

Wade Hampton: Confederate Warrior to Southern Redeemer

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Interview

WADE HAMPTON: CONFEDERATE WARRIOR TO SOUTHERN REDEEMER

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Interview with Rod Andrew, Jr.

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Wade Hampton's public life spans such a momentous time of American history in which the nature of the American republic changed drastically. What stayed constant in Hampton's life and what changed?

Rod Andrew, Jr. (RA): I believe one thing that changed greatly for Hampton was his learning that the political and military events of his day would affect his personal life profoundly. Comparatively little of his antebellum correspondence survives, but my impression is that while Hampton was interested in state and national politics before the war, he had few inklings that abolitionism and secessionism would completely rearrange and disrupt his personal life. He feared both movements, but seemed hopeful that regardless of the outcome of the sectional crisis, life could go on much as before — he would enjoy his wealth, social position, the presence of his loved ones, plenty of time to hunt and fish, and a great degree of social stability. He turned out to be dreadfully wrong. For the rest of his life, the fortunes and tragedies of his personal life were inextricably bound up with events occurring on the national stage.

What changed little was Hampton's assumption that, as a powerful white man, he had the obligation to protect, provide for, and rule over social inferiors. Today we are struck by the arrogance of this viewpoint, but in one sense Hampton was right. Despite the loss of his wealth and his being on the losing side in the war, until the end of his life he still had vastly more social power than

the women, black people, and other white men around him.

CWBR: You note that Hampton kept silent in public on the issue of secession, at least until December 1860? Why did Hampton believe that the election of Abraham Lincoln merited secession? How did his opinions differ from his contemporaries? And how did Hampton's contemporaries change his outlook on secession?

RA: Yes, Hampton was publicly silent on the issue, and there are few extant private letters that explicate his views, which makes this a tough question to answer. We do have his 1859 anti-slave trade speech and the revealing letters of his sister-in-law, Sally Baxter Hampton. Hampton never doubted that South Carolina had the constitutional right to secede, but I think Lincoln's election was important to him only in that it would make the fire-eaters unstoppable in his state. I think it is clear that, unlike most of his contemporaries in South Carolina, his enthusiasm for a new Confederate nation grew only slowly in the period between Lincoln's election and the firing on Fort Sumter. The crucial factor for Hampton was not so much Lincoln's election as it was loyalty to his home state. The highest demand of chivalry was home defense, and patriotism and honor came to be measured by one's loyalty to South Carolina. Hampton was determined that if it came to fighting, no one would be able to say that he was less than a patriot, or that he couldn't be depended on to answer the call for home defense.

If Hampton's contemporaries had any effect on his outlook, it would have been in their success in defining patriotism solely as loyalty to South Carolina. Still, it's hard to tell from his limited antebellum writings how much they influenced him in that regard and how much that was already one of his core convictions.

CWBR: You focus sharply on Hampton's character as a southern man and how that influenced his actions. In particular, your study of his character over the course of the Civil War yields interesting insights into how war changed the Hampton the man. How and why did his hatred for Yankees grow over the four years of war?

RA: Hampton suffered a great deal. The war brought financial ruin and great personal loss and emotional pain to Hampton and the people he tried to defend. He lost a son, a brother, his house, and his entire fortune just for starters. Joe

Glatthaar points out in your interview of him in the last issue that white southerners had a hard time understanding why northerners would go to such effort and inflict so much damage in an attempt to keep the South from going its own way. By the end of the first year of fighting Hampton was sick of war and longed for peace. However, he wrote that he didn't want to see peace until the people of the North had to suffer the destruction, privation, and loss that southerners had then, he thought, peace would be lasting. So he was already bitter by the summer of 1862, and Dahlgren's raid, Sherman's march, the burning of Columbia, and scores of other destructive acts that Hampton personally saw the results of were still in the future. Thus, I argue that it was the war itself, not constitutional abstractions, that convinced Hampton that the Yankees were the bad guys.

CWBR: You argue that the Lost Cause message transcended politics and even race—it was personal. What does Wade Hampton's Lost Cause tell us about memory in the postwar South and how does it revise the work of other historians on this subject?

RA: Historians have made much progress in explaining how Lost Cause mythology could serve political purposes and legitimate the white supremacist order; see, for example, David Blight's *Race and Reunion*. But I argue that in doing so, they have too often assumed that white southerners were consciously cynical and dishonest in preaching the Lost Cause message. We have overlooked the obvious fact that these people had suffered greatly. It wasn't just a political or social order that was destroyed but literally millions of personal lives. It was simply impossible for many white southerners to see neglect of the Lost Cause or criticism of the Confederacy's goals as anything other than spitting in their loved one's graves. Hampton's case was a poignant one, but so were thousands of others; many had suffered as much as he had but weren't as articulate as he was or had less opportunity to express themselves publicly. I think it is still important to recognize the political and social agendas of Lost Cause writers and orators, particularly for the generation that came of age after the war. For the generation that fought with Hampton, though, we should take care to view them as people first and propagandists and politicians second. Also, much writing on the Lost Cause today assumes that its central concern was race. I argue that, at least in Hampton's case, manipulating race was a secondary goal at best when it came to memorializing the Lost Cause. You have to make a lot of shaky inferences and put a lot of words in his mouth to assert that his real reason for praising his dead son and his dead comrades was to reinstate or reinforce white supremacy.

