

An interview with historian James M. McPherson

The Civil War, impeachment then and now, and Lincoln's legacy

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WSWS editorial board member David Walsh recently spoke to James McPherson, the distinguished historian of the Civil War era in his office at Princeton University. Professor McPherson's works include *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*; *Battle Cry of Freedom* [a Pulitzer Prize winner]; *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* and *The Struggle for Equality*. Explanatory notes to assist the reader follow at the end of the article.

David Walsh: Over the past 15 months or so, the US has been shaken by a severe political crisis, leading to the impeachment of an elected president for the first time and has entered into two wars, one of which is ongoing as we speak.

When we turn to the debates of the 1850s, the first thing that strikes one is the apparently far more substantive nature of the divisions. I wonder if you could discuss briefly the passion that was aroused by the discussions over the fate of Kansas. I'm thinking in particular of the attack on Charles Sumner in May 1856, and the debate on the Lecompt on constitution in early 1858. What social tensions were expressed in those struggles?

James McPherson: Kansas became a kind of cockpit and symbol of events that had been building up for a generation, since the 1830s, on the question of slavery. I think it probably started with the increasing polarization between the Abolitionist movement in its militant phase, that got going in the 1830s, and the pro-slavery defenders, those who argued that slavery was a positive good, who also got going in a major way in the 1830s. In the 1830s and 1840s this was a debate over the morality and socioeconomic validity of slavery and the question as to whether slavery was consistent with a democratic society. It was a major issue in the polity because of the controversy over the gag rule, for example, and the barring of Abolitionist literature from the mails, the debates in Congress, and so on.

But I don't think it threatened the stability of the country until the Texas issue came along, this huge expansion of slavery, and then the Mexican War, with an even potentially greater expansion of slavery and the Wilmot Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, the fugitive slave law and, of course, the Kansas-Nebraska Act. All of these had sort of built up in a step-by-step acceleration and broadening of the whole debate, from a situation where it had been an obsessive issue for the two extremes in the 1830s and 1840s to a point where it became something of an obsessive issue for the whole country, focusing on the issue of the expansion of slavery.

I think more than anything else the Kansas-Nebraska Act is what projected that.... Well, first there was the issue of the Wilmot Proviso and the Compromise of 1850, but those measures seemed at least to resolve the issue, even though a lot of people on both sides were unhappy with the resolution. But the Kansas-Nebraska Act just blew the lid off again. Take Lincoln, for example, it brought him back into politics in a major way, after he thought that probably his political career was over.

DW: Do we know what his reaction was?

JM: Yes, he said that the Kansas-Nebraska Act fell on him like a thunderclap. And that's when he went back into politics. Between the passage of the Act and his election as president he gave 175 public speeches, all of them focusing on the issue of slavery's expansion.

And of course the issue of Kansas itself, the contest between the Free Staters and the border ruffians and so on really went on for four years from 1854, when the bill was passed, until 1858 when Congress finally defeated the Lecompton constitution. You had this war in Kansas itself, in which several hundred people were killed. In fact, nobody knows how many. John Brown and so on. And the echoes of it in Congress, more than echoes.

It was a speech on Kansas by Charles Sumner that provoked Preston Brooks' attack on him. The Lecompton constitution split the Democratic Party and ensured that two Democratic parties would contest against the Republicans in the 1860 election. I think that's what made possible Lincoln's election. These issues really engaged passions. There were several occasions in addition to the Sumner-Brooks affair when Congressmen confronted each other on the floor of Congress, threw punches at each other, threatened each other with weapons, and there was as well truly escalating rhetoric. My own feeling is that the 1850s was probably the decade in all of American history with the most passionate and irreconcilable polarization, which foreshadowed the war in many ways. So it went from a moral argument, the Abolitionists versus the pro-slavery forces, to a political argument, to physical confrontation, to war, over the course of a generation.

I don't know if in domestic politics that particular pattern has ever replicated itself on anything like the same level. I don't think the culture wars of the 1960s, of which I think the Clinton impeachment is part, are at nearly the same level for the whole country. There are groups, like the anti-abortion people, extremes on the Right, the *Wall Street Journal* being the more respectable spokesman for some of these, but I don't think they've engaged the whole country in the same way that the debates and conflicts of the 1850s did.

DW: What was the essence of Sumner's speech?

JM: His substantive argument was that "The Crime Against Kansas" was just the latest effort by what he called the Slave Power, that is, an organized and concerted effort by the planter class through their political leadership, to expand slavery. This was the latest example of their efforts to foist the expansion of slavery on the country. What really provoked Brooks' response were Sumner's references to his cousin, the South Carolina senator, Andrew P. Butler. Sumner is often said to have made offensive remarks about the Senator, but I've read the whole speech and while he did condemn him pretty strongly, and he said he was Don Quixote and that slavery was his Dulcinea, that seemed to me to be the

most extreme thing he said about him. Brooks, however, regarded it as an insult to the honor of his kinsman and also to the honor of Southerners and South Carolinians in particular.

And the way a Southerner responded to a challenge to his honor was through violence. And because he did not regard Sumner as an equal, he did not challenge him to a duel. The usual response in that case was horsewhipping, but he said even horsewhipping was too good for Sumner, so he hit him over the head with a cane. Because he said Sumner had insulted the honor of all Southerners and slaveowners through his rhetoric.

This took place in the Senate chamber. Brooks was a Congressman, but he had heard Sumner's speech, or read it, so he walked into the Senate a couple of days later after it had adjourned. Sumner was sitting there writing letters or reading letters from his constituents, and without warning, Brooks started clubbing him over the head with a heavy cane. Congressional desks in those days were like school-desks, Sumner couldn't get up. He was trapped in there, couldn't defend himself. He finally wrenched the desk from the floor. He got up and then collapsed. That's an extraordinary event to take place in the Senate of the United States; and I think a pretty good symbol of the passions that were totally out of control.

