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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW:"WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE NEGRO?": LINCOLN, WHITE RACISM, AND CIVIL WAR AMERICA

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Spring 2009

Interview with Dr. Paul D. Escott, Reynolds Professor of History at Wake Forest University

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Your latest book is titled *"What Shall We Do with The Negro?": Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America*. Now in this book, you attempt to revise what is really a celebratory depiction of Abraham Lincoln as the great emancipator by noting his reticence in many ways to ending the institution of slavery by force. How have historians, in your opinion, erred in chronicling Lincoln's record on the slavery issue?

Paul D. Escott (PDE): There is a deep celebratory impulse in American popular culture in terms of the way we view our history. And historians have been emphasizing Lincoln's racial progressivism and racial egalitarianism, overemphasizing it I would say, quite a bit in recent decades. This has not always been the case. There were earlier periods in American history which people praised Lincoln highly because he was considerate of white southerners and did not push for rights for black people. But it's notable that in the last couple of decades, the emphasis on Lincoln as someone who worked for racial equality has gone a little too far. There are quite a number of things about Lincoln's policies that needed a careful reconsideration. I'll start, I think, by mentioning just a couple of them.

One would have to do with his expectation on what might follow freedom; and another might have to do with the Thirteenth Amendment and where he stood on the process of ratification for it at the end of the war. It's well known

that before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he had repeatedly proposed plans of gradual, compensated emancipation that could be voluntarily undertaken by the states, acting on their own. He always linked those to colonization. What people have said less about is that after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, he repeatedly talked about what he called temporary arrangements or apprenticeship. Now apprenticeship may bring to mind Benjamin Franklin back in the 18th century, and we may think of it as something that would give people an opportunity to rise in society. But that kind of apprenticeship had almost completely died out in 19th century America. This idea of apprenticeship would be a way for slaveholders to hold onto the labor of younger slaves for a period of time. That was always a part of his plans for gradual emancipation. After he proposed the Emancipation Proclamation, he continued to talk about apprenticeship or temporary arrangements.

What Lincoln had in mind comes through very clearly in the letter that he wrote to General John McClernand in early 1863. In that letter, he said to McClernand that if the southern states that are covered by the Emancipation Proclamation would adopt measures of apprenticeship, they could be nearly as well off as if this trouble had not occurred. He would be trying to provide financial aid from the federal government, and that would help them as well. Lincoln continued to talk about apprenticeship or temporary arrangements as something that southern whites could expect once slavery came to an end. And in his Amnesty Proclamation, the one setting up the Ten Percent Plan for reestablishing southern governments, he again talks about these temporary arrangements or apprenticeships that would be looked upon with favor by the president. So I think that he was not expecting (and there's no evidence that he was pushing for) any drastic, immediate change in the social and political situation of black people once slavery came to an end.

What is also notable about the Thirteenth Amendment, is that although Lincoln deserves a great deal of praise for pushing Congress to propose the Thirteenth Amendment and to put in place a measure that would be a part of our Constitution to bar slavery (not just a war measure as the Emancipation Proclamation was), the prospects of ratifying the Thirteenth Amendment without force or a requirement by the executive were very troubled. It would take ten states to block the amendment. The Confederacy of course claimed thirteen. There were eleven southern states that had actively participated in the Confederacy. There were also three Union states that had voted heavily Democratic in 1864, were not at all in Lincoln's camp, and were likely to oppose

ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment.

Historians have not questioned that at the Hampton Roads Conference in February of 1865, William Seward told southerners about the proposal of this amendment but also mentioned that he expected it not to be approved. Up to the very time of his death, Lincoln was still not insisting on ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. He was trying in various ways to offer incentives to white southerners to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment. But he had not at all come to the point of requiring that. And I think that that needs to be kept in mind in order for us to have a better understanding of what Lincoln's approach was and what his policy was. He seemed very interested in first, pursuing the priority of getting the Union back together, and second, in order to do that, to offer incentives and means of conciliating white southerners so that they would participate in the process and take an active role in it, rather than be coerced into reunion.

CWBR: You contend in this book that the true legacy of the Civil War regarding race relations is what you call "a sobering future of segregation and racial exploitation." And yet the answer you just gave, and in fact much of what you talk about in the book, seems to suggest that there is a continuity of racism and troubled race relations from the antebellum years to the Civil War and into the years of Reconstruction. Did the legacy of racism from the antebellum period ease in any way or do you just see a fundamental continuity over the years of the Civil War and Reconstruction?

