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Interview

THE URBAN SOUTH AND THE COMING OF THE CIVIL WAR

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Interview with Frank Towers Interview by Frank Winter Hardie

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): What initially drew you to study the social aspects of the South?

Frank Towers (FT): I had always been interested in the roads-not-taken in history and aspects of the modern past that seemed not to fit with the modern world as I knew it in the time and place of my youth--Providence, Rhode Island during the 1970s. It wasn't a straight line from that inspiration to the history of Southern cities. I read a lot about what to me seemed to be a different anti-modern anomaly, the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the Middle East, North Africa, and southeastern Europe. In some ways the Old South fit the same set of questions that drew me to the Ottomans. I took in a lot of the romanticism of the Lost Cause that depicts the South as a region fighting off the industrializing world that characterizes our own time. In graduate school at the University of California at Irvine I concentrated on pre-Civil War Southern history (I chickened out of learning the four or five languages necessary to study Ottoman history) and realized that there was a vast literature on the question of whether or not the South was anti-modern, what role slavery played in that problem, and how unified the white South was in support of slavery and the social system that went with it. Writing a dissertation about Baltimore in the 1850s seemed like a good test case for what happened to Americans living in a place that mixed all the elements of the emerging industrial order with slavery and the political culture of the Old South.

CWBR: Much of what we know about secession and the South is based on research of power structures associated with rural, agrarian regions. How can examination of urban areas within the prewar South enhance our understanding of the region as a whole regarding slavery and the Civil War?

FT: Looking at Southern cities is important for at least two reasons. First, they were there and they were becoming more important every year. Despite our image of the Old South as a rural monolith, in 1860 one in 12 Southerners lived in a city. Just under one million people lived in the 25 largest slave-state cities on the eve of the Civil War. Southern cities grew faster than the South's rural population between 1840 and 1860, and by 1860 slave-state cities housed factories, banks, and marketplaces that commercial sectors of the rural economy could not live without. All of this seems a little surprising if we get locked into a way of looking at the sectional conflict as a clash between diametrically opposed societies.

Southern cities also merit attention because they expose the complex relationship between free labor and slavery, and they open a window onto the South's adaptation to the modern industrial world. Recent scholarship on the urban South shows that cities and slavery could go together under the right conditions. Slavery was on the way out in some cities, Baltimore being the best example, but it was actually growing in others, like Richmond, where cigar and iron makers used slaves in their factories. Furthermore, free laborers in the cities sometimes fought against slavery, but at other times they sought to make the institution stronger as a means for protecting their own privileges. That finding challenges the belief that slavery and modernity were at odds with each other.

CWBR: How did the Southern style of free labor politics relate to the politics of slavery?

FT: We should make a distinction between the political behavior of the South's free wage workers and the southern variant of free-labor ideology. As an ideology, free labor is usually associated with the North and the Republican Party. Proponents of free labor ideology argued that all wealth ultimately derived from human labor and that therefore labor had a moral right to be fairly compensated for its effort. This idea had many adherents in the 1800s. Economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx called it the labor theory of value. Abraham Lincoln expressed it in Biblical terms as God's injunction that in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread. In the late 1850s

Lincoln and the Republicans fit this idea into a broad ranging critique of the slave power as a threat to the liberty and living standards of ordinary Americans.

On its face, free labor ideology was antislavery because slaveholders withheld from slaves the fruits of their labor. However, proslavery politicians found ways to fit free labor ideas into a defense of slavery and an attack on the North. One of the best examples of this line of reasoning is James Henry Hammond's mudsill argument, which he articulated in an 1858 speech to the U.S. Senate. Hammond combined the commonly held white belief that African Americans ranked below whites with the proslavery assertion that low-skilled manual work degraded those who performed it. According to Hammond, slaves and only slaves performed the most oppressive forms of manual labor thereby allowing poor whites to take skilled jobs that brought the fair reward and livable wage that free labor deserved. Without slavery, Hammond and others like him warned, white labor would be forced into the degradation experienced by slaves. This is a long way of saying that under the right circumstances, free labor politics could be compatible with the politics of slavery.

Similarly, proslavery politicians could sometimes make allies of free wage laborers, but for the most part the political behavior of Southern free white labor ran counter to the interests of slaveholders. In the 1850s, cities housed the biggest concentrations of enfranchised wage workers, and they voted for candidates who promoted their concerns in opposition to the wishes of planter-politicians who dominated Southern state legislatures. Although the South's white workers rarely criticized slavery directly, they opposed planters in other ways, such as demanding decreased legislative representation for plantation counties, raising taxes on land and slaves, spending taxes on job-creating and city-building public works, and preventing police and militia from disrupting strikes. Proslavery politicians understood this threat. Among many proslavery motives for secession, fire eaters hoped that disunion would cut labor-influenced Southern municipal administrations off from potential allies in the federal government.

