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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW DELIVER US FROM EVIL: THE SLAVERY QUESTION IN THE OLD SOUTH

Ford, Lacy K. Jr.

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Interview with Dr. Lacy K. Ford, Jr., Professor of History at the University of South Carolina

Interviewed by Nathan Buman

CWBR : I'm here today with Lacy K. Ford, author of *Deliver Us from Evil: The Question of Slavery in the Old South*. Professor Ford, thank you for joining me.

Lacy K. Ford (LKF): I'm happy to be here.

CWBR: In *Deliver Us from Evil* you deemphasize the idea of a monolithic South, instead focusing on the upper South and lower South between 1787 and 1840 and the ideological shift over that time in the way southerners thought about the institution of slavery. How did you decide to approach this difficult task and what made you want to explore the differences among southerners within the south?

LKF: You know I don't know that I started out the project knowing that it was going to take that direction but I think that as I began to gather and sort through the evidence, it seemed like that there were different patterns of response and behavior. Looking at it more closely, I could see that the sort of predominant division in that behavior was between upper South and lower South. Now there were certainly some internal disagreement in the upper South and some internal disagreement in the lower South but there seemed to be a fundamentally different approach to things in upper and lower South and I decided therefore to tell the story moving from one sub region to another. This is, of course, suggested in Professor William Freehling's work: the first volume of *the Road to Disunion*

more than a decade earlier. I had read that and so I knew that there were important upper and lower South divisions that were going to have to be reckoned with but it was a matter of kind of going through the empirical data and just deciding this was the analysis that made the most sense.

CWBR: Sure, just let the evidence lead you.

LKF: Yes.

CWBR: The concept of paternalism plays a large part throughout your study and has challenged historians for many years. How would you define paternalism and what role do you believe it played for white and black southerners living in a biracial society?

LKF: Well before answering that question I'll give you a little background. I think the treatment that I ended up giving paternalism in the book was far different from what I had initially anticipated. But I think that I came to understand through my research that paternalism or at least the central thrust of it (there was always some sort of noise around the edges) began as an insurgent ideology that came directly out of the church. The Christian church and the evangelical denominations played a large role beginning in the Second Great Awakening or at least receiving its most coherent and consistent and determined expression beginning in the Second Great Awakening and that initially it was very much a sort of minority insurgence, in some ways even prophetic voice in the South with its message about slavery and it had a lot of skeptics, a lot of outright opponents, a lot of people who paid no attention at all. But over time, in the way that insurgent movements do, it began to win more and more followers probably as the church began to have more and more influence and although it endured a great number of challenges, I think by the late 1830s it had become the sort of dominant ideology of slaveholding in the South certainly in the lower South. Now, to some extent, it was a convenient explanation for slavery in the face of outside criticism and I think that convenience was an important part of its journey from sort of insurgency to a hegemony. But I do think that the insurgency was based on a small determined but growing band of people who saw paternalism as the best way of understanding slavery. So I think in some ways paternalism was a moderating influence among slaveholders in the South and that moderation actually helped slaves, not in the ways that the paternalists explained, but it helped slaves in their resistance in their ongoing efforts to carve out maneuvering room for themselves, to form and to have space,

to develop their own culture, and their own sort of pre-political identity. That, of course, was not paternalism's goal at all. It was kind of arguing that it was an ideology which would ultimately end in slaves kind of buying into the system and of course it did not achieve that but it was something that the slaves can use effectively to their own advantage even though if it had worked the way slaveholders wanted it to work that wouldn't have been true at all.

CWBR: You mentioned evangelical Christianity and you certainly emphasized its role in South Carolina and the part that it played in the slaveholding ideology for both white and black. What role, if any, did this evangelical Christianity play in the upper South or other parts of the lower South like Louisiana where Catholicism dominated early on?

LKF: I think it played a very similar role, perhaps in slightly different time frames, across the lower South and in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and much of Louisiana outside of the New Orleans area. I think Protestant Christianity had a similar influence and, while my discussion tended to be South Carolina-centered on that, I think I do treat Alabama and Mississippi, Georgia to some extent in saying that I think similar developments were going on there and charting them. Now, because they were settled later and didn't have urban centers like Charleston, I think it took hold to some extent a little bit later. I mean in some places I think that there was not as intense of an opposition to paternalism, say in Mississippi, as there was in South Carolina but I do think across the lower South it was similar. I think the story of the upper South is a little bit more complicated and in the end I decided not to try to tease it all out in an already long book but I think in the portions of the upper South which remained pretty deeply committed to slavery, the more heavily black regions of the upper South like the south side of Virginia, reached essentially similar conclusions as the lower South and Protestant Christianity played a fairly large role in the development of the paternalist ideology. I do think in those portions of the upper South like western Virginia, where there remained a good bit of desire to minimize slavery's role, people saw paternalism maybe as a very short-term alternative but not as good of an idea as selling off slaves to the lower South, perhaps colonizing slaves, perhaps looking toward gradual emancipation. Therefore, because slavery didn't seem to have (they didn't want it to have) as much permanence, paternalism wasn't embraced as anything other than a kind of short-term practical way of managing affairs.

