

Cwbr Author Interview: No Quarter: The Battle Of The Crater, 1864

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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: NO QUARTER: THE BATTLE OF THE CRATER, 1864

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Interview with Richard Slotkin

Interviewed by Nathan Buman

Interview with Dr. Richard Slotkin

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CWBR: My first question, what led you to venture away from your three-volume study of the American frontier in *Gunfighter Nation, The Fatal Environment, and Regeneration Through Violence* to examine the Battle of the Crater during the American Civil War?

RS: Well I've always been interested in the civil war, in fact my interest in American history in general really dates from two things: western movies when I was growing up and visits to civil war battlefields and for various reasons having to do with the way my education went that my career developed I wasn't professionally licensed to write about the Civil War coming out of graduate school but I was so interested in it that it was always in the back of my mind as something I wanted to do. It's really to me the water shed of American history. It's the place where the United States turned into the unified nation-state that we've got the industrialized nation state and it's also the moment when our perennial conflict between racialism and belief in equality comes to a head and the issue really takes a modern form.

CWBR: What if any are some of the similar themes that you can trace across your frontier analysis and your look at the crater? It seems to me that you have in part shown a similar trend toward imagery through conflict to detail very

differing frontiers.

RS: Yeah, I see that I focused on the way in which, let's change this. The key to the stuff I've done on the frontier is the idea that we've as a culture we've always seen violence as an essential means for producing the nation that we became and in the frontier what makes the United States "American" is the conflict with the Native Americans so there is always a racial dimension in there from the start and that combination of racism and violence has a different form but a parallel form in the Civil War where both sides are grappling with the question of: what is the relation between white and black? Is it potentially a relationship of equality; that is are blacks Americans as well as whites? or is the United States a white man's republic and that issue, which in a sense begins on the Indian frontier, comes home in the Civil War and it comes home with tremendous violence. It's my contention that the South secedes, primarily, to preserve white supremacy; slavery as an institution yes but as an institutional means for the preservation of white supremacy and the North doesn't get it in those terms. The North thinks that slavery and white supremacy are two different issues and one of the things that happens is as the North confronts the end of slavery and particularly as the soldiers on the battle line confront the question: shall I fight for the end of slavery, what succeeds slavery what comes after is the question of black equality. And northern whites as well as southern whites are violently freaked out by that notion and the thing about the Battle of the Crater is: it ends with a massacre of black troops, not only by Confederates who are storming the position the blacks are occupying, but white troops on the northern side turn against the blacks and kill them as well.

CWBR: So it's almost like the Battle of the Crater and the American Civil War are sort of a frontier in itself towards that unified nation-state.

RS: Yeah it's a frontier in a sort of symbolic sense, the frontier between, or the borderlands, between two different Americas. In one of which white supremacy is assumed and slavery exists and the other slavery is removed and now you have to ask yourself: are you still in favor of white supremacy?

CWBR: Well much of your narrative focuses on the experiences of the United States Colored Troops as you say, and their enlistment in the war following emancipation in the proclamation. Do you think the enrollment of black soldiers altered the course of the war politically and/or ideologically and how so?

RS: I think it altered it in both ways. First of all, just in terms of numbers: I think the statistics show there were something like the North had a little bit over 2 million men under arms during the Civil War. By the end of the war nearly 200,000 troops, almost 10% were African American. That's very significant and is actually even more significant since their presence is weighted into the last two years of the war and although they don't take a leading role in most major battles the Crater is an exception in that way. Their role is absolutely essential; there is a whole corps of black troops in the army of the Potomac by the end of the war so just militarily their entirely significant. Politically and socially, war is about politics as well as about tactics and the fact that black troops could come marching through slave territory in the South had a tremendous impact on the stability of the slave-based economy even before northern success guaranteed the end of slavery. And the political issue in the North, by the 1864 election. In the 1864 election, the Democrats contest Lincoln's administration with essentially a campaign for white supremacy, arguing that to preserve white supremacy you have got to throw the Republicans out. When Lincoln is endorsed by popular vote the possibility of something like a movement in the direction of racial equality gets a certain kind of credibility so the role politically, socially, and tactically is highly significant.

CWBR: Well what did the blacks' fighting experience itself accomplish for African Americans that simple freedom through emancipation could not?

RS: Well you have to remember that the right to serve in the militia or in the army is a fundamental civil right, the famous Second Amendment has not only to do with fire arms, "the right to bear arms," explicitly deals with the right serve in the national defense and until 1863 blacks were barred from militia service in all the northern states including Massachusetts. And admission to that civil right has a tremendous symbolic and cultural impact. Remember also that this is a country in which only men can vote and which the concept of manhood is almost indistinguishable from the concept of political equality or political rights. So if you admit blacks to the civil right of service as men bearing arms the cultural impact is immense. Even those blacks who never see combat have their sense of self and their sense of their possibilities of self turned around by military service. I think studies have shown that blacks who served in the military tended to do better in Reconstruction than those who didn't, in part because they learned a certain skill as soldiers as well but the psychological impact I think is immense.

