

Interview with historian James McPherson: 150 years since the Emancipation Proclamation

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World Socialist Web Site writer Tom Mackaman recently spoke with historian James McPherson on the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War. McPherson is professor emeritus of history at Princeton University and the author of a number of books on the Civil War, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom*.

Tom Mackaman: Can you speak to the military and political background to the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in the context of the Civil War in 1862?

James McPherson: In the beginning of 1862 the war was going well for the Union. There was great success in the Mississippi Valley campaign and in the naval campaign. In July, [Commander of the Union Army of the Potomac] McClellan was within miles of Richmond.

Already at this time there had been some movement toward abolition. There had been the military confiscation bills passed by Congress in 1861 and 1862, and there had been the abolition of slavery in Washington, D.C.

Then things took a turn for the worse. In July, Lee drives McClellan away from Richmond and in August prepares to invade the North. In the context of this new and harsher war, attitudes in the North were changing. One of the lines we find repeatedly in letters from Union soldiers was “it’s time to take the kid gloves off.”

This thinking began to find its way into Lincoln’s own rhetoric. Lincoln first tried to appeal to the border states to support a plan of gradual emancipation, telling them that they can’t be blind to the signs of the times. But at a meeting with border state congressmen on July 12, the majority again turned Lincoln down. The very next day Lincoln tells Secretary of State William Seward and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles that he plans to issue a proclamation of emancipation.

Lincoln had a very expansive idea of executive war powers, based on the idea that he could seize enemy property. There had been some history of this in relationship to slavery already in the war. General Benjamin Butler, in Union-controlled New Orleans, declared slaves who ran behind his lines “contraband of war” and subject to confiscation because they served the Confederacy.

Nine days later Lincoln told his full Cabinet that he intended to issue an emancipation proclamation. Only Postmaster-General Montgomery Blair opposed the measure. Blair feared that Democrats would use the unpopularity of such a measure to gain control of Congress in the 1862 elections, which is precisely what they attempted to do.

Seward supported it, but advised Lincoln to wait for some success on the battlefield so it wouldn’t appear to be a desperation measure—in his words, “our last shriek on the retreat.” This discussion came soon after the Seven Days Battles, in which Confederate General Robert E. Lee maneuvered McClellan and the Army of the Potomac away from Richmond.

It turned out to be a long and excruciating wait. In September, Lee invaded Maryland in the North and at the same time [Confederate Generals] Braxton Bragg and Kirby Smith invaded Kentucky.

TM: And then came the Battle of Antietam.

JM: Yes. On September 17, 1862, the Union forces achieved the strategic victory in Maryland. Lincoln was disappointed that McClellan did not destroy Lee’s army when he had the chance to do so, but on September 22 he nonetheless issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

TM: How was the Proclamation received in the North?

JM: Among the abolitionists, who had been pressing for emancipation from the beginning of the war, it was welcomed, cheered. What we would call the right wing in American politics, the Democrats and the conservative unionists, were appalled by the Proclamation. The Democratic Party press promoted racist fears over the “amalgamation of races” as a result of the proclamation. Later in 1864 they coined the term “miscegenation.” But I would say that the weight of the Northern population, over 50 percent, supported the Proclamation, either out of opposition to slavery or as a necessary war measure.

TM: Can you explain the relationship between the conduct of the war by the North’s leading generals—McClellan on one hand and then Grant and Sherman and Sheridan on the other hand—and the question of emancipation?

JM: McClellan was a Democrat and was linked to Democrats who were allies of the South before the Civil War. He disdained abolitionists. He was loyal to the Union, but he was certainly soft on slavery and was also soft on the South in the sense that he did not wish to challenge the southern social order. In 1864, he ran against Lincoln as the Democratic nominee for the presidency.

Grant was not an abolitionist, but already in 1861 he had recognized the military necessity of the confiscation of slaves. Sherman did not speak out against slavery, but his brother, who as a senator from Ohio, was writing to him that it was now time “to take the kid gloves off.” Sheridan came to be an opponent of slavery and helped to enforce Reconstruction in the South after the war.

TM: How widespread was the conception that the Union was

fighting an international cause—something that Lincoln appears to refer to in the Gettysburg address when he says the fight is so that “government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the Earth”—in the wake of the defeats of the revolutions in Europe after 1848?

