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Interview

DIVISION WITHIN THE 'SOLID SOUTH': WALLACE HETTLE UNTANGLES ANTEBELLUM SOUTHERN POLITICS

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*Civil War Book Review (cwbr): In **The Peculiar Democracy**, you observe that the antebellum South went from "a world in which political equality [was] mixed with economic inequality" to one dominated by an elite affiliated with the Democratic Party. What caused this political shift?*

Wallace Hettle (wh): It was perhaps inevitable that a society based on the ultimate form of economic inequality, slavery, would generate a political class based on principles of mastery as much as those of equality. Thomas Jefferson certainly worried about the troubling implications that slavery held for a democratic polity. Since slavery produced "unremitting despotism" on the plantation, young men would find it difficult to retain the "manners and morals" essential to democracy. Jefferson thought that the habits of mastery developed on the plantation could not be walled off from the rest of society, including the political world.

cwbr: You argue that the political legacies of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson existed in tension within the antebellum Democratic Party. By the time of the Civil War, what were the reasons for the apparent triumph of the Jacksonian tradition?

wh: Unlike Jefferson, who was fundamentally ambivalent about slavery, Jackson pioneered an effective political style based on mastery and manhood. Jacksonian Democrats continued, as Jefferson had, to celebrate the independence of the yeomanry. But the language of yeoman independence coexisted with practices and discourses that legitimated inequality.

In **The Peculiar Democracy**, I explore those practices and ideas by telling the stories of five Confederate Democrats, whose stories highlight the fragile

nature of a democracy in a society shaped by the peculiar institution.

cwbr: Prior to the Civil War, what were the vehicles through which "encroachments of aristocratic power" threatened agrarian autonomy?

wh: Agrarian independence was as much an idea as a concrete set of political or economic practices. Presented in an idealized form by Democratic theorists such as John Taylor of Caroline, agrarian liberty was in some sense a convenient fiction, based on a romanticized conception of absolute personal autonomy on the part of the yeomanry.

In my first chapter, I describe the paradoxical manner in which conceptions of yeoman independence were intertwined with the militia system, a social institution based on hierarchy and order. In chapter two, I argue that in the 1850s, rising taxes, high land prices, railroad development, and the growth of commercial agriculture all created a sense of crisis—a belief that yeoman personal independence was endangered by the growth of the market economy.

cwbr: You contend that slavery was, to use a modern phrase, the "wedge issue" that increasingly divided the plantation aristocracy from the yeoman farmer class. Why weren't the yeoman farmers, and others who owned property but not slaves, able to mount a viable political challenge to the Democratic Party?

wh: Slavery and racism both united and divided white Southerners. Shared racial identity held them together, while conflicting economic interests and the exigencies of a war to maintain slavery pulled them apart.

That the yeoman farmers never founded an alternative to the slaveholder-dominated Democratic Party should not be surprising, given the paucity of independent organization by rural laborers across the globe in the 19th century. Like other landed ruling classes, slaveholders dominated the intellectual, political, and religious life of their society. By dominating the democratic conversation they set the social agenda.

Yet slaveholders did feel insecure in the 1850s. Many feared that the election of Lincoln might endanger their political hegemony, creating patronage opportunities for the Republicans and furthering the dissent of non-slaveholders. I believe that such concerns helped speed the South towards disunion.

cwbr: In a recent book, David Williams argued that southern whites were organized into a virtual caste society. Would you go so far?

wh: The word "caste" seems too static, when in fact the antebellum South's social class structure did allow for both downward and upward social mobility. Democrats such as Jackson and Joseph Brown of Georgia were both upwardly mobile lawyers, who entered the slaveholding class only after achieving professional success. That talented young men could enter the slaveholding class through industry and thrift was a crucial argument to pro-slavery writers who believed that the legitimacy of the slave system rested on the promise of equal opportunity for white men.

cwbr: You condemn southern firebrands, such as the 1860-61 secession crisis spawned, for being increasingly opposed to "popular Democracy." But hadn't egalitarianism been considered suspect during much of America's early history, and not just in the South?

wh: To me, "democracy" simply means a government by the people. In the antebellum South, of course, "the people" meant white men. Yet even by those standards, secession witnessed real limitations in popular democracy.

In the secession crisis, slaveholders had more say than other white men. Control of party machinery such as nominating caucuses, newspapers, and party conventions was absolutely vital in framing debate. While real disagreements occurred, the debate over secession was generally one between members of the slaveholding class advocating competing strategies. Therefore, events such as Georgia's pivotal secession debates at Milledgeville in 1860 featured only speeches by slaveholders. Moreover, some professed yeoman dissidents, such as Georgia's Joseph Brown, were incorporated into the drive for secession. In many ways the process was formally democratic, yet formal democracy coexisted with elite control.

In my chapter on Governor Francis W. Pickens of South Carolina's Upcountry, I explore a case where the democratic process breaks down completely in the wake of secession. In that state, legislative apportionment virtually guaranteed planter rule by giving undue weight to the Lowcountry

parishes. Still, the state's secession convention stripped Pickens of power, handing it to a planter-controlled executive council.

cwbr: *Superior political organization and chicanery, you suggest, facilitated the victory of the secessionists. Had a referendum on secession been conducted, is there reason to think that the unionists might have prevailed?*

wh: In researching the secession debate, I was struck by the fact that opponents of secession argued for greater deliberation and greater accountability, including popular referenda. They believed that the process should be a democratic one, and convincingly portrayed themselves as the defenders of Jacksonian democracy. By contrast, the secession crisis witnessed fire-eaters, even in relatively egalitarian states such as Alabama, showing remarkably little concern for the voice of the people.

It is hard to know what a popular referendum encompassing all the slave states would have produced, and the fire-eaters had no interest in finding out. Certainly results in the Upper South would have looked different than the Deep South. Georgia did pass a referendum on secession, though by a razor-thin margin. But this kind of question, because it is essentially counterfactual, is very difficult to answer precisely. Who would supervise such a referendum? When would it have been held?

cwbr: *You write that "fighting in the Civil War became a test of masculinity." Does this account for why many non-slaveholders fought for the Confederacy (even before forced conscription)?*

wh: For many soldiers, the Civil War was a test of manhood. I make this argument in regard to Jeremiah Clemens, Joseph Brown, and John C. Rutherford. Of course, it would be absurd to argue that Civil War soldier motivation was solely about gender. A variety of scholars have convincingly explored the ways in which religion, political ideology, and racial identity contributed to soldier motivation. I do believe, however, that Confederate soldiers thought about themselves as men in a culture that equated manhood with violence.

cwbr: *Let us close with your assessment of the South's collapse. Would you say that political fractures more than military defeats contributed to the Confederacy's defeat?*

wh: The Peculiar Democracy is a history of Confederate politics, intended as a corrective to literature that emphasizes the unity of white men in an Old South, "herrenvolk democracy." I therefore emphasize politics-especially Jefferson Davis's spectacular failure to articulate a coherent vision for the plain people of the Confederacy-when I discuss the collapse of the South. Although providing an explanation for Confederate defeat has not been my chief concern, I believe that it can best be explained by three related factors: Union military strength, Confederate social and political divisions, and the collapse of slavery.

*Wallace Hettle, who teaches history at the University of Northern Iowa, challenges the prevailing notion of a unified Southern polity on the eve of the Civil War in *The Peculiar Democracy: Southern Democrats in Peace and Civil War*. Examining the Democratic Party's ideals and rhetoric from Thomas Jefferson to Jefferson Davis, Hettle addresses how political divisions between agrarian populists and plantation elites weakened the South during a period in which it most desperately needed unity.*