

An interview with David Williams, author of *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War*

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The World Socialist Web Site recently interviewed Professor David Williams, a historian of the American Civil War who currently teaches at Valdosta State University in Georgia. Last month, the WSWs reviewed his 2008 book *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War*.

Eric London: Hello, Professor. First, thank you for sitting down with us for this interview. Van Newkirk of The Atlantic called the film *Free State of Jones* “quasi-historical” because it portrayed the class struggle during the American Civil War. This is something you have dedicated considerable attention to in your professional life. What do you make of these claims?

Professor David Williams: Newton Knight was not the only one who opposed the Confederate government during the Civil War. A lot of other people did, and this issue hasn't received much attention. That's not to say racism wasn't prevalent in the South, as well as the North. But what the war brought to a head particularly in the South was that the war was “a rich man's war” that wasn't worth fighting. You found that in the North as well but much more in the South.

From early in the war desertion was so rampant that by the first winter of the war the Confederates are scratching their heads thinking, “how are we going to get men into the army?” By spring 1862 they decided to force men into the army, and they instituted the first national draft in US history. One element of this conscription act was that men who owned 20 or more slaves would be exempt. The natural effect was that people who didn't own many slaves, and particularly for the 75 percent of whites that didn't own any slaves, tried to avoid service. By 1863, half the Confederate Army has deserted. In 1864, Jefferson Davis publicly admitted that two-thirds of the army was absent.

EL: From a military standpoint, the impact of opposition to the war on the Confederate Army seems immense. What if the Confederates held out for several months until the winter at Vicksburg? What if there were 5,000 more men in Pickett's charge at Gettysburg?

DW: It is incredibly significant because it's tough to win a war when two-thirds of your army has deserted. What's most striking to me is the reason they're deserting. Getting back to the Twenty Slave law, one of the main justifications for this was that planters have the best land, they have the labor force to work the land, and the Confederate Army and the families of soldiers needed food. But the planters didn't provide food. They grew cotton, and this resulted in hunger in the army and for poor families, sparking food riots all over the South.

There was desertion in the Union Army, but it was about half the desertion rate as in the Confederacy. Why is the confederate rate double? Largely it has to do with food production. Soldiers are constantly hungry. The theme of a “rich man's war,” which clearly has a class aspect, runs throughout this dissatisfaction.

EL: But it wasn't only a question of “hunger,” right? How did the oppositional sentiment express itself politically?

DW: The 1863 election is really the only time you see an opportunity

for an electoral expression of political opinion by southern soldiers and the population. And in the Deep South, which hadn't been affected as much militarily by the war, you find a lot of protest votes against the Davis administration and against the Confederate Congress. In Georgia, for example, there were 10 congressional representatives, and nine were voted out of office over the issues of impressment and conscription.

Impressment was a tax-in-kind that the Confederate Congress had instituted that allowed the Confederate Army and its impressment agents to take food and supplies off of farms. It was supposed to be limited to 10 percent of goods, but it in fact was unlimited. Impressment agents could take more than 10 percent if they paid in Confederate money or in promissory notes, both of which were virtually worthless by 1863. Inflation had hit the Confederacy so hard by 1863 that they had just about instituted a barter system. This largely had to do with overproduction of cotton by planters and underproduction of food. Food prices were going up, and because food was a staple commodity, prices for everything else went up as well. This created an inflationary spiral which was out of control by 1863. All of this produced widespread opposition in the 1863 southern elections. The freshmen in the Confederate Congress of 1864 come in on an anti-Davis sentiment. It's not necessarily pro-Union, but it does express a dissatisfaction with the war and with the way in which society is being run by planters and elites.

EL: I am struck by the parallels between the “Lost Cause” myth of the South unified against “northern aggression” and the new, racist perspective which says all Southern whites, including the most impoverished, were racist supporters of the Confederacy.

DW: Oh sure, in the post-Civil War period there was a group of southern elites called the Redeemers who try and recast the Civil War as a time during which Southerners were completely unified. By this method, the South had only been beaten by the larger Northern population and their superior industry. The North's powerful industry had some effect, but consider this fact: The Confederate Army never lost a single battle for lack of munitions. They were able to supply their army with enough munitions from their own manufacturing or via imports from England.

