

Colossal Ambitions: Confederate Planning for a Post-Civil War World

Adrian Brettle
Arizona State University, Adrian.Brettle@asu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Brettle, Adrian (2021) "Colossal Ambitions: Confederate Planning for a Post-Civil War World," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.1.02

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss1/2>

Interview with Adrian Brettle, author of *Colossal Ambitions: Confederate Planning for a Post-Civil War World*, published by the University of Virginia Press in 2020. Dr. Brettle's book is part of the UVA Press's "A Nation Divided: Studies in the Civil War Era" series. Dr. Brettle is Lecturer in History at Arizona State University.

Due to my technological incompetence, I, Jeffery Hardin Hobson, lost the first few minutes of my interview with Dr. Brettle. The audio begins in the midst of his answer to my first question: "How did you come to write this book?" Dr. Brettle explained (and here I paraphrase) that his starting point for his research was situating the Civil War and the Confederacy in an international context. Once he delved deeper into his research, Dr. Brettle found sources that convinced him Confederates planned for a robust presence in the post-Civil War world. He realized there was space for analysis of this topic within the historiography on the Confederate nation. With that, we begin the rest of the interview, transcribed below:¹

Adrian Brettle (AB): I was looking at the other studies of Confederate nation, and I felt that they certainly did not connect the progress of Confederate nationalism deeply with the war itself. I mean, the war is the driver of this—the changing, and how the war determined, as opposed to say the Lost Cause memory, or this sort of Southern, antebellum Southern nationalism. Historians tend to run shy of the war. I mean, I'm a Gary Gallagher student, and of course I'm reflecting his teaching about—how—he was absolutely emphatic with saying that the war, his thesis, obviously, that the Army of Northern Virginia was a symbol of Confederate nationhood. Although as I say, the Confederates had a profoundly *civilian* view of their future that this was not going to be a military republic, but their visions of the future were driven intimately by the war. And I felt that was certainly something that struck me about the scholarship. So yes, you sort of follow the evidence. But at the same time, I was, I felt that people had overlooked the interpretation and experience of the war in these sort of plans about this nation state—looking at European events, or looking at antebellum events, or looking at Lost Cause memory more so than . . . the war and the interpretation of its progress . . . This did not stop in secession, it did not start in 1865 with the Lost Cause. It was something that was growing and changing during the course of the war itself.

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): So why do you think there have not been historians that look at this previously? Why do you think that we've not investigated the postwar goals of the Confederacy?

AB: Humans are complicated. And the Confederates were anxious and worried . . . this idea of a sort of sense of a victimhood, Paul Quigley . . . his study sort of centers on . . . they were looking towards defeat and sort of following that sort of trajectory of the war. Now that existed. I am not saying that other scholars are *wrong* in their understandings of nationalism, but I do say . . . there is this also there's this hugely ambitious, determinedly—I mean the word that's so often used . . . they really wanted to be deluded . . . and as scholars it's hard to take that seriously. I think that's . . . scholars find it really difficult to sort of get to . . . understand that sort of state of mind, and unpack it and uncover it and see how important it was to them. That they fought this war, and that they . . . really to the very, very end that they had this sort of idea of a reality that was very, very different to how things turned out. But they used it to construct what they saw as very realistic, reasonable expectations of the future that lay alongside apocalyptic . . . that humans have a capacity

to believe different—almost at the same time. As I say sometimes, public and private diverged. You're public, resolutely optimistic, while in private, right, 'we've all lost . . .'" To answer your question why . . . because it's hard. It's hard to introduce this, this sort of state building, nation building, future-oriented sort of aspect to what the Confederates were about.

CWBR: So, I mean, do you think part of it is we, when we approach the Civil War and the Confederacy, specifically, that we still have in the back of our minds that 'they lost,' and that's really what this all leads up to . . . and that it's in a sense that we refuse to accept that there was, you know, that possibility that they would have a post-Civil War world?

