An exchange with a Civil War historian

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19 June 1995

Originally published in the International Workers Bulletin*, June 19, 1995*

James M. McPherson of Princeton University is perhaps the foremost historian of the Civil War period currently writing and teaching in the United States. For more than 30 years, in many books, articles and essays, he has championed the view that the Civil War was a revolutionary struggle of epic dimensions.

On the basis of an extensive analysis of historical fact, Professor McPherson has refuted attempts to diminish the significance of the great conflict, dismiss its accomplishments and denigrate its leading figures.

Born in 1936 in North Dakota and raised in Minnesota, he graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota in 1958 and received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in 1963. Professor McPherson's dissertation, published in 1964 as *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, was a groundbreaking study of the Abolitionist movement during the Civil War. He has paid particular attention, in works such as *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union* (1965) and *Marching Toward Freedom: The Negro in the Civil War* (1967), to the role of slaves in their own liberation. He is also the author of two comprehensive studies of the Civil War, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction (1982)* and *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988), as well as a collection of essays, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (1991).

The December 5, 1994 issue of The International Workers Bulletin carried a favorable review by this writer of his latest work, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865*. I sent the piece to Professor McPherson and he responded in December with a brief letter. Subsequently I requested an interview and he was kind enough to consent.

I spoke to Professor McPherson in late March in his book-lined office in Dickinson Hall on the Princeton campus, where he has taught for three decades. I began by asking if there had been something in his background which predisposed him to be interested in the Civil War—"Nothing," he firmly replied—or whether the motive force had been the political atmosphere of the late 1950s, the civil rights movement, in particular.

"It was the civil rights movement," Professor McPherson confirmed. "I was in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins University at the time of the civil rights movement. I grew up in a small town in Minnesota. The problems of urban society and of the South were totally in another world, as far as I was concerned. But this was in the late '50s, at the time of the Little Rock school desegregation crisis and the Montgomery bus boycott. I was just becoming conscious of what was going on in the world at this time, so I thought, 'This is a strange place, this South.' So I decided that maybe I'd like to try to find out more about it, study Southern history, so I really went to Hopkins because [historian] C. Vann Woodward was there. And when I got there, the late '50s and early '60s, I was suddenly struck by the parallels between the times in which I was living and what had happened exactly, I mean exactly in some cases, 100 years earlier."

In response to a question about other historians or historical writers, aside from Woodward, who had influenced him, Professor McPherson mentioned Eric McKitrick's *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* and a biography of Edwin M. Stanton co-authored by Harold Hyman. He pointed out that these books appeared at a time "when the whole reinterpretation of Reconstruction was just getting started, and that was where my first interest lay, in the sort of challenges against the [historian William A.] Dunning interpretation of Reconstruction and the fashioning of a new interpretation that was much more sympathetic to the radical Republicans and their goals. And that, coinciding with the civil rights movement, was what set me on the Abolitionists."

A reference by Professor McPherson to his first work, *The Struggle for Equality*, prompted me to tell him that I thought it brought out a number of crucial issues. One of these was the rapid transformation in the political fortunes of the Abolitionists with the outbreak of the Civil War. After decades of "crying in the wilderness," facing official and at times popular hostility, branded a group of fanatics, the antislavery forces almost overnight gained a wide following and access to a mass audience.

I also noted the fact, related in *The Struggle for Equality*, that during the war Abolitionist leader Wendell Phillips delivered lectures on Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian revolution. These were published in a special edition of Horace Greeley's New York Tribune in March 1863 and distributed to Union troops. I remarked that this was clearly an extraordinary moment, one of the high points of the democratic struggle in the US.

"Obviously you have emphasized over the course of three decades this revolutionary-democratic character of the Civil War, treated in the context of a genuinely liberating movement of masses of people," I said. "I wonder if your convictions have shifted or if they've deepened in any way over the three decades."

Professor McPherson thought a moment before answering, "No, I don't think that's changed. What has changed is that I've gained a lot more sympathy for Lincoln. At the time I was doing my dissertation I tended to take the Wendell Phillips view of Lincoln. Why didn't he move more quickly? Why was he so conservative on some of these issues? Why didn't he seize this revolutionary moment? The more I've learned about it, the more I realize that Lincoln was under extraordinary pressure from all sides. In his position he could not have acted like Wendell Phillips. He would have lost the whole war.

"When he said in the first year of the war that he needed Kentucky, that he needed to retain the support of the War Democrats and that to move in a precipitous way would alienate these groups, lose the war and lose everything, I think he was probably right. I've gained more appreciation for the skill with which Lincoln was able to hold together this very fragile coalition. At the same time that he actually moved it gradually in the direction that the radicals really wanted."

I asked, "Do you think that he himself changed?"

"I think he changed too, yes," Professor McPherson responded. "Not in his fundamental convictions. He'd said for years that slavery was morally wrong, that it was a violation of the principles on which the country was founded, the Declaration of Independence. But I think he moved more in the direction of seeing that the freed slaves could be incorporated into American society and wanting to do so on as equitable a basis as possible, from an earlier position which held that there would be no chance for

peaceful incorporation of 4 million freed slaves into American society. I think in that respect he changed. He changed in his willingness to use, in the latter part of the war, really radical instrumentalities to achieve this."