But what they constantly lacked was willing men to carry those arms and food to feed those men. And in terms of population, for 150 years people have always assumed that the Union Army outnumbered the Confederate Army because of the North's larger population. The North did have a larger population, but if you look at the roughly two million men in the Union Army, 500,000 were from slave states, and 300,000 whites and 200,000 blacks came from the South. So about a fourth of the Union Army is composed of Southerners. If you had taken all of those Southerners and put them in the Confederate Army, the Confederacy could have matched the Union Army man for man, and it was Southerners who gave the north its numerical advantage.

EL: And that was primarily a political question?

DW: That was a political question and had been from the beginning of the war. You can see this in the popular vote against secession in the

South. Today we still get this argument that southern whites were all for secession, but if you look at the initial popular vote on the question of war, only in three states can we say that most voters voted for secession: Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina. Remember that at the time voting is restricted to white males. In Georgia, the vote was very close, but we think a slight majority voted against secession. The same was true in Louisiana. In Texas the vote was overwhelmingly against secession, and Secessionists took the state government in a literal coup d'état.

In the Upper South, the initial vote against secession was overwhelming. The South goes into the Civil War very divided. It is only after Ft. Sumter and Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers that you get an upsurge of excitement and a considerable number of volunteers for the Confederate army who are motivated by a pro-war hysteria caused by planters threatening poor whites that the North was going to take their farms and rape their wives.

That goes away pretty quickly, and through the summer of 1861 desertion really starts to affect the Southern Army. Immediately the Confederacy faced the problem that many were deserting and not many were volunteering to take their places.

As the desertions grow in late 1862, early 1863, deserters are bringing their weapons home, and there is literally a civil war going on within the South between the Confederacy and "lay out gangs" composed of deserters, draft dodgers and sometimes runaway slaves, like the gang depicted in *Free State of Jones*. By 1863, one newspaper in Georgia pointed out that the South was fighting itself harder than it ever fought the North.

EL: There was also opposition to the war in the North, as evidenced by Copperheads like Clement Vallandigham and through events like the riots that took place in New York City in July 1863. How did this differ from anti war sentiment in the South?

DW: There was certainly opposition to the war in the North, which was widespread to such an extent that in 1863 the Northern Congress passes its own draft act. This sparks antidraft race riots across the North. This was not just in New York City, but also Boston, Chicago, and places like Troy, New York. But it pales in comparison with what is going on in the South. In the North you could be antiwar and pro-Union. The vast wheat fields in the Midwest provided the Army with food.

EL: But wasn't there an ideological element to this, too? In the 1864 elections, it was the Union soldiers who "voted as they shot" and turned out overwhelmingly for Lincoln.

DW: Most Northerners didn't go into the war as strict abolitionists. Initially they didn't want to fight to free the slaves. But they come to abolitionism somewhat reluctantly mainly because they knew that slavery was the central issue of the war. Even if the war were to end with a Union victory and with slavery intact, they knew that the issue that brought the war into existence would still exist. The idea that starts to develop in the minds of white Northerners by 1864 is: "If we are to defeat the Confederacy, slavery needs to die with it."

EL: So anti-slavery sentiment grew as it became clearer that the abolition of slavery was a military necessity?

DW: Yes, and it comes as a response to what blacks are doing themselves. In 1861, Lincoln goes into the war saying it's not a war against slavery, it is strictly to preserve the Union. But as the war continues, blacks are showing up at Union military camps across Virginia and Kentucky saying they want to be free. The stated policy of the Union Army at first was to turn them away and send them back. And blacks by the hundreds of thousands still show up at camps saying, "Ok you want me to go back? I'm not going back." And so how do you deal with that?

In 1861, the US Congress passes the first Confiscation Act which declares that slaves are contraband of war. But that doesn't legally end their status as slaves. They are still legally considered slaves by the federal government. Part of what Lincoln is arguing in 1861 is that secession is

illegal and all Union laws still apply in the seceded states, including the Fugitive Slave Act. This means the government has an obligation to return slaves. But they couldn't physically do that because they were blocked by the Confederate Army. The slaves knew that and they used it very effectively.