Brooks was censured by the House. He then resigned, went home and was unanimously reelected.

DW: What was going on in Kansas during those years? Aside from the military action, what sort of propaganda war was taking place?

JM: The slave-state Kansans were able to get more states, most of them fraudulent votes, in the various elections in 1855 and 1856 because the Missourians would control these votes. But the Free Staters would elect their own territorial delegate and their own territorial legislature, so you basically had two governments in Kansas, the "legitimate" one that was recognized by the president and the Senate, which was controlled by the Democrats, and the Free State government, which eventually was recognized by the House, when the Republicans controlled the House. So you had divided state government, with its counterpart in the Congress of the United States.

The Free State government was located in Lawrence, and one of the things that set off John Brown was when the slave-state faction marched into Lawrence and sacked the town. This was almost simultaneous with Brooks' caning of Sumner, in May 1856. It was part of the build-up to the presidential election of 1856. First [President Franklin] Pierce [1853-57], then [President James] Buchanan [1857-61], kept sending territorial governors to Kansas to try to control the violence with the help of troops that were stationed there, and one after the other they resigned, because they couldn't control the situation. So basically you had political and even civil war on the ground in Kansas for two or three years.

DW: How many federal troops were there?

JM: That fluctuated, according to the level of violence. There were several hundred there.

DW: Did any of those officers go on to play a role in the Civil War?

JM: Yes, Nathaniel Lyon, who was in Missouri at the outbreak of the war, and took the initiative in arresting the pro-secessionist militia in Missouri in May of 1861, which provoked a riot in St. Louis and polarized the state. Lyon was an army captain in Kansas and grew to hate the pro-slavery faction, and that radicalized him in the Missouri controversy of 1861. He was then killed in the first major battle in the Western theater, in August 1861, the Battle of Wilson's Creek.

DW: What significance did the events in Kansas have for the population of the country as a whole? How closely was this followed?

JM: The national press paid a great deal of attention to it, especially the Republican press, newspapers like the *New York Tribune*. For a while the *Tribune*, which was the leading Republican paper in the North, and one of the most significant of all Northern papers at the time, Horace Greeley editor, they had a standing headline, *Civil war in Kansas*, for months.

They had reporters out there. So did other Northern and I think some Southern papers. So this whole thing was played out in the media in a major way. Especially in 1856, during the presidential campaign.

Of course both sides tried to use what they called atrocities or "outrages" in Kansas. There was a lot of partisan exaggeration, a lot of name-calling and all the rest of it. I think journalism was even more raw and unrestrained, and certainly more partisan, then. Newspapers were identified directly with political parties or a faction within a political party, in a way that was much more open and unabashed than is the case today.

DW: In your latest book you made reference to Civil War soldiers shooting "as they had voted," and to the kind of political education they had received over the previous period. The soldiers didn't have to be propagandized, they had some understanding of what they were involved in.

JM: There was no need for Civil War soldiers to have something like Frank Capra's series of propaganda films in the 1940s, *Why We Fight*, because that generation, I think probably more than almost any other generation in American history, had been totally politicized by these events of the 1850s, which were part of the common political culture of the time.

This is an age in which young men, men in their late teens or twenties, as well as older individuals, were far more involved in the political culture than their counterparts would be today. There was no competition, for one thing. There was no television, no movies, no organized sports, nothing except public events to involve them outside their workaday life. Politics was a form of recreation.

Elections were more frequent; the participation of the eligible electorate in elections was far higher than it is today. In the presidential elections in the middle part of the nineteenth century it was about 80 percent. It was over 80 percent in the elections of 1856 and 1860. So it was about double what it is today. Of course the electorate is much larger today. It was just white males, 21 years and older then, who were citizens. Those immigrants who had declared their intention to become citizens could vote in most states too.

DW: That's interesting, in contrast to today's attitudes toward immigrants.

JM: If they had taken out papers, even if they weren't yet citizens. They had to wait five years, just as it is now. But if they had declared their intention to become citizens, most states then enfranchised them. You had a very high rate of political participation and I think the sense that people had that politics was far more important to their everyday lives than people feel today.

So when the war began, these men were already politicized and socialized to the issues over which the war was fought. And they really saw themselves as citizens in uniform out to accomplish by military means political goals that they had identified before. In a way they illustrate the most famous dictum of Karl von Clausewitz that war is the extension of politics by other means. They clearly would have agreed with that. That's what they saw themselves doing, and from the very beginning, some were very articulate about why they were fighting and what the political issues were.

DW: How do you explain the enduring fascination with Lincoln? The peculiar thing is that he is embraced by political factions that are diametrically opposed to one another. Do you see him as a man of the Right, or a man of the Left?

JM: I would say that in the context of his own time, he was more on the Left of center, but not a radical. The major issues of his time were slavery and democracy. On the economy, the Whig Party, the party with which he was identified, was in many ways more progressive than the Democrats, in the sense that they believed in economic development as a way of bringing rising prosperity for all classes.

I think Lincoln really believed that if you created a kind of level playing field, and then you had a rapidly expanding economy, with expanding opportunity within that economy, then anybody, like himself, a poor boy, could get ahead, if he was ambitious, worked hard, and so on. But the way to do that was through certain kinds of government activism, to promote economic and social development. So the Whigs were the party at the state level and the local level of public schools, for example, which advocated using government to promote economic growth, through the building of railroads, or canals, or the chartering of banks, subsidies for certain kinds of economic enterprise.