AB: 'They lost, so who cares?' It never came about, 'so why, why study something that never came about?' There's that classic, sort of, victor's war. There's the all-encompassing Lost Cause memory, that of course we are being so challenged at the moment, that rewrote the history into this splendid, you know, into this idea of the hopeless, the hopeless conflict. And of course, there's revulsion of slavery and that huge block . . . more so than the military . . . that the Confederates could have secured their independence during the war . . . especially Lincoln's reelection year. But to construct a society based on the perpetuation of slavery and its expansion is really a hard thing for . . . scholars to grasp. That they insisted that this . . . would quote-unquote work out. And that you provide a basis for their future plans for want of a better word—nation-building plans.

CWBR: Right. And Ultimately your book is a book about nation-building, and statecraft, I would say.

AB: Yes, more than that, than say, diplomacy, or nationalism. It's about policy. It's about people trying to implement things. They thought as a practical people, not utopian idealists. In fact, although they so often . . . the border between them can sometimes blur, and at times they were more dreamy, and at other times they were more practical . . . But I think you're right, the book is, uhm, is that kind of, is at its heart that planning, practical—at least the people thought that they were planning and practical people seeking to construct a nation and their space that the world . . . and put other countries, especially the United States, into that sort of framework that they were b[uilding] . . . and then they were tearing it down and rebuilding it during the course of the war. Or I like to call it 'rebooting.' They rebooted this, when a crisis came, or when the war opened up opportunities. That this plan, which, you could argue, 'Well that means it was never really viable if they were constantly changing it.' But of course they thought that this was practical, that by constantly changing it, that they would then reconstruct, resurrect, recalibrate, redraft, qualify what they were doing during the course of the war.

CWBR: Right. Well that's one of the things that I really like about your book is that it shows contingency. It's all centered on contingency. And in a sense, your book is not definitionally a counterfactual, but it almost operates as one in that it forces the reader to consider a possible future in which, well, actually, *many* possible futures in which the Confederacy could have won at any different stage of the war.

AB: Because, yeah, because . . . by calling it nation-building, it's sort of a liner progression toward something. This book is not linear. It's . . . contingent is so important, because there's no arc. There's no narrative arc to Appomattox.

CWBR: Right! Oh, exactly! Because they didn't know Appomattox was there [mutual apologies for talking over one another] So, the title says it all, right—Confederates did not hold modest expectations, rather they held *Colossal Ambitions*. Uhm, now when I was reading, the word 'hubris' kept crossing my mind. But you do a good job of making the reader realize that hubris is not the best word to describe these expectations. Why was I wrong to think that these thinkers and planners were hubristic?

AB: That is a really interesting question because they loved to enact a Greek tragedy, and of the Civil War as Nemesis. Whereas for them, they saw their flexibility and adaptability as profoundly important. They also, I mean Quigley's not wrong, they have a strong victim aspect to their enterprise—that they see themselves as a victim of a revolutionary, yet also backward-looking, centralizing United States tyrannical mob democracy—you name it. Although they are this sort of self-confident—they saw themselves as creating one of the wealthiest, most powerful countries on earth. But they were also conscious that they were next door to an even more powerful nation. And that . . . therefore they, viewed [themselves] not as hubristic, but as actually trying to sort of adjust themselves constantly to circumstances that they understood were not always, and sometimes never, under their control. So then it comes back to the practical. They saw themselves as imminently realistic, not as inviting retribution from Nemesis by outlandish pride. They saw themselves as, yes this great enterprise—and they needed to. And here's the other thing, as small-d democratic politicians, with a white southern electorate, the majority of whom were non-slaveholding, they had to offer the people—this is about leadership . . . But again, scholars have slightly missed this. That they couldn't just, they had to offer a practical, prosperous future to the people for the nation-state to work. They couldn't just rely on 'you're dying for states' rights or dying for a cause.' You also needed the sort of bread-and-butter . . . And hence over and over, from the very beginning with secession, the need to trump the Union as a way to offer a sort of secure, prosperous future, and opportunities for a non-slaveholding majority . . . And as they would see it, they saw themselves offering futures to African Americans, to Native Americans, to Hispanic Americans as well, that was better than that to be had in the United States—however extraordinary that is for us to see. So they were not arrogant, sort of 'my way or the highway.' They were saying, 'we can offer you a better future than to be had in the United States.'