PDE: I do see a tremendous amount of continuity. Racism was a very deep problem in the entire nationâ€”North as well as South. My last chapter points out and analyzes the action of three northern states after the war came to an end. These states voted against proposals to let the small numbers of black people in their state vote as citizens following the end of the war. Racism did continue and there's a great deal of continuity there. The war really posed two problems or two questions. One was: what was going to be done about slavery. Following upon that was the next question, which many newspapers and magazines were asking, "What shall we do with the Negro?"

You can see in the way that the question was asked that it was flawed by racism. The white people asking that question were assuming that they could dispose of the Negro problem, that they could decide what would be done with African Americans. They weren't looking upon African Americans as members

of the polity who would have a normal role to play. It is striking that there was some change in racial attitudes in the North during the war. I was really surprised as I turned to a more careful study to the North (since most of my work had been done on the South) to see how quickly many magazines came around to the idea not only that slavery must be destroyed, but also that improvement in the status of black people needed to be undertaken. *Harper's Weekly* was far in advance in this regard, and quickly came to a position that the United States needed to confront its problem of racism and live up to its ideals. There also were Army officials who worked with freedmen in the South whose attitudes changed and who made recommendations that included full political rights for African Americans. Indeed many of these generals said that it would be necessary to give African Americans their political rights so that they could protect themselves against white hostility in the post-war world. And there were others signs of discussion and some change of ideas in the North, especially before 1863.

But thereafter, in the later stages of the war, there was not as much discussion of the future status of African Americans as one would have expected. I believe that Lincoln wanted to see slavery come to an end at some point, as I've indicated. But even at the end of the war, he was not at the point of insisting on *immediate* emancipation for *all* of the South's slaves; he would consider some other possibilities. Lincoln did not really do much to address this question of future status of African Americans. We do know that in his final public statements, just a few days before he was killed, he came out in favor of letting a few Africans Americans voteâ€"those whom he called the very intelligent or those who served in the Army. But he voiced that view simply as a personal preference, and he was at the same time, offering many conciliatory measures to white southerners. So, though the war did address the question of slavery, it did relatively little to address the question of racism and the future status of African Americans. That was forced upon Congress during Reconstruction, but there wasn't a great deal of important ground gained on that front during the war itself. Of course, in the South, we know that there were proposals to bring slaves into the army and to free them, and there perhaps were a surprising number of white southerners who concluded that that needed to be done. Yet it's notable that the Confederate Congress absolutely refused to consider the idea of freedom for any black soldiers and was very tardy in coming around to the idea that some steps should be taken to bring slaves into the Army.

CWBR: In trying to answer the question you pose in the title, you chronicle how the Union conducted studies to decide what they should do with African

Americans following the end of the war. And they actually produced some very valuable insights into how African Americans could live in the Union as productive citizens. Now, from what you've said, you suggest that Lincoln himself may not have taken much stock in that information that he received. Did other members of his administration and the cabinet receive the information about what role freedmen could possibly play in a reconstructed Union any more favorably than did Lincoln?

PE: Yes. Salmon Chase, the Treasury Secretary, was known as a strong advocate of abolition before the war. Chase was pushing for improvement in the situation of the slaves who had escaped from their masters in the South. But what is more surprising and really interesting, is the fact that Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, took a strong role here. Stanton had been a democrat, not a republican. As Secretary of War, Stanton concluded that to win the war and restore the Union, slavery would have to be destroyed. He ended up favoring measures that led to studies and recommendations on political and civil equality for black people. Stanton, I could say, colluded a little bit with David Hunter, the general who issued a proclamation early in 1862 to free slaves in his military district. Hunter wanted to do this, and he let Stanton know that he was planning to do it and said, in essence, "Let me take the blame if need be." Stanton was happy for him to go ahead and do that. And then Stanton appointed the American Freedman's Inquiry Commission. So the commission and various Union generals who were at work in the South gathered a lot of information about how the freedmen were fairing once they had managed to escape from slavery. They did write reports and, as you indicated, they recommended that the African Americans should be given the right to vote and should have means of protecting themselves as citizens in the polity once the war was over.

CWBR: To what do you attribute Lincoln's reticence on emancipation on the issue of broader rights for African Americans? How do his attitudes and opinions on slavery fit within the larger context of Republican Party politics? In many ways, it seems that Lincoln might have drawn some of his conclusions and some of his opinions about slavery from his political idol, Henry Clay, who himself was very conflicted on the issue of slavery.

