

White House chief of staff blames Civil War on failure to “compromise”

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White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, speaking on Fox News Monday night with Laura Ingraham, declared that the Civil War resulted from a failure to “compromise.” This is a reactionary and discredited interpretation that denies the historical necessity of the struggle that preserved the union, destroyed slavery and, in launching the industrial revolution, gave birth to the American working class.

Kelly rehearsed several components of what historians have come to call “The Lost Cause myth,” which centers on the false premise that in 1861 the plantation oligarchy—owners of some 4.5 million slaves—led the southern states out of the Union and into the Civil War over “states’ rights,” and that this fight was conducted by noble figures, epitomized by Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

Kelly said: “Robert E. Lee was an honorable man who gave up his country to fight for his state. One hundred and fifty years ago, that was more important than country—it was always loyalty to state back in those days. Now it’s different. But the lack of an ability to compromise led to the Civil War, and men and women of good faith on both sides made their stand where their conscience had them make their stand.”

The retired Marine general’s praise for the leading Confederate general is a provocative reiteration of Trump’s defense of the August 11-12 fascist riot in Charlottesville, which took place in opposition to the removal of a statue of Lee from a city park and resulted in the murder of Heather Heyer, a 32-year-old anti-racist protester run over by a white supremacist.

Kelly’s comments also reprise a comment made by Trump in a May 1 interview with Sirius satellite radio. “Why was there the Civil War?” Trump asked. “Why could that one not have been worked out? I mean, had Andrew Jackson been [president] a little later, you wouldn’t have had the Civil War.”

The repetition of the same claim by Trump and his chief of staff shows that it is not an innocuous mistake. Trump, and even more Kelly, who has been promoted by the media as a “moderating influence” in the White House and “the adult in the room,” know full well what they are doing. Their aim, inspired by Trump’s former chief advisor Steven Bannon, is to cultivate a far-right, fascistic movement in the United States. The Civil War’s revolutionary and egalitarian essence, which belongs to the whole working class, cuts across this. Its significance must therefore be distorted.

Since this attack is waged in the arena of history, it is first of all necessary to set straight the historical record.

The Civil War was itself the outcome of *decades of compromise*. The pattern of what Senator William Seward would in 1858 call the “irrepressible conflict” was already perceptible to some as early as 1820, including the elderly Thomas Jefferson, who famously wrote that that year’s Missouri Compromise “like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror.” He continued: “I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed indeed for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence.”

These were prophetic words. Beginning with that compromise, by which

the entry of Missouri as a slave state was offset by the entry of Maine as a free state, each new territorial acquisition, and every new state that entered the union—including all of the lands taken from the American Indians and Mexico—only raised again, and on a more intense level, the sectional dispute over slavery.

By 1861, this had reached an end point. Now, only one “compromise” was possible that would have appeased the Southern ruling class and averted the Civil War: a legal guarantee, or “Slave Code,” forever ensuring the inviolability of slavery in all of the United States. In late December 1860, with the Secession Crisis already underway, Mississippi Senator (and future Confederate President) Jefferson Davis, in his “Compromise Proposal” to the Committee of Thirteen to avert war, proposed precisely this:

Resolved, That it shall be declared, by amendment of the Constitution, that property in slaves, recognized as such by the local law of any of the States of the Union, shall stand on the same footing in all constitutional and federal relations as any other species of property so recognized; and, like other property, shall not be subject to be divested or impaired by the local law of any other State, either in escape thereto or of transit or sojourn of the owner therein; and in no case whatever shall such property be subject to be divested or impaired by any legislative act of the United States, or of any of the Territories thereof.

The Slave Code would be the law of the land in all federal territories and all future acquisitions, wherever they may be—including Mexico, Cuba and Nicaragua, each of which were targeted for annexation in the 1850s by southern politicians, including Sen. Albert Gallatin Brown of Mississippi, who in an 1858 speech fulminated against Republicans frustrating the expansion of slavery:

I want Cuba, and I know that sooner or later we must have it. If the worm-eaten throne of Spain is willing to give it for a fair equivalent, well—if not, we must take it. I want Tamaulipas, Potosi, and one or two other Mexican States; and I want them all for the same reason—for the planting and spreading of slavery. And a footing in Central America will powerfully aid us in acquiring those other states. It will render them less valuable to the other powers of the earth, and thereby diminish competition with us. Yes, I want these countries for the spread of slavery. I would spread the blessings of slavery, like the religion of our Divine Master, to the uttermost ends of the earth, and rebellious and wicked as the Yankees have been, I would even extend it to them.

Secession was not, then, an issue of “states’ rights”—but rather the inability, after Lincoln’s victory in the 1860 election, of the Slave Power to dominate the levers of federal power, as it had done, in alliance with northern Democrats and so-called “Cotton Whigs,” uninterruptedly since the 1820s.