The Democrats were afraid that these kinds of subsidies or special grants to economic development would, in the end, promote inequality. They wanted small government, and they tended to be against large-scale appropriations for schools and that sort of thing. They would say they were for the common man because most of these subsidies, which went toward the building of railroads, or the chartering of banks, were really going to help the rich more than the poor in the end. But Lincoln didn't believe that. He said that the poor man with ambition—he was thinking of himself—could get ahead in a system like this. But these were very lively issues in the 1820s to the 1840s, the Jacksonian period. And you can get into an endless argument over which of the two parties was really Left or Right. I don't think Left or Right had the same connotations as it does now.

By the 1850s, certainly for a generation after that, the major issue in American politics was slavery and race. And on that issue, Lincoln and the Republicans were certainly Left of center. They were the ones who thought slavery was wrong, that it eventually must be brought to an end, and then during the war and Reconstruction period, they were the ones who actually pushed through the legislation that, on paper at least, granted equal rights to blacks, including the former slaves. They were very much in favor of the use of powerful central government to promote this.

Lincoln certainly wasn't on the far Left of the Republican spectrum, someone like Thaddeus Stevens or Charles Sumner would be. But Lincoln wound up going along with many of their measures, and actually promoting them as president. Looking toward the future he would have continued to move in a more liberal direction on these issues. What Lincoln's position might have been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on issues that became associated with the Progressive period and the rise of giant industry, who knows?

To address his enduring fascination is not simple. Part of it has to do with his martyrdom at the moment of triumph. If he had lived he would still be a giant figure in the American pantheon, but there is a special quality that attaches to his reputation because he was assassinated at the very moment of triumph. Part of the fascination is the sort of rags-to-riches, log cabin to White House image that's associated with him. Part of it is the enduring language of the greatest documents we associate with him, the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural and several others. Part of it is his association with the war, which also has its own fascination, as you know. It's hard to say why he stands out so far above everybody else in popular fascination. More books have been written about Lincoln than anybody else in American history *by far*, and more books have been written about him in English than almost anybody else.

Because Lincoln has this image of semi-divinity almost, I think people on all parts of the political spectrum ever since the 1860s and 1870s have wanted their positions to be identified with Lincoln. His writings are sort of the like the Bible; you can go to them and find support for almost anything you believe in, in the contemporary world. There's a wonderful essay by David Donald, that he wrote back in the 1950s, called *Getting Right with Lincoln*, in which he traced this tendency of politicians always to find a Lincoln quote to support their position.

DW: Does it seem sometimes that these were quite recent events?

JM: It does. I had a great grandfather who was born in 1841 or 1842 and

who fought in the Civil War, whom my mother knew. When she was a child he was still alive. I think he died in 1924 or something like that. She had known him as a seven- or eight-year-old child.

DW: Turning to the impeachment of Andrew Johnson in 1868, I've been reading various works on the subject. There are different views on it, obviously. In the course of this year's turmoil, I didn't run across much that was in depth about it in the media. Johnson's impeachment is sometimes portrayed in the literature as an entirely illegitimate attempt at a political coup d'état by a group of power-hungry, vengeful radicals. Whether Johnson had broken the Tenure of Office Act as he was charged is questionable, but certainly there were serious political issues at stake. Hundreds of thousands had sacrificed their lives for a cause, and there was reason to believe that this victory would be diminished.

JM: Or even reversed.

DW: How do you view these circumstances—the Stanton issue, the question of black suffrage, the treatment of former slaveholders, the re-entry of the Southern states?

JM: Whether or not the impeachment of Johnson was a legitimate constitutional process or not I think could be endlessly debated. His removal of Stanton in violation, or alleged violation, of the Tenure of Office Act was the issue on which he was impeached, the trigger for it. But the real substantive issue was Johnson's repeated defiance of the Republican majority in Congress on issues that that majority regarded as essential to resolving the outcome of the war and protecting the stability of the restored Union. There was a partisan dimension to this too. The Republicans also saw it as essential to their continued control of the government, but a lot of them could argue that their continued control of the government was the only way to ensure what was often called at the time the fruits of victory in the war. There was still a widespread tendency among many Republicans to see the Democrats, especially the Southern Democrats, as representing the spirit of the rebellion.

Johnson had not been elected president, unlike Clinton. In the only sort of referendum on his presidency, the Congressional elections of 1866, he had been overwhelmingly repudiated by the Northern voters who returned a three-quarters Republican majority to the House of Representatives. Of course Southern states were not voting. But that was the issue, what were the terms on which they were going to be brought back into the Union.

Whether the process was the correct process and was constitutionally valid is one question, but the issues were in many ways pretty serious, almost life-and-death issues in the context of the time. There was enormous substance to the issues involved in the impeachment of 1868 in a way that I think was totally absent from the Clinton impeachment. That was a personal vendetta, and in Johnson's case, I don't think it was personal.

DW: How had Johnson been viewed up to that time?

JM: His tenure as vice-president was pretty short. He had been inaugurated on March 4 and six weeks later, after Lincoln's assassination, he was named president. During the war he was something of a hero in the eyes of the North. He was the only senator from a state [Tennessee] that had seceded who remained loyal to the Union. He gave ringing speeches denouncing secession and denouncing the Confederates. When the Union army gained control of much of Tennessee in the spring of 1862 Lincoln sent him back to Nashville, which remained under Union control for the rest of the war, as military governor. He played a pretty important role, in maintaining Unionism under wartime military occupation of the parts of Tennessee that remained under Union control.

So here's a former Democrat from a Southern state, and in 1864 the Republican Party is trying to broaden its image from a Republican Party to a Union Party; they called themselves the Union Party, because they wanted to attract votes from more Democrats. Johnson seemed to be a perfect vice-presidential candidate to broaden the appeal of the Republican Party.

