

Historian James M. McPherson and the cause of intellectual integrity

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Starting tomorrow we will be presenting on the WSWWS a lengthy interview with James M. McPherson, probably the leading contemporary historian of the American Civil War era. We hope that readers will find that the subjects of the discussion—the political turmoil of the period leading up to the Civil War, the violence of the war, Lincoln's legacy, the impeachment of Andrew Johnson—are of interest and that they shed some light on contemporary events.

Professor McPherson is a remarkable and admirable figure. Born in 1936, he received a PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1963 and has taught at Princeton University for more than 35 years. The author of a number of major works on the Civil War, as well as countless articles, reviews and essays, he has paid particular attention to the role of slaves in their own liberation and the activities of the Abolitionists. His *Battle Cry of Freedom* won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1989.

At a time when the appellation “historian” is loosely applied to ideologues such as Richard Pipes and Daniel Goldhagen, and much of “left” historiography consists of largely subjective and arbitrary exercises in “class, race and gender” analysis, McPherson continues to take the study of history and its responsibilities seriously. He treats facts with respect, as they deserve, and while he clearly has a conceptual framework within which he approaches his raw material, he is not blind to nuance and ambiguity. If there is a problem in Civil War history that he has not fully worked out to his satisfaction, he has the modesty to say so.

Nearly 40 years ago Professor McPherson arrived at a conception of the American Civil War, based on the work of the best of his predecessors and his own researches, as a revolutionary struggle for equality and democracy and he has not, I think, ever deviated from that view. This is noteworthy in light of the fact that the last several decades have not been favorable for progressive social thought. The most noxious notions have gained popularity, which, in the final analysis, justify the adaptation of their advocates to the status quo.

In the formation of an outlook various factors come into play, some of which must remain hidden to the observer. What is evident is that McPherson arrived at certain conclusions about US history at a significant moment in postwar American life, the eruption of the Civil Rights movement. As someone deeply moved by the issues it raised, he set out to find in historical fact the basis for a deeper grasp of contemporary events. That study convinced him that the key to the problems of the 1960s lay at least in part in an understanding of the great conflict of the 1860s, and he set his intellectual compass in that direction. His earliest work, *The Struggle for Equality*, examined the activities of the Abolitionist movement following the Emancipation Proclamation.

How has he retained his principles in the course of the intervening years, when so many have not? This is also a complex matter. I think that in any serious figure, historian, artist or political leader, principle is not simply a matter of certain intellectual formulations that rest on top, so to speak, of one's personality. It is more a matter of the coming together of various powerful social and cultural currents at a critical moment in one's life, so

that the most positive external influences and what is best in oneself are heated in a crucible, fuse and become one. One is able to retain principles, across time and in the face of all sorts of opposition and setbacks, because they are imbedded in some part of consciousness that is not susceptible to shifts in popular mood. One knows with one's *entire being* certain things to be true, they are not up for debate, much less sale.

Professor McPherson's conception of the Civil War as a titanic social upheaval remains, as I say, as firm as ever. One need only look at his most recent and excellent collection of essays, *Drawn With the Sword* (1996), for proof. The volume is introduced by a passage from Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, on March 4, 1865, from which it derives its title: “Fondly do we hope—and fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.’”

Drawn With a Sword contains a number of remarkable essays. One is suggestively entitled “The War that Never Goes Away.” After considering a number of the factors that help explain the war's “enduring fascination,” McPherson points to what he holds to be “the most important reason”: “Great issues were at stake, issues about which Americans were willing to fight and die; issues whose resolution profoundly transformed and redefined the United States but at the same time are still alive and contested today.” It is such eloquent simplicity and bluntness that help make Professor McPherson so unusual, and perhaps somewhat unfashionable, in the world of contemporary scholarship.

In “From Limited to Total War: 1861-1865,” one of the volume's most radical inclusions, McPherson returns to a recurring theme in his work, the ferocity of the Civil War and the depth of the political and social transformation it wrought. In regard to the first point, the author writes: “Altogether nearly 4 percent of the Southern people, black and white, civilians and soldiers, died as a consequence of the war. This percentage exceeded the human cost of any country in World War I and was outstripped only by the region between the Rhine and the Volga in World War II. The amount of property and resources destroyed in the Confederate States is almost incalculable. It has been estimated at two-thirds of all assessed wealth, including the market value of slaves.”

“The Civil War mobilized human resources on a scale unmatched by any other event in American history except, perhaps, World War II. For actual combat duty the Civil War mustered a considerably larger proportion of American manpower than did World War II.”

As to the liberating character of the war, McPherson seems more passionate than ever. In this same piece, after explaining the background to Lincoln's announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, he continues: “With this action Lincoln embraced the idea of the Civil War as a revolutionary conflict. Things had changed a

great deal since he had promised to avoid 'any devastation, or destruction of, or interference with, property.' The Emancipation Proclamation was just what the *Springfield Republican* pronounced it: 'the greatest social and political revolution of the age.' No less an authority on revolutions than Karl Marx exulted: 'Never has such a gigantic transformation taken place so rapidly.'"