But why did the Southern slaveocracy risk everything by instigating war? Why not accept the Republican Party’s promise from its 1860 platform to uphold “the right of each state to order and control its own domestic institutions,” a promise reiterated by Lincoln in his First Inaugural: “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.”

In his *The Scorpion’s Sting: Antislavery Politics and the Coming of the Civil War*, Lincoln Prize Winner James Oakes argues that there was a widespread belief, in both the North and the South, that the restriction of slavery would lead to its ultimate extinction—a position originally upheld by the Founding Fathers, whose efforts along these lines, including the Northwest Ordinance and the ending of the transatlantic slave trade, were upended by the emergence of southern cotton as the staple crop of Britain’s industrial revolution.

To stop slavery’s further expansion, with an eye toward its end—this expressed Lincoln’s politics as well as the dominant anti-slavery current within the Republican Party. In his famous House Divided Speech, delivered in 1858 in the wake of the notorious Dred Scott decision by the Supreme Court, Lincoln said:

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States, old as well as new—North as well as South.

This “ultimate extinction” was not thought to be imminent, at least not in the North. According to Oakes, abolitionist congressmen such as Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania and Owen Lovejoy of Illinois thought that full emancipation might take 25 or 50 years. Lincoln thought as many as 100. In 1858, the *Chicago Tribune* could still predict that “no man living” would see the end of slavery.

Far more than these northerners, the southern oligarchy sensed the imminence of revolution—a word its leaders flung freely at the hated “Black Republican” Party. They perceived Lincoln’s victory as a deadly ominous political expression of the North’s more rapidly growing population and economy, as well as its increasing cultural influence. They were convinced that further compromise would only hasten demise. It was time to strike out against the progress of history.

Noting this, historian James McPherson in his *Battle Cry of Freedom* has aptly dubbed southern secession the “Counter-Revolution of 1861.” But, as he adds, “seldom in history has a counterrevolution so quickly provoked the very revolution it sought to pre-empt.”

By the summer of 1862, Lincoln recognized it was no longer possible to return to the union of 1860. As the abolitionist Frederick Douglass advised, “war for the destruction of liberty must be met with war for the destruction of slavery.” Lincoln’s promise in 1861 to not touch slavery where it already existed gave way, on January 1, 1863, to the Emancipation Proclamation, which turned the Civil War into a revolutionary war.

Whether the immediate question was union or emancipation, no one living in those years thought that the war was about anything *other* than slavery. When Lincoln said, looking back on the war’s onset in his Second Inaugural, that “all knew” that slavery was “somehow the cause of the war,” it provoked no controversy.

It was so obvious as to be a truism. The Constitution of the Confederate States of America, ratified in the spring of 1861, copied much of the American Constitution. But whereas the latter maintained a shamefaced silence over slavery—the word itself did not appear—the Confederate version took care to name it no less than ten times, guaranteeing its sanctity in any future territories acquired.

In their various declarations of independence, whatever the precise wording, each of the southern secession conventions joined Louisiana in asserting that “the people of the slave-holding States are bound together by the same necessity and determination to preserve African slavery.” Karl Marx, writing in 1865, observed that this marked the first time in world history that “an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders dared to inscribe... ‘slavery’ on the banner of Armed Revolt.”

Indeed, in claiming that the Civil War was a mistake, Trump and Kelly are harkening back to a school of historical falsification created well after the Civil War. First put forward by former Confederates such as Jefferson Davis and General Jubal Early, the Lost Cause became, in all but name, the official narrative of American history in the 1890s, promoted by a wave of elite historians following William Dunning of Columbia University, among them the future American president and liberal icon Woodrow Wilson.

Its basic tenets were these: the antebellum plantation system was a pastoral world of contented slaves and chivalrous owners; secession was not about slavery, but “states’ rights;” the entire South was united against “the War of the Northern Aggression;” Lee, the greatest of all American generals, succumbed to the ruthless Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant only in the face of vastly superior numbers; and the brief period of African-American political equality after the war, the period known as Reconstruction during the Grant administration, was the darkest hour of American history.

It is no coincidence that this historical revisionism emerged in the 1890s, simultaneous with the consolidation and legal entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation, which became the law of the land in the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* Supreme Court case. It is also not coincidental that it emerged simultaneously with the eruption of American imperialism in the predatory Spanish-American War of 1898, in which the conquest of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines was ideologically justified, in part, by the concept of “the White Man’s Burden.”

Finally, it is not coincidental that this reactionary revisionism of the Civil War was promoted at the same time as the eruption of major and violent working class struggles against the new capitalist order, including, in 1894 alone, the Pullman Strike, the Great Northern Railway Strike and the nationwide Bituminous Coal Strike—events that accelerated the emergence of socialism in the American working class from the late 1890s on.

It was under these conditions that the American ruling class, now unified North and South around the imperialist project, found it convenient, even necessary, to hide the revolutionary and egalitarian essence of the Civil War. Kelly, Trump, Bannon, et al., hope that the Lost Cause myth can play a similar role in 2017.



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