielding a manly support to whatever measures shall best secure justice and relief to Virginia. . . . 38

In spite of these political platitudes and the fortunate nominations and progressive platforms of the two parties, the true issue of the campaign, the Negro control in politics, could not be concealed. The question was: Who would rule Virginia? Would it be the incompetent, property-less Radicals of Negroes, carpetbaggers and scalawags led by a few able believers in Republicanism? Or would it be the property-owning, largely native Virginians of the Conservative Party who were experienced and capable?³⁹

Conservative tempers were still warm over Hughes' Lynchburg speech in praise of the Negroes. If the Radicals wanted a 'tooth and nail' campaign, the Conservatives were eager to give it to them. They had based their Party's formation on the premise that "the white man should have the ascendency in the control of the gov-

ernment."40

The Conservatives had refrained from recognizing the color line in former campaigns and had tried in vain to break the solid ranks of the Negroes under the Republicans in an effort to avoid the race issue in politics. But now, if the Radicals were going to continue to draw the line between the whites and the blacks, then the Conservatives had but one course to pursue — do just as their

opponents had done.41

The whites in the central, eastern, and southern counties of the state had endured the Reconstruction policies patiently. They had in their local offices and as their representatives in the legislature, their former slaves as well as self-seeking carpetbaggers and native demagogues. Some of the Negro officers, true, were honest and capable men who exerted some good; but even these were truthfully lacking in training and experience to represent educated white constituencies.⁴² These whites especially wanted a change.

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They desired the expulsion of radical influences so that politics and

public life might return to a higher level.43

On August 19, Kemper received a letter from William Smith, an ante-bellum member of Congress from Virginia and two-time governor of the state.⁴⁴ Although now in his late seventies, "Extra Billy" Smith still followed the political scene with a keen, if not an active, interest. In fiery words, he encouraged Kemper to campaign with forcefulness. "We must have no temporizing," he admonished Kemper. "We must crush our adversaries wherever we meet them."⁴⁵ Then in the passionate political rhetoric for which he was famous,⁴⁶ he added:

For home renegades and traitors, such as Hughes, I have no quarter — propose to hoist the black flag as he advised during the late war, and to 'cry aloud and spare not.'47

Other messages from outside the state encouraged the Conservative candidate. D. M. Pattie of Thompson, Georgia, wrote Kemper:

If we could only give the white men of Virginia one look into the Capitol at Columbia, South Carolina and let them see one hundred and twenty-seven Black faces and only twenty-five White face[s], administering the government of that Old State, I don't think Hughes would get a single white vote. . . .48

The editor of the Meridian, Mississippi, Gazette, in the flowery editoralizing style of the time, wrote an article which was reprinted in Virginia:

We would be glad to see the faithful and intrepid Kemper in the gubernatorial chair, which has been occupied by strangers for years . . . the people of every state need just such a man. Let the winding James carry the news of Kemper's nomination to the East: send it along the ruffled slopes of the famous Blue Ridge . . . and from the cragged gorges of the Alleghenies, and when the struggle is over Virginia can gather up the skeleton of her old glories, bid her sons and daughters look up again — that the breezes of heaven are once more free. . . .49

But the struggle was closer home, and in Virginia, Sam M. Gadand of Amherst, stated the issue in clear terms to Kemper:

The radical party has made the issue and thrown down the glove; that issue I know you will boldly and bravely meet and you will fearlessly... accept the challenge. It is the war of races, — turn it and twist it as the radical party may, to that complexion it must come....50

The canvas swept across the state like a wild forest fire. Fiery speeches and press denunciations blazed back and forth, lighting

passions, and leaving sparks in their charred wakes that would smolder for eighty-five years. Hughes adjured the Negroes to support "their" party and in branding terms warned them that the whites, who had once held them in slavery, would do so again if given control of the government. Kemper, in turn, alluded to the men who had fought for Virginia during the War and asked them, as heroes, to be worthy of their state.⁵¹ The Conservative press fanned the blaze:

With all the sins of its foul career clinging to its garments like scorpions, the Radical Party . . . with its barbaric hate and hideous purposes will die the death of the wicked. Its unhallowed life will be yielded to the conquering arms of our heroes like . . . the bloody dragon to the . . . spear of St. George. 52

By November the campaigning had reached its climax, and the people prepared to wage the final battle at the polls. On Tuesday, November 4, Kemper addressed a letter "To the People of Virginia." In it, he thanked them for supporting him in the canvass as the representative of their cause, and asked them to vote for a Conservative "triumph as will forever settle the intestine feuds of the past, [and] diffuse peace and good-will over our land. . . . "53 On Thursday, November 6, the issue was decided.

The election was a victory for the Conservatives. Out of the 214,237 votes cast for governor, Kemper won with a substantial majority of 27,239. Withers and Daniel were also elected. More importantly, in the General Assembly, the Conservatives placed thirty-three men in the Senate and ninety-nine in the House of Delegates. In contrast, the Republicans had only nine men in the Senate and thirty-three in the House, and a third of those in the Senate and over half in the House were colored.⁵⁴ Radical Republicanism as a political force in Virginia was dead.

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On the afternoon of January 1, 1874, at a few minutes before four o'clock, a group of men entered the Rotunda of the Capitol Building in Richmond.⁵⁵ After taking off their coats and hats, they walked toward the Hall of the House of Delegates on the northside. The man leading this group was the new governor of Virginia, James Lawson Kemper.

As they entered the Hall, the joint assembly of the legislature stood up in an enthusiastic ovation.⁵⁶ Amid their applause and

scattered cheers, the new governor walked to the Speaker's rostrum, and as the Hall quieted, he began his inaugural message:

We have devolved upon us today the solution of this great problem: How to make and administer laws so as to secure life, liberty, and property . . . in a community composed of two distinct races. . . - We intend to perform it by scrupulously guarding the newly acquired rights of the colored man, by affording him liberal facilities for education . . . by cultivating such relations of active co-operation and mutual trust and common interest between the races as will combine both in recovering the general prosperity. . . . 57

In reference to the defeat of the Republicans, he said:

Recent events prove how futile, and how disastrous . . . must be any attempt to array the colored race as a political combination upon any principle of antagonism between the races. All such attempted combinations of the past are dissolved . . . and we are afforded a golden opportunity for settling forever the internal jealousies which have hindered our material progress and for completing the pacification of all elements of the body politic. . . .58

Finally, in praise, he confirmed that Virginia "emerging from great disasters, stricken with sorrows, multilated, poor," still wore "a stainless crown of honor on her brow - still shining with hope and courage."59 On this note, James L. Kemper opened a new era in Virginia history.

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