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Interview

WHAT THIS CRUEL WAR WAS OVER: SOLDIERS, SLAVERY, AND THE CIVIL WAR

Manning, Chandra

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Interview with Chandra Manning

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Your book emphasizes the role of slavery as the reason for the Civil War—according to the soldiers—from the beginning of the conflict. In contrast, some scholars have argued that in 1860 and 1861 politicians saw the war as a fight to either prevent or allow the secession of part of the Union—or, more broadly, as a conflict over states rights. Most notably, they argue that Abraham Lincoln slowly drifted toward a war against slavery. Should the political philosophy of soldiers in blue and gray prompt us to take another look at when the Civil War became a fight over slavery?

Chandra Manning (CM): I should note from the outset that soldiers certainly prompted *me* to take another look at the relationship between the war and slavery. When I started the project, I had no idea that slavery would be its focus, and in fact, assumed slavery would be fairly peripheral for enlisted soldiers, but the enlisted men whose mail I read finally persuaded me that I needed to think anew. What I concluded was that when the war became a fight over slavery, as well as how the war became a war over slavery differed for different groups, so the political philosophy of ordinary enlisted men should probably prompt us to ask the question a little more precisely, and should probably persuade us to distinguish between a war *over* slavery and a war to *end* slavery.

In one sense, everybody agrees it was about slavery from the outset—the election of Abraham Lincoln on a platform explicitly prohibiting the expansion

of slavery prompted the secession of seven states, each of which cited that platform and a lack of confidence in the North's commitment to enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law as reasons for secession, and secession, as everyone at the time knew, meant war. Leaders in the seceding states were no less sure of that than anyone else; they might have believed they had the right to secede, but knew full well that it would not happen without war, just as it took war for the thirteen colonies to gain independence. Once war came, slaves and free blacks knew immediately that slavery lay at the heart of the conflict, and no amount of official nay-saying convinced them otherwise. Confederate soldiers, right from the outset, saw the war as necessary to prevent what they were sure the North was really up to, and that was the destruction of an institution without which they simply could not imagine their lives or homes or families being safe.

One of the war's many ironies is that the average white Northerner was up to no such thing in the spring of 1861, because in April 1861, the average white Northerner would have much preferred not to think about the issue of slavery at all. In fact, one of few things enlisted men in both armies might have agreed on after a few months in the ranks was, this blasted war happened over slavery whether we like it or not, and the *other* side made it that way. The ordinary white guy who enlisted in the Union Army in the spring of 1861 did care about what he saw as the United States' experiment in self-government, which only works when all parties agree to abide by election results, even when they don't like them. Secession in response to distasteful election results would turn the United States from the example for the world that soldiers had grown up believing their country was supposed to be into a laughingstock for the world, and would doom the rest of the world's hopes for self-government. Such ideas might sound grandiose to us, and I confess it took me awhile to take them seriously, but after awhile when you see regular guys writing about these kinds of ideas with such feeling to the very people they can least put up a show in front of (parents, spouses, or that toughest of audiences, siblings), you realize that to understand the war from an enlisted Union soldier's point of view, you simply have to take those ideas seriously. So when the ordinary Union soldier enlisted in 1861, those were the ideas on his mind, and in that sense, the war was not primarily over slavery for enlisted Union soldiers at first.

Yet two things changed white Union enlisted men's minds fast, and in that change I think we do perceive a command to revisit our ideas about the timing of the war's transition to a war to end slavery. Wartime service in seceded states and meeting white Southerners led Union soldiers to realize that after decades of

tension, war—the real thing—had actually come. They concluded that *what* broke up the Union was slavery, so if the Union was to remain intact or be restored *and* if it was not to face similar peril all over again, the factor that had caused secession had to be eradicated. The second factor was interaction with actual slaves, whose suffering genuinely horrified many white Union soldiers. Even the most hard-bitten of souls wrote home to say how much worse it was than he thought, so when coupled with the institution's role in prompting secession (as enlisted Union soldiers saw it), exposure to the misery of slavery changed minds. These two factors did their work remarkably quickly—within months of soldiers' first arrival to the theater of war. The first big wave of changing opinion took place when the first round of recruits had been in the field for a couple of months—between August and December of 1861 to be exact—and in that sense, yes, I think we really do need to revisit when we think the relationship between the war and ending slavery began to congeal.