DW: What was the reaction after the assassination, was there any concern about Johnson?

JM: There was a kind of mixed reaction. Johnson, when he took the oath as vice president on March 4, 1865, had been suffering from a mild case of typhoid fever and he was ill, he was nervous, he had taken a couple of drinks to fortify himself before he took the oath of office, and he apparently was drunk. That created a somewhat bad image in the press. But he lived that down, and when Lincoln was assassinated he came out with strong speeches about punishing traitors and rebels and so on. The radical wing of the Republican Party thought he was a congenial guy who was going to go along with their program that would be pretty restrictive on restoring former Confederates to any kind of political rights and political role.

As time went on, however, Johnson backed away from that and did an almost 180-degree turn. By the fall of 1865 he was identifying himself with Southern rights and making noises about bringing the Southern states back into the government as quickly as possible under the mildest conditions possible.

One interpretation is that the Blair family, which was a powerful political family going all the way back to the Jacksonian period, got to Johnson and tried to persuade him that he could create a middle force in American politics, a new coalition of the center, that would isolate the radical Republicans on the Left and the former secessionist Democrats on the Right, and that he could become the presidential candidate of a revived, middle of the road loyalist-Democrat and conservative Republican Party. I think Johnson was mesmerized by that prospect, and in the end it boomeranged on him. Instead of attracting moderate Republicans to this middle of the road party, he drove middle of the road Republicans to the left on the Reconstruction issue.

DW: What were some of the issues in 1865, '66 and '67 that precipitated the crisis?

JM: Basically it was the terms of Reconstruction and the status of the freed slaves in the Reconstructed South. Johnson's idea, after this early rhetoric about punishing treason, was that Southern states had to fulfill only minimal requirements and then they could come back in the Union, with their full rights, voting rights, property rights. He issued a proclamation of pardon and amnesty. He also issued 13,000 individual pardons. These were political leaders more than anything else. He had exempted wealthy Southerners in his original amnesty, anyone who owned more than \$20,000 worth of property.

Johnson represented the poor whites of east Tennessee and he thought the planters were the ones who had led the South into secession and ruined the South, and he was going to show them who was running the country. He was a poor white himself. He had been semi-literate when he was growing up, a tailor, an apprentice tailor. Like Lincoln, he had clawed his way to the top, a self-made man. But unlike Lincoln he harbored resentment against the elite. So he had originally exempted them from his proclamation of pardon. But then when they came on bended knee and prostrated themselves in front of him and asked for forgiveness, he gave it to them and I think felt a sense of power in doing it. They captured him more than he captured them.

He wanted to bring them back on the easiest possible terms and allow them to reorganize Southern state governments, elect Senators and Congressmen, petition for the seating of these Senators and Congressmen in the US Congress, and come back as fully-fledged members of the Union, with only the condition of ratifying the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, and repudiating the ordinance of secession. Once they did that, everything would be the same again, as it always had been.

The Republicans wanted some kind of guarantees, they wanted minimal rights for blacks, and, as time went on, they moved to the left on that issue and wanted suffrage in the South. They wanted to create a Republican Party in the South, they wanted protection for genuine white Unionists in

the South, who they felt would be oppressed if these former Confederates regained political control. Basically, it was a question of who was going to rule the South. Was it going to be the former ruling class, most of whom had been Confederates? Or was it going to be a new, much more democratic coalition of blacks and whites who had not been strong Confederates, either loyal Unionists during the war or reluctant Confederates.

I think the Republicans wanted to create a kind of middle class, small farmer coalition. Those are the people who became Republicans in the South as an offset to the old ruling class in the South. They were afraid that Johnson's policy was going to restore the old ruling class. So that was really what these issues were about. The Republicans passed a civil rights act, they renewed the Freedmen's Bureau and expanded its responsibilities and powers in the South, they passed several Reconstruction acts, to enfranchise the former slaves and to keep disfranchised some elements of the former Confederate ruling class for the time being. Johnson vetoed every one of these acts, then the Republicans would pass them over his veto. Then Johnson would get his attorney general to construe the law as narrowly as possible, and he would appoint officials in the South who did as little as possible to enforce the law. It was this kind of a seesaw battle that was going on through 1866, '67 and into 1868 that really lay behind the impeachment.

He was a president who was defying the will of the majority of Congress in doing all he could to frustrate the legislation they passed over his veto.

DW: Do you think his removal would have made a difference?

JM: In some ways, it might have. Another aspect of this is that because Johnson was defying the Republicans in Congress, he encouraged Southern resistance to Congressional legislation. Johnson held out the hope to former Confederates in the South that if they would only hang in there until 1868, the Democrats would win the presidential election and the Republicans would be out of power. So he encouraged this kind of violent resistance in the South. If he had been removed from office that might have been a far more decisive signal that the Republicans were going to use the full powers of the national government and the army to enforce legislation in the South.

Historian Hans Trefousse argues that the failure to convict Johnson really encouraged Southern whites to continue their resistance, and that may be true. However, Johnson did pull back after he was acquitted. He scaled back his rhetoric, he accepted a compromise candidate as secretary of war, John Schofield; he stopped using the presidency to try to frustrate legislation, so even though he wasn't removed from office this whole controversy pulled his teeth a little bit.

DW: This is perhaps the same question asked in a different way, but what if Lincoln had not been assassinated? Would the course of American history have been at all different, granted that obviously that the US was going to become a modern, industrial capitalist country? Would the conditions in the South perhaps, the conditions of blacks, have been somewhat different?

