An interview with historian James M. McPherson

The Civil War, impeachment then and now, and Lincoln's legacy—Part 1

By David Walsh
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WSWS editorial board member David Walsh recently spoke to James McPherson, the distinguished historian of the Civil War era in his office at Princeton University. Professor McPherson's works include Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution; Battle Cry of Freedom [a Pulitzer Prize winner]; For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War and The Struggle for Equality.

David Walsh: Over the past 15 months or so, the US has been shaken by a severe political crisis, leading to the impeachment of an elected president for the first time and has entered into two wars, one of which is ongoing as we speak.

When we turn to the debates of the 1850s, the first thing that strikes one is the apparently far more substantive nature of the divisions. I wonder if you could discuss briefly the passion that was aroused by the discussions over the fate of Kansas. I'm thinking in particular of the attack on Charles Sumner in May 1856, and the debate on the Lecompt on constitution in early 1858. What social tensions were expressed in those struggles?

James McPherson: Kansas became a kind of cockpit and symbol of events that had been building up for a generation, since the 1830s, on the question of slavery. I think it probably started with the increasing polarization between the Abolitionist movement in its militant phase, that got going in the 1830s, and the pro-slavery defenders, those who argued that slavery was a positive good, who also got going in a major way in the 1830s. In the 1830s and 1840s this was a debate over the morality and socioeconomic validity of slavery and the question as to whether slavery was consistent with a democratic society. It was a major issue in the polity because of the controversy over the gag rule, for example, and the barring of Abolitionist literature from the mails, the debates in Congress, and so on.

But I don't think it threatened the stability of the country until the Texas issue came along, this huge expansion of slavery, and then the Mexican War, with an even potentially greater expansion of slavery and the Wilmot Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, the fugitive slave law and, of course, the Kansas-Nebraska Act. All of these had sort of built up in a step-by-step acceleration and broadening of the whole debate, from a situation where it had been an obsessive issue for the two extremes in the 1830s and 1840s to a point where it became something of an obsessive issue for the whole country, focusing on the issue of the expansion of slavery.

I think more than anything else the Kansas-Nebraska Act fell on him like a thunderclap. And that's when he went back into politics. Between the passage of the Act and his election as president he gave 175 public speeches, all of them focusing on the issue of slavery's expansion.

And of course the issue of Kansas itself, the contest between the Free Staters and the border ruffians and so on really went on for four years from 1854, when the bill was passed, until 1858 when Congress finally defeated the Lecompton constitution. You had this war in Kansas itself, in which several hundred people were killed. In fact, nobody knows how many. John Brown and so on. And the echoes of it in Congress, more than echoes.

It was a speech on Kansas by Charles Sumner that provoked Preston Brooks' attack on him. The Lecompton constitution split the Democratic Party and ensured that two Democratic parties would contest against the Republicans in the 1860 election. I think that's what made possible Lincoln's election. These issues really engaged passions. There were several occasions in addition to the Sumner-Brooks affair when Congressmen confronted each other on the floor of Congress, threw punches at each other, threatened each other with weapons, and there was as well truly escalating rhetoric. My own feeling is that the 1850s was probably the decade in all of American history with the most passionate and irreconcilable polarization, which foreshadowed the war in many ways. So it went from a moral argument, the Abolitionists versus the pro-slavery forces, to a political argument, to physical confrontation, to war, over the course of a generation.

I don't know if in domestic politics that particular pattern has ever replicated itself on anything like the same level. I don't think the culture wars of the 1960s, of which I think the Clinton impeachment is part, are at nearly the same level for the whole country. There are groups, like the anti-abortion people, extremes on the Right, the Wall Street Journal being the more respectable spokesman for some of these, but I don't think they've engaged the whole country in the same way that the debates and conflicts of the 1850s did.

DW: What was the essence of Sumner's speech?

JM: His substantive argument was that “The Crime Against Kansas”
was just the latest effort by what he called the Slave Power, that is, an organized and concerted effort by the planter class through their political leadership, to expand slavery. This was the latest example of their efforts to foist the expansion of slavery on the country. What really provoked Brooks' response were Sumner's references to his cousin, the South Carolina senator, Andrew P. Butler. Sumner is often said to have made offensive remarks about the Senator, but I've read the whole speech and while he did condemn him pretty strongly, and he said he was Don Quixote and that slavery was his Dulcinea, that seemed to me to be the most extreme thing he said about him. Brooks, however, regarded it as an insult to the honor of his kinsman and also to the honor of Southerners and South Carolinians in particular.

And the way a Southerner responded to a challenge to his honor was through violence. And because he did not regard Sumner as an equal, he did not challenge him to a duel. The usual response in that case was horseshoeing, but he said even horseshoeing was too good for Sumner, so he hit him over the head with a cane. Because he said Sumner had insulted the honor of all Southerners and slaveowners through his rhetoric.

This took place in the Senate chamber. Brooks was a Congressman, but he had heard Sumner's speech, or read it, so he walked into the Senate a couple of days later after it had adjourned. Sumner was sitting there writing letters or reading letters from his constituents, and without warning, Brooks started clubbing him over the head with a heavy cane. Congressional desks in those days were like school-desks, Sumner couldn't get up. He was trapped in there, couldn't defend himself. He finally wrenched the desk from the floor. He got up and then collapsed. That's an extraordinary event to take place in the Senate of the United States; and I think a pretty good symbol of the passions that were totally out of control.

Brooks was censured by the House. He then resigned, went home and was unanimously reelected.