CWBR: You spoke of the resistance against paternalism. You certainly challenge the idea of complacency among slaves but how prevalent were, not just revolts or scares, but daily resistance and individual violence and how did these instances shape white southern ideology?

LKF: I think slave resistance was always at work in shaping the way white southerners perceived slavery. I do think there is a way in which (I don't dwell on this as much perhaps in the book as I perhaps could have) white southerners thought they could manage the institution but I think they really thought they could handle and manage the day-to-day resistance that they encountered. They thought that was kind of what it meant to be a slaveholder was to deal with that. I think they remained more concerned about dealing with larger and more concerted action and particularly if they thought that action would occur with any great frequency and that the outside world might not support all of their efforts to put it down. So I do think that, not merely the more common day-to-day resistance, but the threat of larger resistance played a role in their response. But, I think at the same time, they tended to think they could manage all of these things. What they debated greatly was: what was the best way to do it. Some people had the idea that paternalism was virtually useless in that regard and others argued that this was actually the way to avoid the scares and these crises.

CWBR: These scare and these crises, the actual open rebellions that you discuss in *Deliver Us from Evil*, mostly took place in Virginia, South Carolina and Louisiana. How would you explain why you see little evidence of larger insurrection plots and scares in the interior states like Tennessee Alabama, or Mississippi?

LKF: That's probably not a question I can answer on the basis of my research. I think that there were certainly some scares in Mississippi from time to time. How large and how much attention are given to these things somehow tended to depend a lot on how the whites felt it necessary to respond to it. I think the alleged Denmark Vesey conspiracy could have almost been a footnote in history. However serious you believe the conspiracy might or might not have been, it could have been handled with a lot less fan fair if the whites had chosen to do so and they chose not to do so. And now Nat Turner, of course, is another story but in many ways the white leadership, in dealing with Nat Turner, sort of tried to minimize the significance of it in the aftermath. Once the rebellion was put down their official word was: well it wasn't that elaborate of a plot and so on and so forth. And so that's interesting to me and I think that more work could be

done (I think I've made some suggestions about what I think or how I think white responses were shaped) probably more work could be done. There may be a way in which, I think more work could be done in trying to examine rumors and allegations in other portions of the South that haven't gotten as much attention. My guess is that similar kinds of things may have been happening all along and lower on the Richter scale of resistance that led to similar thoughts.

CWBR: During your discussion of David Walker's *Appeal* in 1829 you suggested that "the South as a whole had never reacted with any uniformity across state or sub regional boundaries to previous scares and insurrections." How was David Walker's *Appeal* different and what role did it play in the potential unification of the South that you eluded to as it proceeded into the 1830s?

LKF: That was an interesting finding to me. I had not anticipated that and I guess that maybe I anticipated that there would have been some unanimity earlier but even Denmark Vesey didn't ripple across the lower South in the way that David Walker's *Appeal* did. I guess the reason is that it happened in a large number of places at approximately the same time and I think therefore showed the danger of a written document that could be seen as instigating insurrection was enormously threatening in a way that even a serious insurrection plot like Gabriel's plot in 1800 really wasn't. I think that the abolitionist were quick to learn from that. That's why they came up with their flooding the mails campaign in the mid 1830s because they realized how powerful they could be. So I think my best hypothesis about why that was such a sweeping scare was that those pamphlets arrived, not everywhere, but in many parts of the South within a fairly narrow time frame of a couple of years and therefore created a kind of simultaneous reaction which was something. They were kind of in quasi-equal intensity everywhere. I mean an insurrection scare is always going to have more impact in the area where it occurs and kind of dissipate, the ripple effects dissipate as they get further from the center. But a printed appeal is a different thing and really that's what happens with the 1830s. It's words on a page that I think drives the slaveholders into a frenzy more than anything else.