JM: I think so. For one thing there would have been no impeachment. For another, Lincoln would not have held out the same kind of encouragement to the Southern whites to resist that Johnson did. There clearly would have been ongoing tensions and differences between executive and Congress, there always are even when Congress is controlled by the same party as the president. Nevertheless, Lincoln had worked in general harmony with Congress during the war, although there were some tensions, especially in 1864. As a result there would have been a smoother Reconstruction process, less violence, less confrontation, less polarization in Washington and in the South, maybe in the long run less violent resistance by Southern whites to whatever had to be done to carry out Reconstruction.

Now Lincoln, of course, would have gone out of office in 1869, and

much of the violence that eventually made the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments pretty much a dead letter for three-quarters of a century, might have happened anyhow. Under [Ulysses S.] Grant, who probably would have been Lincoln's successor, just as he was Johnson's successor ... who knows. But I think in terms of the other broader developments that you're talking about, the development of the United States as a major industrial capitalist country, that would have happened no matter what. What happened in the impeachment controversy of 1868 was virtually irrelevant to that process.

DW: Could you contrast the two impeachment processes, 1868 and 1998?

JM: The major difference is that the impeachment of the 1860s concerned really serious matters of substance, and the 1990s' impeachment was a more personal vendetta, with a context of the cultural wars, issues like abortion, and going all the way back to the Vietnam War, as well as lifestyle questions. The Right in American politics sees Clinton as a nefarious symbol of many of these changes they don't like in American society, but for the most part the recent impeachment did not have much to do with substantive legislative and political and executive policy matters in the same way that the Johnson impeachment did.

Another thing is that in the 1990s' impeachment there seems to have been a very sharp divide between Congress and the country. All the polls showed an overwhelming majority against Clinton's impeachment, but Congress went ahead anyhow. Whereas in the 1860s, the nearest thing we had to polls was the 1866 Congressional elections and that represented a very sharp repudiation of Johnson's leadership. Johnson didn't have strong political support in the country. Clinton did, although the nature of that political support is a bit ambiguous. The electorate made a distinction between his personal behavior and his presidential leadership. Johnson's personal behavior in 1868 had nothing to do with the impeachment at all.

DW: What was the attitude of the Abolitionists, the former Abolitionists, toward Johnson's impeachment?

JM: They mostly favored it. They saw Johnson as representing the pro-slavery revival, and so they were strongly in favor of getting rid of him.

DW: Viewing the Civil War in the light of contemporary events, its extraordinary violence certainly stands out. It appears to be a nineteenth century anticipation of total war. Was the violence remarked upon by contemporaries as something remarkable? How was it seen by Europeans?

JM: The British were the ones who paid the most attention to the American Civil War, and a lot of British leaders were appalled by the escalating level of violence and I think that was one of the motives that prompted British political leaders like Palmerston and Gladstone and Russell to try to intervene to end this increasing violence in North America.

Because the level of violence escalated step by step in the American Civil War, it was something that people got used to; got used to is not the right phrase, but found that they were able to tolerate because it escalated step by step. By 1864 there was a powerful sentiment for peace in both North and South, so powerful that both Lincoln and Jefferson Davis had to take it seriously, and to at least allow two peace initiatives, one undertaken by Horace Greeley, and one undertaken by a couple of other Northerners who actually went to see Jefferson Davis in Richmond under flag of truce. This got a lot of publicity, but both sides and both presidents were using this as a way of showing their respective peoples that the only way they could have peace through negotiations was to yield everything that the other side wanted.

Lincoln said: my terms for peace are reunion and the end of slavery. Jefferson Davis said: my only terms of peace are recognition of our independence. There was no common ground there. So these peace initiatives collapsed, but in a way the Confederates won the propaganda war because Northern Democrats said, look, we could have had peace negotiations if the president hadn't insisted on emancipation. Even though

Jefferson Davis said, independence is my condition for peace negotiations, and Lincoln said, reunion and emancipation, the Democrats fastened on emancipation and said: it's only Lincoln's insistence on emancipation that blocks peace. They convinced a lot of people of that.

It was only Northern military victories in the late summer of 1864 that prevented what probably otherwise would have been Lincoln's defeat for re-election. So there was powerful peace sentiment because casualties by 1864 had become so high that people were looking for some way out short of total victory. But in the end Lincoln was reelected on a platform of total victory. Extraordinarily, a substantial part of his victory margin came from Northern soldiers, who voted nearly 80 percent for his election, as opposed to slightly over 50 percent of the civilian population.

DW: Were there incidents that were singled out by the hostile British press as evidence of Northern brutality?

JM: They focused on symbolic issues early in the war. For example, Benjamin Butler's famous "woman order" in New Orleans, in which he said that occupying Union soldiers who were being insulted and harassed by Southern women should treat them as ordinary women of the street plying their avocation. And the British thought this was an outrage. Butler also hanged a man who had run up and torn down the American flag over the courthouse in New Orleans, and the British thought that was barbarous. These were the two issues that aroused a lot of very strong anti-American and pro-Southern sentiment in Britain in 1862. More symbolic than real.

By 1864 when [General William T.] Sherman and [General Philip H.] Sheridan were carrying out kind of scorched earth policies in the South, while I think the British press paid a lot of attention to it, there was no danger by that time that the British were going to intervene. That moment had passed in late 1862, or the latest, the summer of 1863. So while they paid some attention to this, and saw it as an escalation in the war, and as a kind of unjustified brutality against citizens, they didn't do anything about it.

DW: Was it not possible to characterize the Northern effort as an attempt to put down a legitimate rebellion? After all, the Union was voluntary. How would Southern historians have written the history if the Union had lost?