I asked Professor McPherson what were the forces at work, in his opinion, which produced the shift in the general sentiment of the country between 1861 and 1864.

"I think it was the war itself," he replied. "And I think it was a matter of 'the enemy of my enemy becomes my friend.' The great crisis facing the country was the rebellion and anybody in the North who wanted to preserve the Union now found the principal enemy to be those Southern slave owners who had broken up the country. The institution which sustained them and the institution they went to war to defend was slavery. And more and more northerners became convinced of that. As a consequence, a lot of them went the whole way over, from being conservative, pro-Southern, proslavery Democrats to becoming radical Republicans. Benjamin Butler is a good example, and Edwin M. Stanton is another one.

"Then once the decision was made to use black soldiers to put down the rebellion, the conviction began to grow that blacks who fought for the Union were far more deserving of rights and political power than Southern whites who fought to destroy the country. And I think that is the fundamental reason for the transformation of attitudes of a lot of Northerners. Southern slaves were now friends of the Union, they were fighting, risking their lives to preserve this Union against their masters who were killing northern soldiers and were traitors trying to destroy the great republican experiment of 1776. That sort of attitude persisted through, I'd say, about 1868 or 1870."

In response to a question about the relevance of the Civil War to the present period, Professor McPherson explained that he felt the connection lay primarily in the unresolved problems of race relations and the role of the national government in promoting social change and justice. "The Civil War really resolved the fundamental issue about which it was fought, which was the survival of the United States as one nation. But then these other issues have not been fully resolved and so I think that's where the relationship lies."

I asked him at one point if he had given many lectures around the country. "Oh, yes," he answered. "Do you find interest?" I asked. "It's amazing what popular interest there is in the Civil War. It's a phenomenon that everybody in my field remarks on all the time. Look at the Ken Burns film [the PBS series on the Civil War]; at least 40 million are said to have watched that."

"What did you think about the Burns series?" I inquired.

"I had mixed feelings about it," he replied. "For what it did and what it tried to do, I thought it was enormously successful. It certainly tapped into a vein of interest. It struck home in a way that almost nothing that I've ever seen on television has ever done."

I raised the issue of "political correctness" and the outlook of those who maintain that only blacks can write about blacks, women about women, etc. Such people, I pointed out, deny the possibility of establishing any objective historical truth.

Professor McPherson made his position clear: "I don't believe that only blacks can write about blacks and so on. On the other hand, I think it's probably true that in a literal sense it's impossible to establish objective, historical truth. My feeling about this is 'let a thousand flowers bloom'—is that the Chinese saying? That's the nature of the writing of history, that it's constantly in flux and in contestation. That's what makes it interesting. The ideal of an objective truth about history is a will of the wisp, I don't think there is any such thing. History is basically what we think about what happened in the past, what we think it means. And everybody is going to have a somewhat different perspective on that, or different schools of interpretation are going to have different perspectives on that."

As Professor McPherson is no doubt aware, no Marxist would agree with the relativism of such a statement. Honest differences of opinion over the significance of events and individual figures are legitimate and necessary. But that really doesn't speak to the central issues: is history an objective, knowable process and is the goal of historians to uncover its logic and the laws which govern it? Marxists would answer yes to both questions, and would add that advances in historiography are generally made through the exposure of previously-held views whose false or more limited character is often shown to be rooted in vested social interests.

Professor McPherson's own work is a case in point. In order to establish an accurate picture of the Civil War era, he has been obliged to polemicize against various schools of historians. In *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, for example, he argues persuasively on the basis of economic statistics that the conception of Louis Gerteis and others that the Civil War and Reconstruction produced "no fundamental changes" in the forms of economic and social organization in the South is simply wrong. He also counters, in the same work, the arguments of historians such as James G. Randall and T. Harry Williams, who have asserted that Lincoln was essentially a political conservative and an enemy of social revolution.

A dialectical approach to the question of the relation of absolute to relative truth is essential here. From the point of view of Marxism, the ability of human thought to cognize reality is absolute. The existence of objective truth is unconditional and the fact that human thought, considered as an historical process, grasps objective reality—including history—ever more richly and concretely is also unconditional. Since the absolute coincidence of thought to reality is only conceivable as an infinite process, however, the contours of the picture that human beings have of reality (and their own past) at any one moment are historically limited. So objective truth exists at a given instant in the form of relative or partial truths, which nonetheless contain the absolute within them. No individual has a God's-eye view of world history, but that doesn't prevent the serious historian, such as Professor McPherson himself, from contributing "new grains to the sum of absolute truth," in Lenin's phrase.

Following up on this, I asked Professor McPherson whether he considered there to be any determinism in history, or such a thing as historical necessity.