And as we get into 1862, this is causing a lot of confusion from officers in the Union military as the army moves southward.

EL: And at this point, attempts are made in South Carolina and by General Fremont in Missouri to free the slaves.

DW: David Hunter in North and South Carolina and the coast of Georgia, as well as Fremont in Missouri, declare the slaves free. Lincoln says, "No, it's too soon." By early 1863 Lincoln was inclined to want to free the slaves, but he was afraid of what was going on in the border states.

Another issue was that there was some desertion in the Union Army and not a lot of volunteering. Lincoln is beginning to view emancipation as a solution to the manpower problem, too. The 1862 Congress passes the Second Confiscation Act. Lincoln had some problems with it because it declared that as a punishment for slaveholders, the slaves belonging to Confederate supporters would be henceforth and forever free. That's the legal birth of the Emancipation Proclamation. The dilemma that places on Lincoln is: how do you decide which slaveholders are Confederate supporters and which are union supporters? The answer he comes up with is the Emancipation Proclamation. If the slaveholder is behind enemy lines, their slaves are free. But the slaves were taking advantage of this by claiming they came from behind Confederate lines. This is a central theme in my book *"I Freed Myself: African-American Self-emancipation in the Civil War Era."*

EL: In the period immediately following the Civil War, there is an explosion of the class struggle both North and South. Figures like Albert Parsons, who served in the Confederate Army but who was opposed to slavery, emerges as a leading anarchist. Wendell Phillips, a leading abolitionist, later declares himself a socialist and defends the Paris Commune of 1871.

DW: To some extent I see continuity between Southern opposition to the Confederacy and the emergence of the class struggle. A lot of that has its origins in the Civil War formation of trade unions. To some extent these were formed to avoid conscription, both in the North and South.

EL: And after the Civil War, the 1870s and 1880s marked the beginning of the "Labor Wars" with the Great Railroad rebellion of 1877 and the Homestead Strike, for example. Bitterly Divided speaks of a strike wave breaking out during the war in the South. Can you speak on this?

DW: There were industrial strikes in places like Columbus, Georgia, Richmond, Virginia, Augusta, Georgia, Selma, Alabama and elsewhere. This was mainly over not so much wages, but the inability of wages to keep up with the cost of living. Another issue that spurred some of these strikes, in Columbus in particular, was that the Confederate government would contract with local manufacturers to provide goods for the army and to employ soldiers' wives so that they could have some support, and so their husbands would be less likely to desert from the army.

What a lot of these contractors would do is they'd take the Confederacy's money, but they weren't passing it on in the form of required wages to these women. And the women knew it. So, a lot of them were striking over that. That happened in Richmond as well. This happened without a lot of success because there was such desperation that they would fire the striking workers and bring in replacements.

Another thing that worked against the success of strikes in the South during the war was that the Confederate Draft Act did exempt from the draft certain classes of industrial workers. Any workers employed in war-related factories like cannon factories and gunpowder factories were excused as long as they held those jobs. But if they threatened to strike, as many of them did, the conscript officer would come and they would be

drafted. Soldiers would come to gather them up and haul them to the army.

The response to the strikes simply exacerbated the antiwar “rich man’s war” attitude and ultimately made desertion even worse. A lot of these workers would desert at the earliest opportunity after being forced into the army. Conditions in the factories were horrible. There were explosions where workers body parts were found hanging from the trees near the factories. Child labor was also a major problem.

EL: After the war, what methods did the ruling class use to block the emergence of the class struggle in the South?

DW: White southerners were encouraged by the planter class to be racist against blacks. That is what drives the “lost cause” mentality. A lot of Southern whites who were anti-Confederacy did buy into “lost cause” myths in which the Confederacy becomes a euphemism for the concept of white supremacy.

Factory owners in urban areas in the South used race to keep workers divided among themselves. White workers on strike would be opposed with black strikebreakers and so white workers were upset not only at the factory owner but at the blacks too. In Southern mills especially, the mill workers were generally white in the post-war period. The only blacks who were allowed to work in those factories performed the most menial jobs. That was by design, to keep whites feeling just a bit superior to poor blacks.