JM: That is what Lincoln was referring to. In letters, many soldiers in the Union Army wrote to the effect that the US was the last best hope for democracy on earth. The Chartists in England had also failed to realize universal suffrage. Many of the immigrants who came from Europe came with quite a consciousness of 1848. They come to the US and they find this one scourge on the Republic—slavery—and they determine that slavery must go. The most famous is Carl Schurz, a radical republican in Germany and then America.

TM: The fate of the Emancipation Proclamation was not secured until Union victory, and it hung in the balance in the election of 1864.

JM: The late summer of 1864 is another turning point in the war. The terrible death toll in Grant’s Overland Campaign had brought on a war weariness in the North. The Democrats adopted a platform that called for a cease-fire. This would have been, of course, tantamount to a Confederate victory and would have repudiated the Emancipation Proclamation.

Lincoln was also worried about the Supreme Court. If the Emancipation Proclamation came before the court, with his claims of wartime powers no longer operative, would they have upheld it? So Lincoln pledged himself to a Constitutional amendment to abolish slavery. This becomes the 13th Amendment in 1865.

TM: How do you respond to those who say that, because of the long ordeal of Jim Crow segregation in the South—which became fully implemented in the 1890s—the Civil War accomplished little or nothing?

JM: Well, I look at it as a situation of two steps forward and one step backward. You have the abolition of slavery, and as bad as sharecropping was, it was not slavery. You could not sell and separate families, for example. And you had the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. Jim Crow segregation weakens them, but the amendments are still there. They are not taken away.

TM: As a counterfactual, suppose that the South succeeds in its drive for independence. How long might slavery have continued in the American South?

JM: It would have continued at least a generation.

There are really three plausible scenarios. First, if the South secedes in 1861 without war. Second, if the North had settled for a negotiated peace in the first years of the war. And third, if the Democrats had won the 1864 election and negotiated a peace. Depending on the scenario there might have been a gradual emancipation much later.

TM: Brazil and Cuba did not abolish slavery until—

JM: —1888 and 1886. But you have to keep in mind that their abolition of slavery was very much influenced by its destruction in North America.

TM: You have described the Civil War as a “second American revolution.” Can you explain what you mean?

JM: It was a revolution on two levels. It was so first of all in a political sense. Until 1861, Southern planters and slaveholders had dominated the presidency, first under the Jeffersonian Republican Party and then under the Jacksonian Democratic Party, for 49 of 72 years. Of 36 speakers of the House of Representatives, 24 had been from the South. And they had always had the majority on the Supreme Court.

So Lincoln’s and the Republicans’ victory in 1860 represented the

ascendancy to political control of a more diversified economy, what we might call democratic capitalism. And it was recognized as a revolution at the time in both the North and South. It was called by contemporaries “The Revolution of 1860.”

But more importantly, the Civil War destroyed the planter class.

TM: Yet Lincoln did not consider himself to be a revolutionary. How does he come to play this revolutionary role in American history?

JM: It might be said that Lincoln was right of center within the Republican Party in 1860. In his first year-and-a-half he followed a policy oriented toward keeping the border states and Northern Democrats behind the war cause.

There was clearly a dynamic between the military prosecution of the war and the question of emancipation. Lincoln becomes convinced by the abolitionist argument that the revolt by the slave owners must be met by a war to extinguish slavery. As the war goes on, he understands that slave labor is at the core of the labor logistics of the Southern armies. As a consequence, striking a blow at slavery becomes increasingly attractive.

But Lincoln opposed slavery, and he viewed the Emancipation Proclamation as warranted both as an act of justice and as a military necessity.

TM: You write of Southern secession as a “pre-emptive counterrevolution.” Can you explain that concept?

JM: The concept was developed by my colleague here at Princeton, Arno Mayer, though not in relationship to the Civil War. The expansion of slavery was the *raison d’être* of the South. The Republicans and Lincoln were clearly of the mindset to contain slavery and were predisposed toward some sort of ending of slavery. The South thought the Republicans would squeeze them to death, so they struck out for independence. The Counterrevolution of 1861 came in response to the Revolution of 1860.

TM: Do you recall the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation?

JM: Yes, I had just started teaching at Princeton. John Hope Franklin’s book on the Emancipation Proclamation had just come out. This was in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr. would often make reference to the Emancipation Proclamation. I notice that President Obama does not.

TM: In closing, let me ask what your overall assessment of the Emancipation Proclamation is.

JM: I consider it one of the great iconic documents of American History, right up there with the Declaration of Independence.



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