He said, "I've often been asked also whether I consider the Civil War to have been unavoidable, irrepressible. Because that's an old debate: was it an irrepressible conflict or a repressible conflict? My usual answer to that question is that some kind of a showdown between a Northern free-labor capitalist economy and the ideology and social structure that it generated, and a Southern plantation slave-labor economy and its ideology and its social structure ... these two societies were on a collision course. In that sense, there is a degree of determinism. But I usually answer the question by saying that the Civil War that happened, that is, the war from 1861 to 1865 that killed at least 620,000 men, that wasn't inevitable, that came about because of cause-effect, contingent developments that could have happened in other ways. Just to take an obvious example. Either Jefferson Davis could have decided to leave those 80-odd Union soldiers at Fort Sumter alone, just wait them out, let the supplies go in. Or Lincoln could have said, all right, in the interests of peace we'll pull out, give you Fort Sumter. That could have happened. But it was policy decisions in a certain political context made by these individuals that brought on the war in 1861 that evolved in the way that it did. So I guess my answer is that there are certain things that seem to be inevitable and determined by long-term historical forces, like the conflict between free labor and slave labor in the mid-nineteenth century in the United States, but that the specific American Civil War that we know happened, didn't have to happen that way."

Referring back to one of his comments about Lincoln, I remarked, "I wonder if you've given any thought to what it is that leads or allows someone to make very, very difficult and harsh decisions, revolutionary decisions."

"One example, I suppose," answered Professor McPherson, "would be General Sherman, who had lived in the South, liked Southerners and did not at all sympathize with Northern racial views, yet became the most hated and feared destroyer of the South and its whole civilization. And I think he did so because he saw that as necessary to win the war. And I think Lincoln made some of his decisions—issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, for example, or turning Sherman loose — because he saw that as necessary to win the war.

"And I think that is the case with any of the Civil War generals, like Lee at Gettysburg who decided to attack, attack, attack, even though he knew that it was going to result in thousands of deaths. He made that decision because he thought it necessary in order to win that battle. And in turn perhaps to win the war, to accomplish his objectives. It's not quite so crude as 'the end justifies the means,' but I think that all of these extremely difficult decisions, which in the context of a war do mean life and death for tens of thousands of people or destruction of property and the ruin of lives, were made on the grounds of absolute necessity in a crisis situation, not only a war but in some respects a revolutionary situation. The same kinds of things I suppose could be applied to any of the great revolutions in history, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and so on. 'You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs,' right? That's a standard sort of Marxist justification."

I agreed, although I pointed out that the aphorism became a justification for something quite different in the hands of the Stalinists in the 1930s.

He continued, "By the way, I think that one of the reasons why McClellan was ineffective in the end as a general was that he was not able to make these decisions. Grant called it moral courage. The decision to order men to their deaths—moral courage may sound like a very callous way of describing that, but that's what it is."

I added, "Also, of course, you may make decisions which are wrong."

"Exactly. And the risk of making a decision that's wrong is so enormous that sometimes it just crushes people so that they can't make any decision at all because they're afraid of making the wrong decision. And that's exactly what McClellan's problem was."

"And he seemed to want to be liked."

"Yes, he did. And some people are going to dislike you if you make a decision, even if it turns out to be the right one."

What did he think it was that separated out individuals who could make those sorts of decisions, I asked.

Professor McPherson responded, "I don't know. I guess the willingness to accept the consequences of your decision." I suggested, "And presumably the depth of your commitment." He nodded, "That's right. That's especially true of Lincoln. His commitment to preserving the United States was so strong and so deep that he was willing to do whatever it took to succeed. Would you like to be in his shoes? Just think about that for a moment. Not just Lincoln. There are hundreds of examples in history."

I then raised with Professor McPherson the role of the historian and historical truth in society. I explained that I was raising the question in a particular context, that our party had recently sponsored the tour by the Russian Marxist historian Vadim Rogovin and that we found that there was considerable interest among students—an indication of a change in the political situation—in historical questions, specifically the history of the Soviet Union. I suggested that the impact of work such as Rogovin's objectively altered the political climate in which one operated. I wondered if he had any thoughts about what role the historian played in social life.

He replied that he felt that historians were "the custodians of a people's sense of identity." He compared the society that didn't have a clear sense of its own history to an individual who wakes up one morning with amnesia. Professor McPherson went on, "There are all kinds of myths that a people has about itself, some positive, some negative, some healthy and some not healthy. I think that one job of the historian is to try to cut through some of those myths and get closer to some kind of reality. So that people can face their current situation realistically, rather than mythically. I guess that's my sense of what a historian ought to do."

James McPherson is currently working on a major work, from which his slim volume, *What They Fought For*, was "carved," which will explore the motives of Union and Confederate soldiers for enlisting and fighting in the Civil War. He expects to focus, in his own words, "on a range of attitudes and motives among these mostly volunteer soldiers, including peer pressure; group cohesion; male bonding; ideals of manhood and masculinity; concepts of duty, honor and courage; functions of leadership, discipline and coercion; and the role of religion, as well as of the darker passions of hatred and vengeance."