CWBR: Well on page 328 you state that the mine explosions seem to be "an extraordinary escalation in the murderous cruelty and destructive power of the federal war effort" and Charles Royster has discussed the destructive nature of the war that made the conflict increasingly exhaustive for soldiers and civilians alike. How did the Battle of the Crater change warfare and the psyche or the psychological aspects of both armies?

RS: Well I think you have to put it on, again, a kind of continuum of developments. The technology of violence gets upped by the Civil War and that's what the crater explosion is part of. The Confederate army invented the use of land mines during the Civil War. A Confederate officer did that. That too was regarded by generals on both sides as un-chivalrous as an illegitimate means of making war, almost as bad as the use of poison gas. In fact, the use of poison gas was actually proposed by several officers on both sides during the course of the Civil War. Technology made it impossible but there it is. Once you go to war the use of violence and violent means to win the war becomes primary over time but part of it takes again this technological form. The other side of it, the part that Royster talks about, is the willingness to inflict pain and social destruction in order to obtain victory and that's, I think, the bigger side of it technology is one thing but the will to kill the will to destroy is upped intensively the longer that a war goes on particularly where the issues are so fundamental as they are in the civil war.

CWBR: Well why do you feel that the slaughter occurred to the degree that it did in the crater specifically the inter-racial violence. Is it confederates who are blaming black soldiers for the waning fortunes of the Confederacy or were they afraid that the social hierarchy based on white supremacy was crumbling or was it simpler than that?

RS: Well I think that both of those things are true. That is, they do feel that the presence of blacks is really a major contribution to the overthrow of the Confederacy. Remember, not only because of the numbers that they are now facing but the fact that the presence of black troops carries with it the implied threat of a slave uprising behind the lines and the intense racial hatred is also a part of it. But one of the most critical things which I point to in the book is the role of Confederate officials in establishing a framework of law and policy which encouraged racial murders. The Confederacy had officially taken the position that blacks captured in arms would not be taken prisoner and that the white officers leading these troops should be treated under Confederate state law as

persons inciting a slave insurrection which made them liable for the death penalty. Now fear of Federal retaliation led the Confederacy to back off from officially enforcing the policy but as I quote in the book the Confederate Secretary of War said, yeah we can't do this publicly, but let's do it secretly. Let the killing be done red-handed on the field of battle rather than taking these guys prisoners and then executing them. So what you get then is a kind of uneven enforcement in which local officers and private soldiers even granted permission by their government to do these killings they either do the killings or they refuse to do the killings. So what I think is true here is that the Confederate government sets a frame in which racial murders are approved and soldiers in the heat of battle act in that framework and they regard their actions therefore as not only justified by their emotions but also justified by the policy of their government. In that way I parallel it with atrocities like the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. Some of it is on the troops in the field but there's also this framework of policy which makes murder and indiscriminant killing either inevitable or something that's approved.

CWBR: well you suggest that the result of the battle of the crater may have lead to Lincoln's failure in the November 1864 election that it could have been possible for him to

RS: Yeah he succeeds, but what it produces is a really bad moment for his political campaign and the battle occurs at the end of July. In August he writes that famous memorandum which he requires his cabinet officers to sign without reading which commits them to win the war before the new president takes office on the grounds that the guy who beats Lincoln will have won on a peace platform that will end the war without victory. So Lincoln is pretty discouraged at that point and justifiably so by the failure of this big battle; other things as well but this was the big fight that had occurred right before that.

CWBR: Do you think that Lincoln's discouragement and concern over the election results, was that more due to the mounting casualties of Grant's Virginia campaign or is that as a result of the increasing concerns over the enlistment and the use of black soldiers throughout the north in the civilian population?

RS: in Lincoln's case I think it's more the casualties. He had already taken into account the backlash against his recruitment of black troops and one of the things that I think is remarkable about this period is the uncompromising forthright way in which Lincoln defends the blacks and the use of black troops

and even uses the fighting of black troops as an argument for ultimately granting them civil equality. There's a great speech which I quote in the book in which he contrasts the loyalty and service of black soldiers with the disloyalty and foot-dragging of white Democrats.

CWBR: David Blight has suggested that northern and southern whites erased African Americans from commemoration after the civil war leading into the 20th century, focusing instead on the collaborative white memory of the conflict. Why do you think the efforts to the United States Colored Troops at the Battle of the Crater have been ignored and why do they possess as you say "no monument to the memory of the African American troops who fought and died in the crater"?

RS: Well Blight's book on that subject is absolutely correct. In the case of the crater battle we can actually see that in the speeches that were made during the reenactments that were developed in order to create a battlefield park, that blacks are deliberately excluded from that. And part of the reason is that at the time that these commemorative movements are really gaining strength and influence this is the Jim Crow era in southern politics, when blacks who had gained civil rights in the post war period have those civil rights taken away by state action and this is when the regime of segregation and the elimination of blacks from the voting roles is taking place in the South and also the great waves of lynching in the South. So it's that sort of groundswell shift in southern politics that I think is part of that denial of a black role in the Battle of the Crater. In a way though from the northern side it's consistent with what happened during the battle, that is to say the northerners in the battle identified more with their fellow whites than with their black comrades in arms and that tendency is carried through in the postwar period as well.

CWBR: Professor Slotkin, thank you so much for joining me in discussing your latest book: *No quarter: The Battle of the Crater, 1864*.