How can one fail to be moved by the book's account, which obviously so moves its author, of the exploits of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, one of the first black regiments organized in the Civil War and the subject of the film *Glory*? The heroic attack by the Fifty-fourth on Fort Wagner in July 1863 set straight any Union supporters who had doubted the willingness of blacks to fight. Moreover, the thought of armed black ex-slaves and free men, "the South's ultimate revolutionary nightmare," put fear in Confederate hearts.

McPherson pays tribute to Robert Gould Shaw (played by Matthew Broderick in *Glory*), the white commanding officer of the regiment, explaining that he embodied the finest traditions of New England society. Shaw, along with many of his men, died in the attack on Fort Wagner. After the battle Confederate soldiers stripped his body and dumped it in a mass grave. When a Union commander sent a message requesting its return, as was customarily done with high-ranking officers at the time, a Confederate officer replied: "We have buried him with his niggers." The remark provoked outrage in the North. When Union troops occupied the fort some weeks later and an officer offered to search for Shaw's body, "Shaw's father wrote an eloquent letter to stop the effort: 'We hold that a soldier's most appropriate burial-place is on the field where he has fallen.'"

McPherson is attracted to the most democratic strain within the Union camp. His principled outlook obliges him to criticize the various efforts by contemporary "radical" historians to diminish or reject the role played by anti-slavery forces in the North. In an essay entitled, "Who Freed the Slaves?," he takes up the sophistic arguments of historians, many of them black, who argue that the end of slavery was simply an act of self-liberation. While acknowledging the active role played by slaves in achieving their own freedom (a subject about which, as we noted, he has written extensively), McPherson rejects the argument that Lincoln was more of a hindrance than a help to the cause and demonstrates that emancipation would not have been possible without Union military victory and the enormous sacrifices made by white Northern soldiers.

Professor McPherson forthrightly rejects the method that looks at history through the prism of race. Even while commenting very favorably on Joseph T. Glatthaar's *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (1990), McPherson scolds the author for succumbing "to the fashionable practice of condemning all whites as racists." Glatthaar had written that "Prior to the war virtually all of them [white officers in black regiments] held powerful racial prejudices." McPherson responds: "Powerful racial prejudices? That was not true of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, or Norwood P. Hallowell, or George T. Garrison, or many other abolitionists and sons of abolitionists who became officers in black regiments."

McPherson continues: "Indeed, the contrary was true; they had spent much of their lives fighting the race prejudice endemic in American society, sometimes at the risk of their careers and even their lives.... Perhaps by modern absolutist standards of racial egalitarianism (which few could meet today), these men harbored some mildly racist or paternalistic feelings. But to call these 'powerful racial prejudices' is to indulge in what William Manchester has called 'generational chauvinism—judging past eras by the standard of the present.'"

Anyone not familiar with McPherson's work will, I trust, have begun to grasp the exceptional character of his efforts. Much more could be said about *Drawn With the Sword* and his other works, but the reader should discover their insights for himself.

Professor McPherson is not, in the commonly understood sense of the word, a political man. Those who are looking for left-wing pronouncements will be disappointed, legitimately or otherwise. His banner, if one can avoid sounding too pompous saying it, is intellectual integrity. He seems quite determined to remove himself from the immediacy of day-to-day political life, immersing himself in the study of complex, riveting events, but not living in the past or mesmerized by it. He is neither a preserver of trite "Americana" nor a "Civil War buff." When one speaks with him about the events of the Civil War era they are astonishingly contemporary and alive.

One might wish he were more forthcoming about certain political issues, but one must respect his reticence. One is evaluating him as an historian. Society has a strong need for such people, particularly those who strive to be both authoritative and accessible to a wide audience, as McPherson does, those who "aspire to a general democratic public," in the words of Allan Nevins, a phrase he cites approvingly.

The serious historian plays an objectively significant role in social life, as the embodiment of historical memory. One need only consider the harmful impact that the general decline in historical knowledge has had on contemporary American society. Broad layers of the US population are prevented at this point from responding to contemporary events such as the war in the Balkans not *primarily* because they have an extremely limited grasp of the history of that region, although that is no doubt the case. An even greater difficulty is that they do not understand their own history. If masses of people appreciated the revolutionary content of the Civil War and the issues of principle it raised, they would have at least a frame of reference for understanding events in other parts of the world.

Professor McPherson draws meaning and lessons from the most profound, most humane moment in American history. All that the first American Revolution represented in history found a concentrated expression in the Civil War. We are presenting this interview to our readers as part of the effort to effect an intellectual re-awakening that is a precondition for substantial social change.

McPherson's writings, as an intellectual labor, have their own independent significance. They are not simply about the middle decades of the nineteenth century, they are also about the last decades of the twentieth. When, in the future, historians consider the ideological landscape of our time, in all its general dreariness and moral and political renegacy, it seems certain that some consideration will be given to James McPherson, as a contradictory figure of the period itself. And it will be noted—with approval and appreciation, one trusts—that he contributed to an intellectual ferment with far-reaching consequences.

An interview with historian James M. McPherson

The Civil War, impeachment then and now, and Lincoln's legacy--Part 1
[19 May 1999]

Part 2
[20 May 1999]

Part 3
[21 May 1999]

"There is a big idea which is at stake"--Corporal in the 105th Ohio, 1864
Review of *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*,
by James M. McPherson, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997
[3 November 1997]

An exchange with a Civil War historian
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