PE: That's exactly what I was thinking as I heard you ask your question. I do believe that Lincoln's attitudes and ideas on policy evolved, just not nearly as far as some writers have suggested in recent decades. I believe that when the war began, his thinking was influenced a great deal by the man he called his *beau*

ideal, Henry Clay. Clay, of course, had helped to found the American Colonization Society. Lincoln's advocacy of colonization was not accidental or trivial; he was very consistent about it and stood with it for a long time. Those who want to exalt Lincoln as a modern day paragon of equality like to point out that he did not publicly talk about colonization after January 1, 1863. But in saying that, they ignore the fact that in March and April of that year, he entered into arrangements with some shady operators to send over four hundred African Americans to an island off Haiti in an experiment of colonization. It proved to be disastrous, and the people organizing it did not provide the support they should have, and many people died. So Lincoln did persist in this idea of investigating colonization, even after the issuance of the final Emancipation Proclamation.

Now as a Republican, Lincoln positioned himself pretty much in the middleâ€”he was never as far advanced as those who came to be called Radical Republicans, but he was not as conservative as some of the most conservative Republicans either. But he always tried to stay on good terms with both camps, to keep all of his options open, to move slowly, and to see how the situation developed. I believe, too, that when Lincoln became president, he felt a real obligation not only to try to put the Union together but to adhere to the promises that his party had made to southerners. The platform of the Republican Party said that it respected the rights of states to determine their domestic institutions, and that slavery was not something the government should interfere with. He continually reminded people that he was trying to respect the Constitution and the rights of states. His Emancipation Proclamation, if you recall, was issued as a war measure, under his authority as Commander-in-Chief in time of actual war. So he was concerned, I think, to remind these southern whites that he was a reasonable person whom they could deal with, that he would be liberal in his dealings with them, and that he had not taken the role of a dedicated and bitter enemy of them and of their whole system. He wanted to bring them back into the Union on good terms. His efforts to conciliate them certainly came at the expense of the interest of African Americans in a number of ways.

CWBR: In 1864, Lincoln faced a reelection bid that even he, for a period of time, did not think that he could win. And as you discussed, the political dynamics of the time tested his resolve on the critical issues of the war and especially on emancipation. In what ways did Lincoln's compromises on emancipation reflect his desire to win reelection and what impact did those decisions have on his policy toward African Americans after his reelection?

PDE: Lincoln, of course, was an ambitious and practical politician, and he found himself in a real bind in the summer of 1864. In response to pleas from Horace Greeley that he meet with Confederate commissioners that Jefferson Davis had sent to Canada, Lincoln said he would be willing to talk with such commissioners, if they were empowered to end the war on the terms of putting the Union back together *and* ending slavery. The northern public at that time was discouraged by the heavy casualties that Ulysses S. Grant was incurring in Virginia and discouraged by how long the war had dragged on. There was a great revulsion in the public to hearing these words from Lincoln. People said, "What? You're making emancipation a condition of ending the war. That was never what you said before." Lincoln and the Republicans had always argued that their goal was to reunite the Union, and that measures like the Emancipation Proclamation had been undertaken solely as a means to accomplish that end. So people objected and said, "Now why have you made emancipation a condition of ending the war?" Lincoln's advisors and party leaders throughout the North told him that prospects were dark and that he was likely to be defeated. And he certainly believed that as well. So in response to that crisis and before the fortunes of war turned in the Union's favor, he engaged in what I think we would see as rather typical political maneuvering.

Lincoln drafted, though he did not send, a letter that laid out the strategy. In this letter he said, in essence, "Just because I said I would talk to these Confederates on certain terms doesn't mean that I would refuse to talk to them if other and different terms were offered me. Let them try me." Lincoln decided not to send that letter; I think that would have made him look like he was flip-flopping, in terminology of our day. But other members of the party put the same argument out. The *New York Times* was a notable example of this; its editor Henry Raymond was the chairman of the Republican National Committee, and he made that argument in print. Secretary of State Seward also gave a public speech in which he used language that Lincoln later repeated almost word for word in his address to Congress at the end of 1864. And it's difficult to make complete sense out of the things Lincoln said because they don't entirely go together. On the one hand, he echoed Seward's words and said that the only thing that was necessary to bring the war to an end was for the southern states to cease their resistance. If the military resistance stopped, the war would immediately stop. There would be no way that it would continue. Then courts and councils of legislation would decide all questions that remained regarding the future status of black people, "operating only in constitutional and lawful channels," because the

Emancipation Proclamation was merely a war measure. It's not entirely clear what Lincoln and Seward meant, but the Constitution certainly did not say anything about southern states that had seceded losing their rights. So it would seem that they would still have rights and would be involved in those processes. But Lincoln also went in the opposite direction, stating that he would not retract anything he said about emancipation and that he would not put anyone who had gained freedom back into slavery. So he engaged in a bit of double talk there.