CWBR: But then that is still based on their, as you point out, their concepts on a very rigid racial hierarchy. That in a sense . . . you know . . . that was . . . in a sense based on their ideas of laws of nature. Right? This idea that racial hierarchy is natural, and they had similar views about statecraft. That there, that there were laws in nature that dictated the progress of nations. And so, maybe you can talk a little bit about how that fed into their ambitions as well.

AB: Yes, I think that is really interesting. It's, on the racial aspect, again they look at the United States and they sort of see this . . . there you're either African American or white in the United States. And there's no room [for] as they saw it, their harmonious, that reflected nature, was of a tiered hierarchy of races within this . . . Not that all Confederates had the same racial views—I think they absolutely . . . differed and varied. A Texan had different views of Native Americans than, say, a Virginian . . . There are complex . . . They definitely see themselves as the most advanced civilization on earth . . . And that their sort of national mission was one of propagating their own sort of white-only democracy, racial hierarchy, and a great commercial engine. So this

is all natural laws driven by this sort civilizing impulse of commerce, that will foster interdependence and peace among nations, and that they would pull the world behind them and progressively open up—and here’s that progressive word again—and open up the new era. They had a model, that they saw it, for other nations to emulate, thanks to technology, thanks to human development, thanks to human nature. That they would see this being offered around, opening up the tropical regions of the world to exploitation, or as they would say, development and uplift. This is what they can offer. So they saw themselves at the apex, absolutely, they saw themselves as a sort of signal to a new, of a new . . . they were excited about mobility, they were excited about development, and that would lead to more racial mixing. And that they therefore saw that their model of coerced labor, racial hierarchy, and a sort of white-only democracy at the top—an Anglo-American democracy—would be the vanguard for the rest of the world to follow. It’s a shocking thing to . . . sort of try to get one’s head around.

CWBR: Well it is, especially when you think of it in terms of, that, that they are indeed in many ways progressively minded. You know, they embraced technology, they embraced free trade, they embraced all of these things that we don’t typically associate with conservatism, but I think in most peoples’ minds, they think of Confederates as inherently conservative. But you’ve done a good job, I think, of showing that, that they were quite largely progressively minded people. I also have a question about the concept of ‘Confederate exceptionalism.’ You mention that directly a couple of times, but I think it’s an idea that undergirds a lot of your overall argument. What do you think ‘Confederate exceptionalism’ is, and how do you think it helped shape their postwar planning?

AB: They saw themselves as the most white egalitarian society on earth. This is the sort of, the old *herrenvolk* democracy which we’re all familiar with from graduate school—that kind of white equality predicated on African American slavery—absolutely, emphatically . . . That’s one component . . . Connected with that, you’ve got race, white equality, slavery, and the commodity production. That the role in the world economy of maximum production. That that made them, that they would replace Britain as sort of the global leader, consciousness of free trade, international peace and comity between nations. That they were the ones. They did not want to industrialize. They did not want to set up a national economy. They wanted to trade, and trade with other nations. This was important . . . in so many ways. It would lead to international acceptance of slavery, because ‘if you trade with us, you will accept slavery.’ That will diffuse abolition as an international movement, which they, in any event, saw as declining. And that . . . their exceptional nation would become this sort of repository, a sort of United Nations, a sort of a moral leader of the world—economic, moral, racial, political—leader of the world in all those components . . . Their exceptional nation status was also predicated on a strong . . . internationalist focus. That they would . . . remove the scales from peoples’ eyes. That this, that this new nation would be a model for others to follow. So yes, it’s a vanguard, and you know, yes they’re not expecting that democracy would be embraced by people beyond the, sort of the European. They would teach northerners—once again they saw themselves at the top of a hierarchy—that they would certainly try and teach democracy to more people than themselves.

CWBR: I kept thinking that, kind of at the same time that Lincoln is saying, ‘the last best hope, you know for democracy in the world,’ they’re the last best hope for slavery in the world.