CWBR: With the influx of immigrants, Jacksonian party politics became outmoded in the 1840s and '50s. How did this affect the urban South in light of the Southern tradition of paternalism?

FT: European immigration helped push the cities onto a different political and social course from the rest of the South. In 1860, one half of the South's

foreign born whites lived in its ten largest cities and two fifths lived in the three largest (Baltimore, New Orleans, and St. Louis). Whereas the rural South was overwhelmingly American born, immigrants made up one quarter to one half of big-city populations.

Most of these immigrants came from failing farms in Germany and Ireland in search of any job they could find in the U.S. In the early 1800s, Southern cities were small enough to accommodate a variant of the master-servant paternalistic work relationship idealized by proslavery writers. Immigration brought thousands of newcomers, many of whom had poor command of English, to the urban workplace and made the old face-to-face patron-client style of labor management ineffective. Their presence weakened the social authority of employers who earlier had used slaves and coercive controls over free blacks to divide urban labor along racial lines.

Immigration also affected politics by contributing to the breakup of Jacksonian era party competition in the early 1850s. Along with the inability of Whigs and Democrats to amicably resolve the sectional controversy, their failure to adequately address labor's concerns about immigrant competition undermined their popularity in the urban South. In their place rose the American Party, also called Know Nothings, who campaigned vigorously against immigration and immigrant labor. The American Party's nativism and indulgence of labor radicals created a new constituency for Democrats, who sought to rebuild the urban paternalist alliance between employers and unskilled labor, this time by allying proslavery businessmen with unskilled immigrants.

CWBR: The anti-immigrant Know Nothing Party used white supremacy to rally support within urban areas. How did Know Nothing politicians reconcile this with the fact that slavery undermined the labor opportunities of native poor whites?

FT: The South's urban Know Nothings were caught on the horns of a dilemma in regard to slavery. On the one hand, their constituency--native-born wage labor--resented the power of slaveholders and allied employers. On the other, no politician got far defying the proslavery norm of Southern politics. The Know Nothings fashioned their own style of proslavery free labor ideology to reconcile the political culture of the slave states with urban white workers' demand that government do something to protect them from competing with cheap labor in all forms be it immigrant, convict, free black, or enslaved.

The Know Nothing argument on slavery and job competition followed the general Southern line that slaves and white workers did not compete directly, and to the extent that they did, slavery protected white workers from performing the worst forms of manual labor. To build support with white workers upset at the power of slaveholders and competition from slaves, American Party leaders argued that slaves should be kept out of desirable jobs that white workers could perform. In the end, this meant almost all jobs in the cities except domestic service.

New Orleans Know Nothings made good use of this argument in the 1858 mayoral elections which pitted their candidate against P.G.T. Beauregard, an army officer and head of the customs office who would go to several prominent commands in the Confederate war effort. In constructing a new customs house, Beauregard had used slaves in place of white labor. Know Nothings criticized this decision as evidence of Beauregard's aristocratic disregard for ordinary whites.

Because slave numbers were low in the largest cities, white labor's immediate concerns about job competition focused primarily on immigrants and free blacks. Know Nothings championed restricting immigration and facilitated job-busting purges of free black labor from high-paying skilled jobs, as occurred in a series of riots on Baltimore's docks in 1858 and 1859. Nativism also fed into the proslavery American Party argument. Know Nothings claimed that immigrants, especially German refugees from the Revolution of 1848, were abolitionists. Therefore, proscriptions against immigrants defended slavery.

CWBR: The advent of the Civil War marked the beginning of Democrat domination in most of the South. How did this affect the South's largest cities?

FT: Democratic Party domination, which began in the 1850s and, excepting Reconstruction, lasted for a century, had the ironic effect of making the South's cities less supportive of Democrats. In the 1830s and 1840s when Whigs and Democrats competed fairly evenly across the South, the Democrats often did well in cities because urban workers, a big chunk of the local electorate, supported Andrew Jackson's common man appeal and his attack on aristocratic privilege as manifest in his war against the Bank of the United States. Business support for Whigs helped Democrats claim that they best represented the interests of urban workers. Furthermore in states where Whigs controlled state

government, like Maryland and Louisiana, municipal Democrats stood for opposition to rural domination.