As for how this affected the future status of black people or his policy toward them, I think the most important thing to point out is that, although he pressed forward with the idea of proposing a Thirteenth Amendment, Lincoln continued to leave the question of how it might be ratified in limbo and under a cloud because he insisted that the southern states should be involved in the process of ratification. He continued to talk about bringing those states back into the Union quickly. And I believe that there is good evidence that he did indeed propose to Alexander Stephens at the Hampton Roads Conference that Georgia could ratify the amendment to take effect prospectively, say in five years.

A number of good historians have questioned Stephens' report and have said that we cannot credit it because Alexander Stephens wrote about that conversation in 1870â€”five years after the fact. But I found an article in the *Augusta Chronicle and Sentinel*, a Georgia newspaper, written just a few months after the conference, in which the editor reports on a conversation he had with Alexander Stephens immediately after the Hampton Roads Conference. The editor gives an account that is essentially the same as the one Stephens gave in his book in 1870. So I believe that Lincoln was still considering that sort of an idea, and that he did indeed bring this up with Confederates at Hampton Roads. We also know that when the Confederate commissioners returned to Richmond, they discussed the issue with congressmen. We see from their correspondence that these Confederate congressmen were quite intrigued by the idea that they could reenter the Union and by the vote of ten states block the Thirteenth Amendment.

CWBR: Shifting focus to the Confederate policy on slavery and race in the waning days of the war, you discuss the effort to impress slaves into service for the Confederate war effort, a move that seemed to violate the very purpose of Confederate independence. But you argue that the plan's supporters had ways of maintaining racial subjugation with or without slavery. What did they have in mind?

PDE: The Davis administration was explicit about its ideas for the future of southern black people who might have served in the army and gained freedom under the other proposals. What they outlined was that after the war's end, there could be an intermediate stage of peonage or serfdom before granting full emancipation. And during that time, the Davis administration was proposing that southern states could modify their laws so as to shield the South from some of the criticism that it had received worldwide on slavery. Laws could be passed that would protect the institution of marriage for slaves and give them greater rights to worship and learn to read the Bible. In this way, things that had been the object of criticism of the South's peculiar institution could be ameliorated. At the same time the freed slaves would not have equal rights, but would be in a condition of serfdom for some undetermined period. Given that no statement was made about how long that period might be, I think it was open for people to expect that it might be a very long period. But the Davis administration did put that idea forward and those who supported the plan knew this would be part of the future thinking of the Confederate government.

Nevertheless, many southerners were simply appalled by the idea of arming and freeing the slaves, and the Congress refused to go along with the idea of considering freedom. But Jefferson Davis was still interested, as you know. Once Congress finally passed a law to bring some slaves into the army, he issued some executive orders that made clear that only those slaves whose masters would pledge to give them freedom would be accepted into the army. The Davis administration urged some of its allies in state governments to think about providing better legal means for manumission if it came to that and if the war continued and the Confederacy prevailed.

CWBR: How did the southern plans to perhaps use armed slaves in exchange for either emancipation or some form of receiving additional rights after the war affect Union strategy? How did Lincoln and his administration view these plans and efforts and proposals from the South?

PDE: I'm not aware of any document in which Lincoln discussed this. I think that northern commentators in generalâ€”newspapers and editorsâ€”saw it as a sign of desperation or weakness on the part of the South. They felt that it was an indication of how weak the Confederacy's position was and how close to collapse the Confederate war effort was getting. At the time that Lincoln met with the Confederate commissioners, the Confederate Congress had not yet

acted. The emancipation proposal had been made, but for a period of about four months, the Confederate Congress dragged its heels and refused to act; it wasn't until March that they finally took action. And then, only because the legislature of Virginia instructed its senators (who were opposed to the plan) to vote in its favor, was there enough of a majority for it to squeak through in the Confederate Senate by just one vote. But after the fall of Atlanta, I believe that Lincoln, his cabinet, and northerners generally were more optimistic about the ultimate result. They could see that the war was going well and that the Union was going to win militarily, especially after Sherman had marched to the sea and had arrived in Savannah.