CWBR: Your research suggests that the soldiers who fought in the Civil War had a far more sophisticated political worldview than historians have previously considered. How would you describe their conception of and commitment to republican government, which you argue that they fought to defend? Did Union and Confederate soldiers link this ideal with the preservation and prosperity of them and their families?

CM: I think soldiers had a more sophisticated worldview than historians writing in the mid- to late-twentieth century supposed, but I don't want to make myself sound like I am responsible for blazing entirely new trails on that score. I think our appreciation of soldiers' mental worlds has been increasing for about two decades now, as we move far enough away from later national experiences (especially the Vietnam War) to stop ourselves from reflexively imposing later experiences on the Civil War generation. Historians like Reid Mitchell and James McPherson in particular made it possible, even mandatory, for someone like me to take soldiers' ideas seriously, which is important because soldiers took their ideas about republican government seriously. I do sometimes find that readers or listeners resist the idea that regular soldiers thought or cared very much about why government should exist or what it should do, but I was very gratified yesterday when the father-in-law of a friend, who is not an historian but who received the book for Father's Day and has been reading it, volunteered over hotdogs at our Fourth of July barbeque that he had really enjoyed reading and thinking about the difference between Northerners' and Southerners' ways of thinking about government because the differences struck him as believable and

relevant. So I think that the two decades of work by people who came before me are beginning to pay off!

To get to the heart of the question: it seems clear to me that soldiers in both armies took the American Revolution and its legacy seriously, and derived their conceptions of government from it. To put it another way, both sides saw themselves as defenders of the memory of the Revolution, but in both cases, the memory was selective, and therefore different from, and even threatened by, how the other side interpreted the memory.

Confederate troops were inclined to link the legacy of the Revolution directly to the well-being and aspirations of themselves and their loved ones. The Revolution established the precept that government existed to advance the interests of white men and their families, and when it no longer did so, those same white men had the right to rebel against that government. The preservation of slavery was central to the material well-being of some white Southerners, but even more pivotal to the safety of all white families who lived in a region where 40% of the population was black and (white Southerners worried) inclined to rise up in violence against white Southerners, especially vulnerable women and children, without the controlling mechanism of slavery in place.

One of my favorite Confederates, a Georgia soldier named Private Ivy Duggan, insisted that if the colonists could rebel over a paltry tax on tea because that tax proved that the British government did not represent colonists' interests, then how much more right did white Southerners have to rebel against a government that menaced slavery, an institution far more vital to white men and their loved ones than untaxed tea was to colonists. To so much as criticize slavery, Duggan claimed, was tantamount to unleashing arsonists and putting weapons and poison into the hands of murderers; a government that implicitly criticized slavery by vowing to stop its expansion, therefore, *entitled* white Southerners to invoke the right of revolution invoked by the founding generation, and the safety of their families *demanded* that they invoke it. Duggan, incidentally, wrote in such a way in 1861 in central Georgia, a place where no Union soldiers were remotely near at the time, quite possibly in recognition of the fact that opinion among white Southerners about secession was very divided early in the war, but opinion about the purpose of government, belief in the importance of the American Revolution, and the centrality of family were widespread, so linking the cause of the Confederacy to pre-existing beliefs about republican government and to family made good sense.

Union troops also placed great importance on the memory of the Revolution, and they also cared about the well-being and aspirations of their families, but they did not link the two in the same way as Confederate troops. To make this distinction is emphatically not to say that white Northerners were somehow less self-centered than white Southerners (for the record, since I have been misunderstood on this point on more than one occasion, I think that most groupings of human beings have roughly proportional shares of admirable and less admirable people and generalizations about one group being more or less selfish, generous, kind, honest, or any other adjective than another group strike me as neither persuasive nor useful) but is to say that the relationship between government, family, and individual worked differently for ordinary white Northerners than it did for ordinary white Southerners.