AB: And they used that very same language. That the Confederacy is the last best hope. But they . . . would call it their ‘social system,’ their ‘stable society.’ I mean, they believed that the industrial revolution would lead to social revolution. The creation of a white proletariat in Britain and in the North would lead to revolution. Hence, the importance of enlisting coerced labor. And they believed that Britain and the United States would do this as well—that they would import Chinese laborers. I mean, they are obsessed about international labor movement. They saw themselves as the last best hope, yes, of slavery, and of democracy, and of a stable [society] . . . There’s the conservatism, which you rightly said. They see themselves a stable society that is capable. That’s the essential precondition for economic development and progress. That they see themselves . . . they are still conservative in the sense that you need conservative means for radical ends. If you try to . . . disrupt our society, you’ll just end up with a destructive revolution.

CWBR: Well, and then, what would be the point, in their minds, of carrying out a revolution if you destroy the society that you’re trying to protect.

AB: Exactly. And they of course saw what they did in declaring their own independence, in establishing a government . . . Theirs is the example of a successful revolution along the lines of 1776. And they just see themselves . . . And scholars have . . . seen that that was profoundly important to them. But they saw the risks of a French Revolution growing. And . . . if they are not careful—‘you’ meaning Britain and the North—‘you will go down this road because you are creating an unsustainable social system.’

CWBR: Right. And to that end, they actually tried to convince, or they thought that they could convince, Midwesterners, or, or, newly conquered areas to join either a new confederacy, or some kind of trade organization. That to me, you know . . . the phrase Confederate exceptionalism popped into my head when I read that. That they thought there was something exceptional about what they could offer, that they could convince Midwesterners to join them without, without military power, right, it was suasion, that they could persuade them to join what they were doing.

AB: Or establish an independent Northwestern confederacy, the Pacific confederacy. I always say—this is a vindication of Lincoln—that the confederacy . . . you don’t just let them go. They were determined to destroy the United States and replace it with a multipolar North America. That this would, if you like, secure . . . on a sort of grand strategy, it will secure their northern boundary, so that they can then go off and expand to the South. At the same time, it sort of challenges your Confederate exceptionalism, they saw new nations being created. They believed that the agricultural Northwest . . . They saw enough anecdotal evidence. And . . . again this is hard to get our heads around. They looked at the Copperhead Democrats and saw, ‘ah, secessionists—free-trading secessionists.’ And . . . they debated whether they should join the Confederacy, and most would argue, we don’t want another house divided in the Confederacy—of free and enslaved . . . But we can offer them commercial inducements, like a toll-free trade on the Mississippi, and a custom’s union maybe. And so, they expected that these new nations would be trading partners, would be committed to free trade. The Pacific confederacy would be your gateway to the Chinese market, etc., etc. They’re both exceptional, but they’re also . . . to repeat, sort of global teachers about peaceful revolution, free trade, racial harmony, and racial coexistence in a more complicated globalizing economy. That this was a sort of model that would solve these, as [Jefferson] Davis would say: ‘We’re going to solve our problems. Let us alone and we will solve the world’s

problems,' was what he went on to say, which is often ignored. We just say, 'let them alone.' But they forget . . . they had these plans afterwards.

CWBR: And in a sense to go back to this idea that they saw themselves as inheritors of 1776, I think they saw themselves as inheritors of that entire process of expanding what they thought was the 'true America,' right, coast-to-coast, just as Jefferson and other expansionists did as well.

AB: Absolutely. And to Mexico, and beyond . . . This will be for gradual, peaceful means. They expected that veterans of the army would go out and clear the land and then slaveholders and enslaved people would follow, set up colonies. Then there might be . . . a revolt, but more often they would then peacefully join the expanding Confederacy with access to the Pacific Ocean. So yes, they have that sort of settler-led expansion model. But it's certainly an eco-backed . . . they remain wedded to that 1776 myth, without a doubt.

CWBR: Right. Then also, too, this idea that there, they are willing, as the war progresses and it's become more and more evident that, that it's not going to turn out how they hoped, they still think they have tremendous bargaining power. And so they continue planning even, I mean, even after Lee surrendered—they don't know that Lee has surrendered—some are still planning on a Confederate future, and some of them are thinking about something as radical as a homestead process where they redistribute enslaved people as a redistribution of wealth. So what does that tell you about how their ideas change, uhm, and about that idea of, of hierarchy? Does that challenge their existing ideas of hierarchy?