That sort of thing was going on all over the country. Local politicians would make deals with local unions to give them rights if they would exclude blacks and women, for example, in order to keep the labor movement divided along racial lines. There were some who tried to overcome that. The populist movement in the South sought to do so, for example. One populist leader, Tom Watson, made the point in the early 1890s that blacks and whites were being separately fleeced of their earnings and that they needed to unite.

EL: Now that you mention Tom Watson, can you speak about his political trajectory and the emergence of populism in the South following the Civil War?

DW: In his youth, Tom Watson is very dedicated to racial unity. Initially he sees very clearly that for poor whites and poor blacks, which constitute a majority, they have the same economic problems, they’re controlled by the same elite, and if you can ever unify these folks they would constitute a majority and could take power. But the populists came under such immense pressure from the landowners that eventually Watson was led along another path: race baiting. He does an about face and becomes one of the biggest race-baiters in Southern political history. He was elected to the US Senate in 1920. Around 1906 to 1908 is when you see him change and shift to the right. He becomes one of the leading advocates for the lynching of blacks in Georgia.

EL: And in the post-war period you see various types of radicalism emerge: the Populists, the Nationalists, the Grange movement. But the socialist movement is also emerging.

DW: Unfortunately, the Socialist Party didn’t get as much traction in the South because of the lack of urbanization, but especially during World War I, when the draft was instituted, there were memories in the South of the Civil War Draft and how people had opposed it. Once again there was a lot of opposition to the draft, especially in the mountains of North Georgia. Many of the places where draft dodging was popular in the Civil War were the most hostile to the draft in World War I. Draft resistance was resurrected to some extent in rural areas during the First World War.

The socialists were getting more and more votes with Debs. Even when he ran for president from prison during World War I, he received significant support. The passage of the Espionage Act and the implementation of the act to go after socialists by confiscating their financial resources and throwing them in jail was quite significant.

EL: This was a generation who remembered the “Great Betrayal of

1877.”

DW: Yes, it is telling that the Southern and Northern elites in the post-war period were both dead set against land redistribution in the South. There was a huge movement to redistribute land for poor whites and former slaves. This was very much opposed by Northern elites. Those in the North who were advocating land redistribution in the South said, look, if we have stable landholders who are members of Union Leagues in the South, made up of remnants of the anti-Confederate gangs and composed of black and white small landowners, then they’ll vote Republican. But ultimately Northern elites concluded that making an alliance with the poorer whites and blacks would upset business with the people who own the resources in the South, the cotton, the coal, the timber. They didn’t want to upset business relations with them. They opposed land redistribution because they didn’t want it to spread in the North as well. To the Northern elite, political rights are negotiable, but property rights are sacrosanct. They don’t touch that.

EL: What role did the emergence of the class struggle in the 1870s play in the Republicans’ decision to abandon reconstruction after the 1876 election?

DW: The class struggle was the primary factor in their decision. That was the driving force behind the deal. [Frederick] Douglass said it best when he said that the Republican Party has migrated from a party of principle to a party of money. And the economic considerations on the part of Northern elites was the primary motivation for the betrayal.

One of my favorite quotes comes from William Sylvis, a Southern labor leader during the Civil War, who tried to build a trade union movement in various areas of the south. In my book, *A People’s History of the Civil War*, I quote Sylvis, who said: “No man in America rejoiced more than I at the downfall of negro slavery, but when the shackles fell from the hands of those 4 million blacks, it did not make them free, it simply transferred them from one condition of slavery to another; it placed them upon the platform of the white working men, and made all slaves together.”

That cooperation depicted in *Free State of Jones* between blacks and whites was not unusual. There are countless examples of this. Here in South Georgia, in Brooks County, there was a slave conspiracy in 1864 involving a local white man named John Vickery. They tried to take control of the county and hook up with union forces in Florida. I always thought that would make a great movie, too.

EL: I hope someone makes it. Thank you for your time, Professor.

DW: I hope so, too. You have a wonderful web site and your work for socialism is very much needed.



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