JM: They would have written it precisely that way. That this was an illegitimate and unconstitutional effort to put down an independence movement that was not illegal or unconstitutional. The Southern states had the right to secede from their own government, and that the Union was a voluntary association of states.

Of course, the Northern point of view on that was precisely the opposite. They said, if you have a voluntary association of states you have no Union, if any state can pull out you have no country, you have no nation. As Lincoln said, this is the essence of anarchy. And so that was the political theory under which the North fought. It was the outcome of the war that decided the legitimacy or illegitimacy of these points of view.

If the Confederates had won the war, we would now probably say that, yes, secession is justified and the nation is a voluntary association of states. My own feeling is that there would be no such entity as the United States today if the Confederacy had won the war, because that would have constituted a precedent that would have been invoked by disaffected minorities in the future, let's say, in the Populist movement of the 1890s, when a lot of states in the West and the South were just as hostile to what they described as Wall Street running the country.

DW: There have been waves of interest in the Civil War (*Glory*, *Gettysburg*, the Ken Burns television documentary). But to what extent have the lessons of the Civil War been absorbed? There seems to be a tendency to leave it on the level of the re-creation of battles, the vicarious thrill from reliving war, but the bigger intellectual issues are left on the side.

JM: I think that's true. If you're talking about popular interest in the

Civil War, I'd say at least 80 percent of it focuses on the military events of the war. There are half a dozen popular history magazines about the Civil War, which come out bi-monthly. They mostly focus on the military events of the war, some on politics and the political issues of the war. The more serious of them try to get into larger issues about the war, but I think there is more interest in the latest tactical insights.

DW: This has its value, but it seems somewhat limited.

JM: That's my feeling about it. Academic scholars are more likely to be interested in the broader questions and I see part of my mission as keeping a foot in both camps and trying to show the interconnection between these things and show each side that there is something important to be learned from the other side.

DW: What has been your own experience with the media? Has it been a happy one?

JM: For the most part. I get calls, people write to me all the time to ask my opinion. I just got a call from [right-wing commentator] George Will yesterday, I should have asked him why he wanted to know this, I suspect he's writing something about Kosovo, but he wanted to know where in my book I told the story of the Confederate soldier captured in the war whose captors asked him, why are you fighting? His response was, I'm fighting because you're down here. He wanted to use this obviously in one of his columns. I should have asked him whether it was a column about Kosovo or ethnic nationalism in eastern Europe.

DW: Speaking of the media and Kosovo, and their tendency to demonize enemies of the United States, was Lincoln demonized in the South?

JM: Oh, yes, absolutely, really demonized. As was Jefferson Davis in the North. In cartoons and caricature, they would have horns, whatever contemporary pejorative visual symbols. Lincoln was often portrayed as swarthy and black, as part-Negro in his ancestry. Jefferson Davis was sort of a Mephistopheles. Both sides imposed a kind of satanic image on the leader of the other side. That happens in virtually any war.

DW: Did the European press do any of that?

JM: *Punch*, the British humor magazine with a very satirical twist to it, was very anti-Lincoln through much of the war. Their cartoons of Lincoln portrayed him as a kind of malevolent, backwards buffoon. Toward the end of the war, they began changing their tune.

DW: What would have happened, or did happen, if the North had received an ultimatum from Britain during the Civil War? For example, the *Trent* affair.

JM: There was a lot of chauvinism stirred up by the British. The British did come pretty close to an ultimatum during the *Trent* affair.

DW: For our readers, could you perhaps recall those events?

JM: The *Trent* was a British mail packet that was carrying James Mason and John Slidell as Confederate envoys to London and Paris in November 1861. And a Union navy captain stopped that ship on the high seas and took them off. The British government regarded this as an outrageous violation of their neutrality and demanded that the Lincoln administration release the two.

Meanwhile Northern public opinion had made Captain [Charles] Wilkes, who had done this, a hero. In fact, Congress passed a resolution giving him the thanks of Congress, which is the highest accolade that a military officer at that time could get. And the British press and the Northern press stirred up a lot of war sentiment, and there was a good deal of fear and anticipation that Britain and the United States would go to war over this issue. When the Lincoln administration thought seriously about that, they said ... well, Lincoln's words were, "One war at a time."

Prince Albert, who was on his deathbed from typhoid fever, intervened with the ultimatum, the protest note that the British government was sending to the United States government, and softened it with a phrase suggesting that perhaps Captain Wilkes had acted without instructions. The Lincoln administration seized on that to save face, because in fact, it was true, he had acted on his own. He regarded himself as something of

an expert on international law. Wilkes was an egotist, a little bit of a loose cannon, so there was some truth to that. Anyhow, the Lincoln administration backed off. The British had demanded an apology, as well as the release of Mason and Slidell. The Americans released Mason and Slidell and said Captain Wilkes had acted without instruction, and the British accepted that in lieu of an apology. So passions cooled.

But in the meantime, the British navy had sent a fleet to the North Atlantic, to expedite the transport of something like eight thousand troops to Canada. [Secretary of State William] Seward was very cagey about this. This was in December 1861. The St. Lawrence was frozen. And the only way these troops could get to Canada was to march cross-country. Seward said, how about if we ship them across Maine by rail? This was a way of saying, we really don't want war with you.

The Confederates of course hoped that this would lead to war between the United States and Britain, because they could only gain from such a war. They were hoping that the British would offer diplomatic recognition to the Confederacy, which would have conferred an enormous amount of international prestige on the Confederacy, in the same way as when the United States recognized the Baltic countries back in 1990 against Soviet wishes. If the British had done this, the US would have broken off diplomatic relations with them. The Confederates hoped that the British navy would intervene to break the blockade of Southern ports. When the Union government backed off, and the British accepted their action, it was a great disappointment to the Confederacy.