AB: I think that's a really good question . . . The reforming or amelioration of slavery—they see that as still reinforcing their ideas of, they would say, 'racial tolerance' 'racial hierarchy.' They didn't see, when they were confronted the issue of enlisting African Americans as soldiers, they didn't sort of . . . Some of them, to quote Howell Cobb, 'if you have slaves as soldiers, that's the end of slavery and us.' But there are the gradations of those who believe there would be reform, re-enslavement, between these lines. But I think there is that feeling in the same way as they were rethinking their relationship with the United States, which they were doing especially in those last months of the war—coming up with compromises—they also were increasingly seeing that their own society would undergo huge changes. There would be adaptations, there would be transformations, whether it's more of an industrial-based society. But at the same time, there are other continuities. You know, that . . . even if they joined the United States in a sort of new reunion, there would still be . . . the-age old, what they saw as sort of their consistency, was the need for expansion . . . I mean that was essential for social cohesion, etc., etc. And that there would be, and continue to be, the subordination of African Americans in this hierarchical view—that without a doubt stayed . . . They just say how tolerant this is. And perhaps they are trying to sort of suggest . . . that this a better outcome, a better future for African Americans as well as for white southerners. So it could be that there could be a change of emphasis as they move towards those final months of the war . . . They always accuse the northerners of being the greatest enemies of African Americans—do they need to stress that more and more as they see what the reality of what is happening at that time. There is constant adjustment going on . . . but there are certain—within the midst of that—there are certain continuities. I think the racial hierarchy and expansion remain. But what they are prepared to do is try and fashion this as in the interest of the North to continue to allow this to happen. Even to say to the United States government, 'if we both commit to a radically

expansionist agenda throughout the western hemisphere, you will leave us alone domestically to deal with our arrangements, i.e. perpetuate slavery or slavery in all but name, because that will be in your interest to let us be. They remain, they remain adamant that that will be the outcome, even after Appomattox. That there will be this substantial autonomy, that there will be a reunion of equals, substantial autonomy. Bargaining everything from war debts to pensions . . . And yes, that there's this sort of idea of a southern homestead—veterans will get an enslaved family . . . And they see that as a way to address some of the issues that the war has shown up—the need to distribute slavery ownership more widely. As well as of course dealing with the fiscal problem of the huge postwar debt—that exercised a lot during the war as well.

CWBR: Right, that more people farming more land equals more crops, which equals more exports and hopefully a free-trade world.

AB: Absolutely. And they looked forward to—with the speculation of a cotton stockpile—that they will be able to crush overseas competition. They had no doubt whatsoever that they would swiftly be able to recover their economic position . . . Although as the war drags on, that period of austerity they could call it, before they recover, naturally elongated . . . it seems to be realistic and adjusting. But at the same time there's this faith, they do have this faith in a commodity-based, export-led, based on coerced labor—unfree labor—as being the sort of essential foundation for their postwar society.

CWBR: And I think too that that represents the pragmatism that you try and emphasize. That they understand that, well, they're still fighting a war, they still have to fight that war for something, and that this is part of that. That they're just adapting as the circumstances change.

AB: . . . They're not conquering their independence through fighting the war. The war will come to an end, and then there will be a negotiation, and then they will be able to then get on with what they want to do. So the war is driving and sort of determining, 'when is peace gonna come,' 'how soon,' what condition are they going to be in? And that's what drives their postwar plans. But there, and this is why, this continues in that last year of the war, that they are . . . there is this sort of feeling, that, okay now we have to sort of adjust ourselves to a very powerful United States, that is clearly, not after Lincoln's reelection, not going to fragment. And so, 'we therefore need to qualify our own independence. Make a bargain. Make something that's acceptable to the United States.' As Edward Pollard, the great evangelist of the Lost Cause says, the United States is so powerful now, in February of 1865, that they will let the South go. They still think that . . . there is this sort of reading of the enemy that is all about that the South is essential to the North's prosperity, and that, again, they therefore think, 'well look, we could sort of come to an arrangement.' It's a very materialistic view of what they think their opponents are . . . While they are the virtuous ones, everybody else is money-grasping, materialists.