What was important about the American Revolution was less the process by which it happened (rebellion) than the government it created; so to honor and keep the memory of the Revolution, the thing to do was to save what it had created. Moreover the Union existed not just to advance the interests of white men and their families, but for the grander purpose of proving to the world that republican self-government based on the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence could work. To stand by and allow the Union created by the American Revolution to self-destruct because some citizens did not like the way an election turned out, as an ordinary Union enlistee saw it, was to betray the experiment begun by the Founders and to dash the hopes of human beings everywhere, because to do so would say that self-government does not work, so don't bother to try it.

***CWBR:* You assiduously follow the mood and the morale of soldiers in both Union and Confederate armies, with special attention to region and local circumstances. How did military morale on the battlefield and politics in the halls of government affect one another?**

CM: The short answer is reciprocally. Both the Union and the Confederacy enacted conscription but the fact remained that both armies were overwhelmingly volunteer armies (even if many soldiers volunteered primarily to avoid getting drafted) manned by recruits who saw themselves as citizens who kept civilian rights, particularly the right of dissent. Moreover, the Union and the Confederacy were both democratic societies in which the military remained subject to civil authority and in which that civil authority consisted of elected

leaders who answered to constituents and got their jobs by winning elections in which, by the middle of the war, soldiers as well as civilians voted. What all of this means is that public opinion mattered in how the war was fought. To cite some examples: Lincoln famously overturned Fr mont's Proclamation in part to assuage Border State public opinion and keep Kentucky and Missouri in the Union, and he delayed issuance of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation until after a battle that could at least be pitched as a Union victory. Vicksburg mattered for the Union enough to be the object of a long and costly campaign for lots of tactical and strategic reasons, but also because Midwestern farmers sought the restoration of the Mississippi River as a conduit for shipping produce. Confederate troop allocations were products of military needs, but also of public demand for home guards to prevent slave insurrection.

At the same time, voting publics knew there was a war on, and they wanted most of all to win that war. When the war went well militarily, election results often favored those in power, and when the war was not going well militarily, election results often favored the opposition, in both the Union and the Confederacy. Because they fought the war, voted for leaders (though when they did that varied from state to state), and especially because they wrote letters home to other potential voters and members of the public, many soldiers explicitly saw themselves as actively shaping the war. They did not feel that way every day of course, and plenty of times they railed against feeling like cogs caught up in senseless wheels (as enlisted men since time immemorial have done, I suspect), but nonetheless a striking sense seemed to exist that by persuading the folks at home to see the war their way, soldiers helped to shape the war they fought.

CWBR: The link between soldiers' conceptions of the war as a fight over slavery and their own racial predilections seems, at times, tortured. How did soldiers, particularly in the Union, reconcile their cause and their views on race, or did they?

CM: The link for Confederate soldiers and for black Union soldiers was always pretty clear and straightforward: for them, slavery and race were inextricable which for Confederate troops meant that slavery was necessary as a form of race control (among other things) and for black Union troops meant that every black American, even those born free, had a stake in the end of slavery.

White Union soldiers are often the toughest for us to understand because we naturally assume slavery and race to be intertwined, but white enlisted Union men kept the two topics quite separate. Slavery the institution could be thought about abstractly as a source of political power for white Southerners, as a source of political conflict, perhaps even a moral embarrassment, but above all, as the reason for secession and war and when thought about abstractly, it was not particularly taxing to call for an end to the institution that had caused so much trouble, especially for men not personally invested in it. The magnitude of calling for an end to slavery should not be underestimated; the United States was a slaveholding nation, even if slaves lived only in the southern portion of it, which is to say that governance, foreign policy, economy, and more were shaped by the existence of slavery for everyone who lived in the United States, not just for people who lived in the South.