CWBR: In response to a lot of these rebellions or scares starting in 1800, or even before, whites struggled to decide how best to deal with the black population so what I wonder is how hard was it for white southerners to reconcile their desires to whiten their locality to protect their safety with their continued desire to grow labor-intensive cash crops? How did those who sought the

diffusion of African Americans or colonization plan to continue cash crop production? Where would the labor come from?

LKF: I think that was their fundamental tension. I think that, particularly in the upper South where slave labor-generated cash crops perhaps either stagnant or declining, there was a real tension about that particular question. The general answer to it in the upper South was we are probably not going to be without slaves anytime soon but we certainly would like wean ourselves away from as much dependence on slave labor and become a whiter region than we are now. And I think, while that varied from county to county, there was a strong sense there but it was a big part of the debate. In the lower South I think it was a tension that just almost couldn't be resolved. I think people could see that their staple crop prosperity depended on slave labor and the way to get more of it for yourself was to own slaves. At the same time they could never quite get over this anxiety of the particular area where you live becoming too black and that was really, in some ways, the travail of slavery. It seems to me, in the lower South was that tension between prosperity and safety really and it's a delicate balancing act. I think there was this kind of notion which involves a little bit of using suggestive rather than definitive evidence on my part because a lot of whites thought there was a kind of golden mean, that as long as the slave population didn't exceed about 40 percent of a given area, things would be okay. So when you are beneath that threshold acquisition of more slaves was a good thing and after that it was kind of something to worry about. But the problem is there's no way to implement that as a policy. That's kind of the notion and the microeconomic realities were once the people or many of them were going to acquire slaves if they could and you have portions of the lower South which are much, much blacker than 40 percent. That created some, particularly in areas where some went through the transition later, a good bit of tension, I think.

CWBR: Well you mentioned William Freehling's volume one of *Road to Disunion*. What do you think (in light of that and some of his other work) what do you feel that your analysis might tell us about why secession happened the way it did as the lower South seceded before Sumter, followed by the upper South afterward and the border states: Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware remaining within the union?

LKF: Well I guess I do think in many ways that what I've essentially done is (Freehling provided in his first volume a sort of, while it has a sort of social, cultural, and economic history dimension, it is essentially a political narrative)

and I think that he laid out very nicely this kind of dialectic between the upper and lower South. In politics in which the lower South extremism kind of nurtured moderation in the upper South which then drove the lower South to greater extremism and there was this sort of dialectic there. I think that what I've done is go back and look at attitudes toward slavery that sort of underlay some of this political dichotomy and explain that in looking at attitudes toward slavery. And then I think that that helps to understand some things that Freehling covers in volume two where the lower South is certainly more committed, more quickly to leaving the union, the upper South is more divided, some of it's not ever going to leave the union, and some of it's going to leave the union reluctantly, and pockets of it aren't going to be happy that you've left, and so on and so forth. I think that really shouldn't be (once you've read my book) that shouldn't be particularly surprising.

CWBR: Well you state, and I quote: "by the late 1830s the upper and lower South had each decided that their respective answers to the slavery question lay in different ways of reconfiguring the institution," and then the last sentence of your book states that your effort to "answer the slavery question explains nothing less than how and why whites in the old South created the self-images they fought to preserve in the American Civil War." Would you suggest that southerners fought for differing self-images of how best to practice and manage the institution of slavery?

LKF: Yeah I think so. I think that, by 1840 and certainly by the time of secession, the slave holders in the lower South and common whites who agreed with slaveholders tended to envision themselves as defending this kind of paternalist notion of slavery which supported white democracy and protected the independence of the ordinary southerner. I think in the upper South the slaveholders and whites that agreed with them saw themselves as people who understood the problem was related to slavery did not slight the moral implications that it might have held and were trained to work out, as best they could, a way of gradually diminishing slavery. And as such were heirs of Thomas Jefferson and the founders as they understood them and were leaving the union only because they were forced to in a certain way. I think those were differing conceptions of what everything was about and I think I would have been surprised if it were different. There is some interesting work to be done and some has been done, but more could be done, to look at how notions of the Confederacy and the Lost Cause and what slavery had meant from a postbellum post-emancipation perspective but could still be done because as we all know

Virginia emerges as a big Lost Cause state despite a very ambivalent attitude in going into the war.

CWBR: Well Professor for Thank you so much for joining me in discussing your most recent book *Deliver Us from Evil: The Question of Slavery in the Old South*.

LKF: Thank you for asking me. It's been fun.