DW: You mention the chauvinism that was stirred up. Presumably as well there was some kind of democratic content to Northern arguments, i.e., that these were the Old World aristocracies threatening the republic.

JM: Yes, yes, that issue was played to the hilt. Here's the world's one republic again being threatened by these Old World monarchies and class-ridden, exploitative societies. Of course, the Northern press made quite a lot of the resolutions of sympathy that were passed by some working class representatives and the support to the Union cause by John Bright and Richard Cobden who were the great spokesmen for middle class democracy in England. Of course most workingmen couldn't vote at that time, but they could pass resolutions and they did. They also raised questions, why haven't you freed the slaves? There was a lot of pressure from British liberals and British working class and middle class constituencies in favor of emancipation as a Northern war aim. And when Lincoln did finally take that step, it made the task of the pro-Union British faction much easier than it had been up until that time.

DW: Aside from the military factor, were there moral and political elements in Lincoln's final decision to free the slaves?

JM: Definitely. He knew that making this a war for emancipation would strengthen the Union cause. He knew that it would strengthen ... Actually, when Lincoln issued the emancipation proclamation, I think he believed it would be as much a political liability at home as it would be an asset. That while it would satisfy the radical wing of the Republican party, it would alienate a lot of Northern Democrats and border-state Unionists, and that its positive benefits would be neutralized by its negative effects. But he still thought it was the right thing to do, and I think, you know, Lincoln said over and over again before the war and during the war, that slavery is wrong, it's a monstrous injustice, it's a social, moral and political evil for the white man, to the Negro. He said, if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong, and so on. This was something that Lincoln believed was right, and when he issued the final proclamation on January 1, 1863, he said he did so because it was a military necessity, but also as an act of justice. And I think those two things, plus the foreign policy dimension, were all factors that he took into consideration.

He was also under a lot of pressure from his own party to do something along those lines. Even though Lincoln knew that while it would satisfy his own party, it was going to make his problem of keeping the war Democrats and border-state Unionists in line behind the war effort more

difficult, and indeed that was true for another six to nine months. I don't think it was until after Gettysburg and Vicksburg that that question, whether or not public opinion in the North would support emancipation, was really resolved.

In the two major Northern state off-year elections that were held in 1863, both in October, one in Pennsylvania and one in Ohio, for governor, in both cases the Democratic candidates were anti-war, basically copperheads. In Ohio, there was [Clement] Vallandigham, who was actually running his campaign from Canada, because he had been convicted by military court and Lincoln had commuted his imprisonment to banishment, so he had gone to Canada to run his campaign for governor of Ohio. There was a lot of worry that he might win. And a man named [George W.] Woodward was running for governor of Pennsylvania, he was almost as copper as Vallandigham, even though his son was a captain in the 83rd Pennsylvania, which was in the same brigade as the 20th Maine and fought at Little Rock Top [at Gettysburg] right next to the 20th Maine. Anyhow, the Republicans won both of those elections overwhelmingly, and that was a major turning point. It was partly a referendum on emancipation, because the Democrats ran against emancipation almost more than anything else. And when they won both of these elections it was a big deal.

DW: Turning to the contemporary situation, and the state of public opinion in the United States. Whatever one's attitude is toward the NATO bombing, and we are opposed to it, surely the situation must be more complicated than it is presented by the American media. I would imagine you know people here at Princeton who know something about the history of the Balkans. Are such figures called upon? How do you see the treatment of some of these issues?

JM: I think you're right that they do tend to get oversimplified. I don't watch television news very much. I get most of what I know out of the *New York Times*, and the *Times* is generally more balanced and recognizes more of the complexities of the situation probably more than some of the other popular media. I think there's so much confusion and so much lack of knowledge in general about the Balkans and so much uncertainty about what they ought to be doing there.... If you look at polls, there's a pretty substantial support for NATO's policies, and even for majority support for sending in ground troops. But I think that's kind of tendency that always exists to rally behind the troops rather than a considered opinion on the substantive issues at stake. I think people are really confused about this, I'm confused myself.

DW: You mentioned the use of atrocities, or the other side's atrocities, for propaganda purposes.

JM: That's what both sides are doing in this conflict. As it happens in any war, it certainly happened in the Civil War.

DW: As you know, we draw fairly radical conclusions from your books, with or without your blessing, so to speak. It seems sometimes that there is a kind of self-censorship in this country, because of official anticommunism. Do you ever feel that there is a terrible caution in academic circles?

JM: I don't see much of that around here. I think in public universities and in some other parts of the country that's probably still true. I don't see it to be necessarily true here in New Jersey, either at Princeton or at Rutgers. I think people are pretty willing to say what they believe on a variety of issues without too much fear of self-censorship. The old Cold War issues seem pretty well to have disappeared from discourse. They haven't really been replaced by any new certainties. Many different opinions continue to blossom, not only on the Balkans war, but on Iraq and other foreign policy, domestic issues.

DW: What opinions do you hear about the war in the Balkans?

JM: I haven't really talked very much with my colleagues about that. So I'm not quite sure. I don't know if there's any particular pattern in opinions.

DW: I think there is a great deal of confusion. I don't sense any war fever in the general population.

JM: No. But nobody is organizing anti-war protest meetings around here. Of course it's only begun. Who knows what will happen if this goes on for months and escalates.

DW: Nothing progressive is going to come out of dropping US bombs on Yugoslavia.

JM: I wouldn't think so.

DW: Do you think there are aspects of American history, or world history, that if they were more deeply understood, could be helpful to people in relation to contemporary events?