Still, the end of the institution that had brought about the war could be thought about in pragmatic terms even by men who assumed, as most white Northerners did, that black people were not equal to white people. For that reason, plenty of white Union troops called for an end to slavery even as they voiced racist opinions about black Americans' inferior qualities and unfitness for civil rights. The continued racism has led us to miss the early timing and underestimate the strength of the rank-and-file's demands for an end to slavery because we have assumed that anyone passing such racist remarks must have been all for slavery, or at least opposed to emancipation, but those assumptions are a function of our own presentism, not sound interpretations of what was going on in the rank-and-file. To put it another way, it was perfectly possible for the same white Union soldier to vehemently demand an end to slavery and to insist that blacks were inferior to whites, or even to claim to dislike all black people. The co-existence of pro-emancipation sentiment and racism seems strange to us, but perfectly normal to them, especially since before the war most of them knew few or no black people.

That co-existence did become harder to sustain as the war dragged on, and got more and more gruesome, at least for some Union troops. The escalation of the war began to inspire some troops to see the awfulness of the war as God's punishment on the entire nation and in trying to figure out what Northerners as well as Southerners were being punished *for*, some began to see northern complicity in slavery through the widespread racism that enabled whites in the non-slaveholding states to go along with slavery for so long. That particular calculus had begun to form before the summer of 1863, but it received a real

boost on the 4th of July, when Vicksburg fell and when Lee's Army headed south after Gettysburg on the same day.

The concurrence of those two events on Independence Day, no less, could not just be chance, soldier after soldier reasoned, but must be the work of God. But what did it mean? Even though Vicksburg and Gettysburg were Union victories, soldiers did not just respond with the sort of see, God is on our side rhetoric we might expect, but rather because both campaigns had been so costly, they discerned a more complicated message that went something like: clearly God wants the Union to win in the long run, but not until the Union deserves to win, which it won't do until it recognizes and atones for whatever it has done that has angered God enough to send this awful war, and what it has done must have to do with northern whites' complicity in the war's cause, slavery. In the summer of 1863, then, certainly not all but a surprising number of soldiers began to look seriously at their own racial attitudes.

In contrast to Union soldiers' perception that slavery must go in order for the Union to win the war—which remained strong throughout the war—new ideas about civil rights proved much more fragile. When the war went badly, soldiers could revert to their old attitudes. Conversely, at the end when Union victory began to look imminent, some decided that there was no need for such radical change after all. Both types of back-sliding show that the urge to keep the issues of slavery and race separate remained strong even as the war itself called that separation into question.

CWBR: How did Confederate soldiers grapple with the nature of the Civil War as a crusade against their peculiar institution, especially as the military battles began to turn against them? Did they resent fighting for slavery, especially when many of them owned no slaves themselves?

CM: I certainly expected them to, but I was wrong. When I began this project, I did not set out to write about what soldiers thought about slavery because I did not think slavery would be so central to their war. I especially assumed that slavery would not be central to the non-slaveholding Confederates who made up the bulk of the enlisted ranks, and in whom I was interested. Insofar as I thought about nonslaveholders and slavery, I assumed the story would be one in which ordinary white southern men discovered that they had been tricked and misled into a war over slavery, and then gradually withdrew their loyalty in response to that discovery and to the military course of the war

itself. In making that assumption I was guilty of a habit that I particularly dislike and try to discourage among students, and that is the habit of patronization. It is condescending and patronizing to the men who filled the Confederate ranks to assume that they were oblivious to the plainly worded ordinances of secession, or to the strident editorials, or to the hundred and one other sources explaining why secession was necessary to protect slavery, and it is even more patronizing and condescending to explain the war away as about just about anything other than slavery when soldiers themselves did no such thing, and I am embarrassed to admit it, but I was guilty of that very condescension. The good news is I got over it, because soldiers left me no choice, *especially* when the course of the war became so trying. There is no question that non-slaveholders sometimes resented slaveholders, but that did not translate into resentment of the institution itself, because non-slaveholders saw the survival of that institution as necessary to the survival of everything that mattered to them. The Confederate conception of the purpose of government bequeathed from the Revolution as the promotion of the best interests of white men and their families worked fine when the Confederate government did not need to place demands on white men and their families. But as the needs of the Confederacy increasingly conflicted with the best interests of white families and resulted in policies like conscription, impressment, and tax-in-kind, the logic of secession would say that the Confederate government had forfeited its reason for existence and its claims on white Southerners' loyalties.