CWBR: Going back to the Hampton Roads conference, how earnestly did Lincoln negotiate with the Confederate representatives? Did he honestly seek out some sort of a compromise, peace settlement, or agreement? Or was he merely testing the waters with them to gauge what their situation was as far as continuing to prosecute the war?

PDE: I believe he was absolutely in earnest. He was firm on the question of reunion, but he was much more conciliatory on all other matters, including the ones that we've talked about. And on this crucial issue of offering incentives to the white southerners to come back into the Union and to participate in the process of the reunion even at the expense and interests of black people, I think that his sincerity is clear. Not only was it consistent with everything he said before, but we know that after the conference was over and Lincoln returned to Washington D.C., he drafted a proposal for a constitutional amendment. This was something he was going to bring before Congress and ask the legislators to consider. The idea was that the federal government would provide a large amount of financial aid to all the slaveholding states, including those that were in the Union, if they would do two things: if they would bring the war to an end and if they would support the Thirteenth Amendment.

As he drafted that proposal, Lincoln was offering the South an incentive to adopt the Thirteenth Amendment by the summer of 1865â€”a shorter period of time than what he had mentioned to Alexander Stephens. He wasn't requiring it, but he was trying to lure the southerners into acting in this way. When he shared this idea with his cabinet, they were unanimously opposed. Most of the cabinet and many other northerners by this time felt that this plan was far too lenient, and that Lincoln shouldn't be thinking in such generous terms. One of his cabinet officials said that he wouldn't have minded the expense that was involved in

providing this aid to the southern states, but there was such a thing as being too generous and going too far. So Lincoln was not able to carry that proposal forward. But the fact that he drew it up and that he raised this as the next step to take after the conference shows that he was sincere and was dealing forthrightly with these southern commissioners, especially when he encouraged them to come back into the Union and assured them that he would be generous toward them and provide incentives for them to reenter the Union.

CWBR: In viewing the continuity of racism from the antebellum period through the Civil War and into Reconstruction, you place this book in an interesting historiographical discussion about just how earnest the Republican Party was about endorsing equal rights for African Americans throughout the reconstructed nation. And as you suggest throughout the book, racism prevailed in the North. What role did the persistence of racism in the North play in the persistence of racism in the Southâ€"especially because the North was trying to dictate the terms of reconstruction to the South? And did a majority of Lincoln's Republican Party ever sincerely endorse equal rights for African Americans during the period of Reconstruction?

PDE: That's a very good question and it's probably questionable that they did sincerely endorse equal rights. If you think of the Republican Party overall, it's hard to see that there was a drastic change from the thinking that Republicans had come to just before the war. In his fine book on the ideology of the Republican Party, Eric Foner concludes that Republicans believed that African Americans should have some rights, but the party had not agreed on the meaning of equal rights before the war beganâ€"that equal rights meant that African Americans men should be able to vote and that they should have full political rights. It seems clear that during the war, some Republicans did move in a more egalitarian direction and became convinced that African Americans should have political and civil equality under the law. But it's also clear that there were other Republicans who had not moved that far, not to mention Democrats or others who were less favorable on these issues than the Republicans were.

Had it not been for the resistance of southern whites during Reconstruction, it's doubtful that the Republicans would have agreed in Congress, or prevailed in Congress, on the idea that black men should be given the right to vote. As you know, it was the South's unanimous rejection, except for Tennessee, of the proposed Fourteenth Amendment that compelled Congress to reconsider the means of reconstruction in the South, if it wanted to change anything and to

bring about governments that would be different in character from those that Andrew Johnson had created. It was the dynamics of the conflict during Reconstruction that pushed the northern Congress to the point of giving African Americans men the right to vote. Short of that, I doubt there would have been a majority in favor of doing it.

Northern racism remained strong and remained a problem. We need to remember, I think, just how pervasive and powerful racism was during period of the Civil War and Reconstruction. It's part of our nation's history -- it's a deep part of our history that we need to remember and recall. I think that the celebratory strain in our popular culture wants to look at the Civil War as a great triumph in so many ways because it makes us feel better about the nation. But I believe that a realistic view of our history does not preclude our feeling good about some of the progress we've made. If you recognize the depth and seriousness of racism during the Civil War era, you also could feel that we finally have made a lot of progress since that time. It was a different world then and the pervasiveness of racism and its seriousness in the 19th century was far greater than what we have encountered in our lifetimes.

CWBR: Thank you.