CWBR: I guess that's the main questions I have about the book itself. I do have a couple of questions more generally about . . . do you think there is room for a similar analysis of Northern attitudes, or I'm sorry, Union attitudes during the war. Of more than just, you know, conquering the Confederacy and reincorporating them. Do you think there's room for a study of what they think either winning or losing the war could look like for the United States?

AB: The fact the United States did win, and so . . . obviously the studies of, say, the Union war, or the global Lincoln, there's this appreciation that the United States . . . that this war is a great sort of episode in its rise to world-power status—certainly ideologically, but also militarily, and economically. But, I think you're right, that . . . Lincoln's assassination, Reconstruction, the presidency of Andrew Johnson, etc., has obscured that sort of . . . that the war regenerates the sort of, the American mission for the world, that of course Lincoln will harness. And it expands to include emancipation. But there's also a profound economic . . . There's some other sinews as well as what we see as America's moral and ethical purpose, and ideological purpose. There are also some other practical nation-building aspects of it as well. Now some scholars . . . Heather Richardson and some others, have talked about the sort of Republican Party. I think . . . there are some interesting parallels and divergences that . . . would be of great interest in . . . how Americans in the North also saw this war as a nation-building event as well as a crusade for morality, ideology, religion. And again, it didn't quite happen, because when the war ended, and history goes off in very unusual ways, there is something . . . that I've debated quite a lot, is that there is something to uncover that has also disappeared in the United States as well.

CWBR: Well, you know, narratives have a way of becoming, of obscuring other possibilities, which I think is kind of what I touched on with your book, that we have these set narratives that we're used to with the Confederacy and the Civil War, and you're kind of setting that narrative aside, and maybe there's an opportunity for that to be done with the Union cause as well.

AB: Yes, because, people talk about how the war centralized and expanded federal government, etc., etc. But I think a lot, like the Confederates, they were looking, they were expecting with peace would come some kind of reset. Because the Confederates are not sort of drawn—they were not fashioning their future nation-state around Robert E. Lee, and the Army of Northern Virginia. They were fashioning it around slavery and staple crop production. It's interesting as to the United States, because again we know what happened, but actually during the war they might have been looking . . . they had different goals in mind during the course of the war. And to what extent have those been obscured by what's come on later. Okay, emancipation, the embrace of the harder war . . . well how was that changing expectations about what the United States would become. If the South was indeed going to become, in the words of Thaddeus Stevens, a sort of you know, a colony or a territory. Well, what was that going to mean for the United States. Was it going to be . . . Confederates constantly believed that the North was going to erect a tyranny on the ruins of the South. Well, . . . did . . . some Americans . . . think 'we're going to become more like Britain'—a more industrialized, centralized, imperial power. Or 'are we going to become something...' There are definitely some interesting questions about unpacking what people were thinking at the time during the war. Did McClellan's army signal to Americans at large, 'wow, we are now the greatest military power on earth. We've got a larger army than the Russian Tsar.' What is that gonna mean for the future?

CWBR: Right. I think those are important questions. Alright, before we go, do you have any current projects that you're working on that you want to share with us to keep an on in the future?

AB: . . . My current project, as well as, I think, pursuing what we've just been talking about, my current project is looking at gold rushes around the world, and their role in state formation and empire-building. We sort of, again, we sort of think as these mass movements of people erecting

institutions bottom-up. . . Starting out from California, looking at what will become British Vancouver, the sort of up near Vancouver, where these rushes are taking place. And maybe expanding it to South Africa and Australia as well. Seeing these as extraordinary sort of geopolitical, and bottom-up government sort of enterprises. That's . . . a tentative idea as to what I'm looking at.

CWBR: Fascinating! Well, we look forward to hearing more from you. Again, this is Dr. Brette, author of *Colossal Ambitions: Confederate Planning for the Post-Civil War World*. Dr. Brette, thank you again for joining us today.

AB: And thank you so much indeed, Jeffery for your time. I really enjoyed speaking to you.

CWBR: I did too. It's been a pleasure.

AB: Bye-bye.

¹ Jeffery Hardin Hobson conducted this interview with Adrian Brette on Friday, March 12, 2021. It has been gently edited for clarity.