Yet for four long and very punishing years, non-slaveholding soldiers did not invoke that logic, although many came close when the war went badly, when the Confederate government did something they did not like, and especially when their families were in need. What pulled them back? Partly of course the momentum of war itself, but even more effective was the reminder that no matter how bad the Confederacy was and how awful the war was, life in the Union would be worse because it would mean abolition and abolition was the very worst thing that could happen to their families because it would destroy the world as they knew it and threaten the very lives of their loved ones. That conviction served as a sort of glue that helped non-slaveholders continue to adhere to a war and a cause that on the surface appear to have little to do with them.

***CWBR:* Your narrative points to the racial beliefs of the northern home front during the war vis-à-vis the soldiers' ideas. Does your research suggest that Union soldiers acted as a vanguard of revised notions on race in**

the North?

CM: I think that enlisted Union soldiers' views on race were fundamentally challenged and definitely underwent change as a result of the experiences of serving in the war, seeing slaves and slavery, and the performance of black Union soldiers, but my jury is still out on whether we can think of white Union soldiers as a genuine vanguard, because that would suggest they led to a place that the home front got to later, but did eventually reach. I am not sure that soldiers themselves stayed in that place or that the home front ever really got there. They might have, but I don't feel that I really know. I am in fact trying to envision a project that will let me examine that very question further—so check back in a few years on that one! What my research does suggest is that the question you are asking is one of the most important ones facing us in understanding the war and its aftermath.

CWBR: Your narrative suggests a tragic postlude to the Civil War era: that the progressive ideology that prompted many Union soldiers to fight against slavery did not survive the turbulent Reconstruction years. Where were the soldiers in the postwar years and did they play any role in reuniting the republic under a new racial order?

CM: What happened to soldiers after the war, as I suggested above, really does strike me as an area we need to revisit much more intensely. Much of the work on the memory of the war certainly sees soldiers and the phenomenon of peaceful reunion at the cost of whites North and South agreeing to ignore slavery as central to the post-Reconstruction racial order, which may very well be the case, but I think we have seen that outcome as inevitable because we have missed or at least minimized how much serious rethinking so many white Union soldiers really did during the war. In other words, we have assumed that they didn't change very much in their racial attitudes, so we should not be surprised that by the reunion at Gettysburg in 1913 it was fine with white Union as well as Confederate veterans to make the event a whites only affair and pretend black soldiers did not exist. I am no longer convinced of the inevitability. I think that views did change, or at least proved susceptible to change, but then changed back, and I wish I knew a lot more about precisely when, how, and why.

CWBR: You have crafted this narrative from a massive amount of archival research from scores of archives that reveals the lives of over a thousand Union and Confederate soldiers. How did you organize and

synthesize this mountain of data?

CM: To keep track of soldiers, I created a data sheet for each in which I entered details like birthday, hometown, occupation, father's occupation, marital status, close family members (wife and children, or parents and siblings for unmarried men), date of enlistment, rank, regiment, places served, battles fought, and events like promotion, capture, wounding, illness, and death. Then I just kept the data sheets filed alphabetically within the Union and Confederate armies.