JM: I'm a firm believer in the idea that you need to know history in order to understand the contemporary world, just as a general matter of principle. Certainly you need to know the history of the Balkans in order to understand what goes on there, whether you need to go back to 1389, or only to 1990, to 1945, or 1918, or 1914. Knowledge of the history is absolutely essential to understanding what goes on.

Explanatory notes

Charles Sumner (1811-74), senator from Massachusetts. An aggressive abolitionist, he was physically assaulted by Rep. Preston S. Brooks after making a strong anti-slavery speech on May 19-20, 1856. He was later active in the impeachment of Andrew Johnson.

Free-state voters boycotted a June 1857 vote, which they considered to be a fraud, for election of delegates to a constitutional convention in Kansas. Only 2,000 of 9,250 registered voters participated and pro-slavery delegates won all the seats. The convention, held in Lecompton, Kansas, came up with a document declaring that "the right of property is before and higher than any constitutional sanction, and the right of the owner of a slave to such slave and its increase is the same and as inviolable as the right of the owner of any property whatever." A furious debate ensued in Congress. The constitution was too much for Northern Democrats, led by Douglas, to stomach and they opposed it. The Lecompton constitution went down to defeat in April 1858. This led to a split in the Democratic ranks, making possible Lincoln's election in 1860.

The Mexican War of 1846-48 was an armed conflict between the US and Mexico. The immediate cause of the war was the US annexation of Texas in December 1845. President James Polk (1845-49) attempted to negotiate the purchase of California in 1845. When this attempt failed, the US prepared for war. Fighting began in March 1846 and lasted until September 1847, when American troops occupied Mexico City. By the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (February 2, 1848), Mexico ceded forty percent of its territory to the US and received an indemnity of \$15 million.

The Wilmot Proviso was an amendment put to a bill before the House of Representatives during the Mexican War in 1846. The proviso, sponsored by Rep. David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, would have prohibited slavery in any territory acquired by the Mexican War. The amendment failed in the Senate and never became law, but it heightened the political tensions between pro- and anti-slavery forces.

The Compromise of 1850 was an attempt to resolve issues raised by the territorial gains of the Mexican War. Under its provisions California was admitted to the Union as a free state; the issue was to be decided by popular sovereignty in New Mexico and Utah; the slave trade was prohibited in the District of Columbia; Texas boundary claims were settled; and a more stringent fugitive slave law was passed. As a Northern opponent of the Compromise observed, "the question of slavery in the territories has been avoided. It has not been settled."

In 1850 Congress strengthened the existing fugitive slave law. "All good citizens" were required to obey it on pain of heavy penalty; jury trial and the right to testify were prohibited to fugitives. The Abolitionists and their supporters deliberately defied these provisions.

The issue of whether Kansas was to be a slave or free state took center stage in American political life in the mid-1850s. The Kansas-Nebraska

Act of 1854 represented a major concession to pro-slavery forces. The bill, spearheaded by Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois, divided the Nebraska territory in two, creating Nebraska and Kansas, left “all questions pertaining to slavery in the Territories ... to the people residing therein,” and repealed the ban on slavery north of 36(30' in the Louisiana Purchase territory, provided for by the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The passage of the bill set off a bitter political and physical struggle in Kansas.

John Brown (1800-59), militant Abolitionist and leader of an armed attempt to liberate Southern slaves in 1859. He was hanged December 2, 1859, and became a martyr of the anti-slavery cause.

Horace Greeley (1811-72), American newspaper editor. He founded the *New York Tribune* in 1841. An opponent of slavery, he was one of the first members of the new Republican Party. He later ran for president against Grant in 1872, but was soundly defeated.

Karl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), Prussian general and writer on military strategy.

Thaddeus Stevens(1792-1868), US representative from Pennsylvania and a fervent opponent of slavery. He was a leader of the radical Republicans' Reconstruction program and viewed the Southern states as “conquered provinces.” He was a leader in the impeachment of Andrew Johnson.

Andrew Johnson(1808-75), 17th president of the US (1865-69). A self-educated tailor, he rose in Tennessee politics, becoming a congressman, governor and US senator. He was Lincoln's running mate in the 1864 election and became president upon Lincoln's assassination. When Johnson tried to force Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton from office, radical Republicans sought to remove him. On February 24, 1868, the House passed a resolution of impeachment against Johnson. The most important of the charges was that he had violated the Tenure of Office Act in attempting to oust Stanton. The Senate failed to convict Johnson by one vote in March 1868.

Ulysses S. Grant(1822-85), commander in chief of the Union army in the Civil War and later 18th president of the US (1869-77).

Henry John Temple Palmerston, 3rd Viscount (1784-1865), British statesman, served as foreign secretary and twice as prime minister.

William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98), British statesman and dominant personality of the Liberal Party from 1868 to 1894. He was prime minister four times.

John Russell, 1st Earl (1792-1878), British statesman and twice prime minister. He was foreign secretary (1859-65) under Palmerston during the American Civil War.

Jefferson Davis (1808-89), US senator, secretary of war and president of the Confederacy (1861-65). Captured in 1865 by Union forces, he was imprisoned for two years, but was released without prosecution.

William Tecumseh Sherman (1820-91), Union general in the Civil War. In November 1864 his forces burned Atlanta, Georgia, and Sherman set off, with 60,000 men, on his famous march to the sea, devastating the country.

Philip H. Sheridan (1831-88), Union general and outstanding cavalry officer. In 1864, while leading the Army of the Shenandoah, he defeated the Confederates and laid waste the countryside.

“*Copperhead*”—a derogatory term for Southern sympathizers in the North. Led by Clement Vallandigham, they were especially strong in Illinois, Indiana and Ohio.



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