This pattern changed in the 1850s. The collapse of the Whigs early in the decade drove most of the South's planters into the Democratic Party and gave Democrats majorities in most Southern state legislatures. Solid planter support for Democrats undermined urban Democrats' standing as anti-aristocrats, and the new power of rural Democratic districts made the party less responsive to the needs of urban voters. As a result, city politics underwent its own voter realignment. By 1860, the urban business elite had switched from Whig to Democrat to curry favor with rural power brokers and to oppose labor militants in the opposition parties. Urban workers dropped the Democrats in favor of Know Nothings and other anti-Democrat alternatives.

In the secession crisis urban voters attached long-running municipal feuds to sectional issues and some odd alliances resulted, such as the affinity that many penniless immigrants felt for secessionist Democrats who had defended them from Know Nothing nativists. On the other side, some working-class Know Nothings, who had exhibited little interest in antislavery and often vilified the Republican Party, supported the Union because they hated the urban Democrats who backed secession.

CWBR: In our own time, New Orleans, St. Louis, and Baltimore seem more politically and socially pluralistic and less Southern than other Southern cities. How and why did this happen?

FT: When I was researching this topic, people who I met in Baltimore, St. Louis, and New Orleans sometimes asked why I considered these places fit subjects for Southern history. These days Baltimore and St. Louis are more identified with the mid-Atlantic and the Midwest, and New Orleans has longed been regarded as the Deep South's eccentric exception; the closest place Southerners can go to get away from the South.

That doesn't mean Southerners consider all cities as alien places. Atlanta, Richmond, Mobile are part of the South, as is the border city of Louisville, Kentucky. To understand why the cities that ranked as the slave states' three largest in 1860 seem somehow not Southern we have to go back to the politics of the 1850s. Because it was in that decade of intense sectional conflict that proslavery writers and politicians articulated the enduring definition of the South

as a distinctive region.

By defining the South as a distinct region, if not nation, secessionists buttressed their claim to act for purposes higher than merely protecting planters' power and wealth. The fire eaters who brought the South out of the Union wanted to unify the white South behind their leadership. This was not an easy task. Three fourths of white southern families owned no slaves, and the late antebellum South consisted of a patchwork of different economies, demographic groupings, and climates. This diversity forced secessionists to develop arguments that went beyond a pure interest-based appeal to the profits tied up in slave ownership.

According to secessionists, slavery and white independence were the interrelated cornerstones of what it meant to be Southern. They juxtaposed an idealized South of independent white yeomen against the impoverished industrial workers in big cities, the most visible symbol of white dependence in the mid-19th century. Proslavery propagandists like George Fitzhugh and J.D.B. DeBow pointed to the degraded condition of factory hands in Lowell, Massachusetts, and Manchester, England, and to riots perpetrated by urban mobs in New York and Philadelphia. The industrial cities of the North and Europe, fire eaters claimed, produced chaos and misery, whereas the South's cities were smaller, exclusively commercial places that serviced the staple crop economy of the countryside. No satanic mills or disorderly mobs would plague the South because the South had slavery and agriculture to protect whites from such scenes.

It was at this point in the secessionist narrative of Southern nationalism that Baltimore, New Orleans, and St. Louis created problems. Because these very large cities housed industry and rowdy working-class mobs secessionists sought to define them as not Southern. To admit that the South had the same big cities as the North and Europe would undermine the claim that slavery somehow created a social reality for whites that differed from what modernity was bringing to the rest of the western world.

The ideological case for what was and was not Southern had been established in the 1850s. The Civil War furthered these arguments because the white masses in Baltimore and St. Louis demonstrated for the Union and volunteered for federal military service. In Reconstruction, New Orleans, which also produced thousands of wartime Unionists, became a bastion for radical

Republicans. During the Jim Crow era, the big cities continued to experience competitive elections and maintained a semblance of the partisan politics that had developed before 1861 even as the rest of the South reverted to one-party Democratic domination.

Southerners could find all the excitements of city life in other urban places after 1865, including new cities like Birmingham, and fast growing ones like Nashville and Atlanta. Most Southerners called these cities their own because they remained within the political orthodoxy of the one-party South.

The Civil War era history of Baltimore, New Orleans and St. Louis brings out the fundamentally political character of the question of Southern identity. Secessionists and later Lost Cause enthusiasts had a political purpose in mind when they wrote about the South as a distinctive region characterized by rural living and white supremacy, but they waged this political battle on the cultural ground of regional identity. Although secessionists lost the Civil War, they won a lot back during the peace that followed. Writing big cities out of Southern history is one of many outcomes of that victory.