To keep track of what soldiers were saying, I devised a somewhat more elaborate system that would help me spot patterns and change over time. I developed the system because soldiers were not behaving at all as I expected them to. Initially, I thought I would write a study comparing Union and Confederate soldiers, but also comparing regional differences *within* the Union and Confederate armies and I would end up writing something about region, localism, and loyalty in the 19th century United States (I know, it even sounds like something only a graduate student could love). But as I sat in the archives reading dead guys' mail, I kept finding myself struck by the urgency with which they discussed the very topic I thought they would avoid—slavery. I was not sure, though, if I was spotting a real pattern, or if I was just noticing anomalies because they departed from my expectations and so surprised me more.

So I decided to create a document for every topic I saw soldiers discussing frequently (with the exception of the weather and their intestinal travails, both perennially favorite topics that I did not particularly want to write about) and then start transcribing relevant parts of letters, diary entries, and regimental newspapers chronologically within the document. In other words, I had a document on politics, one on patriotism, one on slavery, and five or six other topics. If I was reading a letter from July 6, 1864, in which a North Carolinian discussed the upcoming gubernatorial election, parallels with the American Revolution, and his fears of race war if slavery ended, then I would enter the part about the governor's election in the politics document between July 5 and July 7 entries, the part about the Revolution in the patriotism document between July 5 and July 7 entries, and the part about slavery in the slavery document between July 5 and July 7 entries. I also included full citations so that if I ended up using the passage, I would be sure to go back and read the passage in the context of the full letter to make sure I was not misinterpreting or taking the soldier's thoughts out of context. I kept Union and Confederate soldiers in the same document, but

I used one font for Union soldiers and another font for Confederate soldiers so I could compare the two easily.

That technique is what first alerted me to the importance of the slavery issue to soldiers, since that file quickly grew to my thickest. The chronological organization also helped me to track change over time; that was how I first spotted the shift that began between August and December 1861, and it was also how I could chart rises and falls in morale. Finally, the organization helped me identify actual patterns as opposed to anomalies. Because both armies consisted of men who thought of themselves as citizen-soldiers who retained the right to their own opinions, dissent and disagreement remained a steady presence in both armies, which meant that I needed to set a standard for figuring out how to tell if one point of view really was dominant or not. The standard I chose was that the prevailing view had to outnumber the dissenting view by a factor of three to one. My long topic documents helped me to figure the ratio of opinion for any given question, and determine if it met my three to one standard.

CWBR: What is the primary belief of historians that you attempt to correct or revise with this work?

CM: I would certainly like to rectify some of the misperceptions that I started out with myself. I would like the book to aid in dislodging the assumption that non-slaveholding Confederates didn't care about or fight to protect slavery and instead help historians and readers to understand *why* slavery would seem important enough for ordinary white Southerners, including good and kind men who cared most in the world about their own families, to fight to protect. I would like the book to play a part in undoing the spell that McClellan had cast over me (and others) with his 1862 Harrison's Landing letter in which he warned Lincoln that radical views on slavery would disband the Union Army. McClellan consistently overestimated the odds against any move he himself did not favor, so I should have been able to see his bluff for what it was, but I didn't until enlisted white Union soldier after enlisted white Union soldier finally alerted me to the shift that began to take place in the last four months of 1861. So with that in mind, I would like the book to help revise our understanding of the timing of the war's transition to a war to end slavery, and I would like to contribute to a more precise understanding of precisely how that transition happened with attention to the roles of enlisted Union soldiers as connectors between the actions and determination of slaves and the measures taken by Lincoln and Union political and military leaders to eventually end slavery.

I would love it if the book would serve as a reminder that about 10% of the Union Army was black, and we can't talk about Union soldiers without talking about black Union soldiers. I would like it if the book made it seem less like a given that black men would fight for the Union; it should not be at all apparent that black men would choose to fight to save a government that had enabled and thrived on the enslavement of members of their race for its entire existence. Hopefully, we will look more closely and think more clearly about what black troops hoped the war would achieve, and recover the real sense of possibility that seemed to exist for many black soldiers in the spring of 1865, so that we see the subsequent loss of that sense as less of a given and more of a pressing question that still awaits our attention.

CWBR: Thank you.