CWBR: In his postwar political career, Hampton seemed to mix noblesse oblige with popular democracy. How did Hampton craft his personal brand of politics? Did Hampton express any reservations about the new way of politics in the postbellum years?

RA: Mixing noblesse oblige with popular democracy is a good way of putting it. Hampton's paternalistic, noblesse oblige outlook never essentially changed, but he wasn't so rigidly tied to it that he couldn't be pragmatic in politics. By the time he ran for governor in 1876, universal manhood suffrage was a fact in South Carolina. Antebellum politicians in South Carolina would have never stumped the state as Hampton had to do.

Hampton soon understood that his preferred outcome—educational and/or modest property qualifications for both black and white suffrage—would never come to pass. He seemed relatively comfortable with the situation as long as gentlemen like himself still won the elections. But it shocked him to see politicians of the 1890s make personal attacks on Confederate veterans and established elites, and to see southern Democrats turn on each other just as they had the interlopers and adventurers, or Republicans. One quote from Hampton that illustrates this dismay came in 1890 just after Ben Tillman had attacked a gubernatorial rival and ex-Confederate general: When I saw that a South Carolina audience could insult General Bratton, I thought, good God, have all the memories of '61 been forgotten?

CWBR: You take issue with equating Hampton and his politics with that of Benjamin R. Tillman, as Stephen Kantrowitz does in his study of Tillman. What do the differences between Hampton and Tillman tell us about the big tent of white supremacy in late-19th century political and social discourse?

RA: First, I agree with many others that Steve Kantrowitz's Ben Tillman is an important and fascinating study. But one reason I insist on recognizing the differences between Hampton and Tillman is that their contemporaries (both black and white) did. Clearly both men were racists and white supremacists. But that's not saying very much in the context of the times. They were on opposite sides of most concrete issues of their day, including the state constitution of 1895 that virtually disfranchised blacks. Hampton appointed at least 116 black men to office while Tillman wanted them completely excluded from political life. Hampton supported public education (with equal funding) for both races, while

Tillman argued that education of a black child ruined a good field hand; and this list of concrete differences could go on.

In terms of late 19th century political discourse, their disagreements remind us that by the time of Tillman's rise, the issue was not whether blacks would have equal political participation in America, but whether they would have any at all. And they remind us that personal backgrounds and life experiences had a lot to do with where someone stood in the big tent of white supremacy. Hampton never doubted the assumption that blacks were inferior to whites. At the same time, he had little fear or distrust of black men (just as in the case of his slaves) unless they were led by dishonest whites (i.e., carpetbaggers or renegades). He even felt some obligation to protect them in their subordinate status. When Hampton acted to protect basic black rights, it did not mean that he was a liberal or even a moderate. It wasn't about black people's abilities or rights at all, but about who he was supposed to be, and fulfilling the promises he had made on the campaign trail, ironically in order to restore native white elite rule.

CWBR: You write of vindication as one of the key elements of Hampton's life—alongside the more traditional themes of paternalism, honor, and chivalry. How did Hampton seek vindication for his actions during the Civil War and those of his fellow Southerners? Did Hampton and his comrades believe they could achieve true vindication?

RA: I believe that the search for vindication is the central theme enabling us to understand the second half of Hampton's life—it informs his determination to keep fighting after his son's death and even after Joe Johnston's surrender; his personal disputes with the Shermans; his Lost Cause rhetoric; and his postwar political stances. It largely explains why he was blind to the brutality of Klan and Red Shirt violence as long as he and his people still felt vilified and humiliated. It explains why, after he left the state to serve in the U.S. Senate in 1878, the injustices suffered by blacks at home in South Carolina moved him far less than northern contempt for southerners' claims about their honor and valor. If Hampton's story is somehow representative of the life and outlook of other white southerners of his generation, I think the strongest resemblance lay in this need and quest for vindication.

During Reconstruction, Hampton occasionally seemed to predict that one day the motives and character of old Confederates like himself would be vindicated. It's hard to tell whether those words came from confidence or

determination; I suspect mostly the latter. By the time he died Hampton had indeed achieved a great deal of the personal and collective vindication he sought. He was widely beloved in South Carolina and respected in the North. One of his main concerns, though, was that younger generations of southerners would squander what he had achieved by forgetting the valor and sacrifices of him and his comrades.

CWBR: Thank you.