**DW:** What was going on in Kansas during those years? Aside from the military action, what sort of propaganda war was taking place?

**JM:** The slave-state Kansans were able to get more states, most of them fraudulent votes, in the various elections in 1855 and 1856 because the Missourians would control these votes. But the Free Staters would elect their own territorial delegate and their own territorial legislature, so you basically had two governments in Kansas, the “legitimate” one that was recognized by the president and the Senate, which was controlled by the Democrats, and the Free State government, which eventually was recognized by the House, when the Republicans controlled the House. So you had divided state government, with its counterpart in the Congress of the United States.

The Free State government was located in Lawrence, and one of the things that set off John Brown was when the slave-state faction marched into Lawrence and sacked the town. This was almost simultaneous with Brooks' caning of Sumner, in May 1856. It was part of the build-up to the presidential election of 1856. First [President Franklin Pierce [1853-57], then [President James] Buchanan [1857-61], kept sending territorial governors to Kansas to try to control the violence with the help of troops that were stationed there, and one after the other they resigned, because they couldn't control the situation. So basically you had political and even civil war on the ground in Kansas for two or three years.

**DW:** How many federal troops were there?

**JM:** That fluctuated, according to the level of violence. There were several hundred there.

**DW:** Did any of those officers go on to play a role in the Civil War?

**JM:** Yes, Nathaniel Lyon, who was in Missouri at the outbreak of the war, and took the initiative in arresting the pro-secessionist militia in Missouri in May of 1861, which provoked a riot in St. Louis and polarized the state. Lyon was an army captain in Kansas and grew to hate the pro-slavery faction, and that radicalized him in the Missouri controversy of 1861. He was then killed in the first major battle in the Western theater, in August 1861, the Battle of Wilson's Creek.

**DW:** What significance did the events in Kansas have for the population of the country as a whole? How closely was this followed?

**JM:** The national press paid a great deal of attention to it, especially the Republican press, newspapers like the *New York Tribune*. For a while the *Tribune*, which was the leading Republican paper in the North, and one of the most significant of all Northern papers at the time, Horace Greeley editor, they had a standing headline, *Civil war in Kansas*, for months. They had reporters out there. So did other Northern and I think some Southern papers. So this whole thing was played out in the media in a major way. Especially in 1856, during the presidential campaign.

Of course both sides tried to use what they called atrocities or “outrages” in Kansas. There was a lot of partisan exaggeration, a lot of name-calling and all the rest of it. I think journalism was even more raw and unrestrained, and certainly more partisan, then. Newspapers were identified directly with political parties or a faction within a political party, in a way that was much more open and unabashed than is the case today.

**DW:** In your latest book you made reference to Civil War soldiers shooting “as they had voted,” and to the kind of political education they had received over the previous period. The soldiers didn't have to be propagandized, they had some understanding of what they were involved in.

**JM:** There was no need for Civil War soldiers to have something like Frank Capra's series of propaganda films in the 1940s, *Why We Fight*, because that generation, I think probably more than almost any other generation in American history, had been totally politicized by these events of the 1850s, which were part of the common political culture of the time.

This is an age in which young men, men in their late teens or twenties, as well as older individuals, were far more involved in the political culture than their counterparts would be today. There was no competition, for one thing. There was no television, no movies, no organized sports, nothing except public events to involve them outside their workaday life. Politics was a form of recreation.

Elections were more frequent; the participation of the eligible electorate in elections was far higher than it is today. In the presidential elections in the middle part of the nineteenth century it was about 80 percent. It was over 80 percent in the elections of 1856 and 1860. So it was about double what it is today. Of course the electorate is much larger today. It was just white males, 21 years and older then, who were citizens. Those immigrants who had declared their intention to become citizens could vote in most states too.

**DW:** That's interesting, in contrast to today's attitudes toward immigrants.

**JM:** If they had taken out papers, even if they weren't yet citizens. They had to wait five years, just as it is now. But if they had declared their intention to become citizens, most states then enfranchised them. You had a very high rate of political participation and I think the sense that people had that politics was far more important to their everyday lives than people feel today.

So when the war began, these men were already politicized and socialized to the issues over which the war was fought. And they really saw themselves as citizens in uniform out to accomplish by military means political goals that they had identified before. In a way they illustrate the most famous dictum of Karl von Clausewitz that war is the extension of politics by other means. They clearly would have agreed with that. That's what they saw themselves doing, and from the very beginning, some were very articulate about why they were fighting and what the political issues were.
Charles Sumner (1811-74), senator from Massachusetts. An aggressive abolitionist, he was physically assaulted by Rep. Preston S. Brooks after making a strong anti-slavery speech on May 19-20, 1856. He was later active in the impeachment of Andrew Johnson.

Free-state voters boycotted a June 1857 vote, which they considered to be a fraud, for election of delegates to a constitutional convention in Kansas. Only 2,000 of 9,250 registered voters participated and pro-slavery delegates won all the seats. The convention, held in Lecompton, Kansas, came up with a document declaring that “the right of property is before and higher than any constitutional sanction, and the right of the owner of a slave to such slave and its increase is the same and as inviolable as the right of the owner of any property whatever.” A furious debate ensued in Congress. The constitution was too much for Northern Democrats, led by Douglas, to stomach and they opposed it. The Lecompton constitution went down to defeat in April 1858. This led to a split in the Democratic ranks, making possible Lincoln's election in 1860.

The Mexican War of 1846-48 was an armed conflict between the US and Mexico. The immediate cause of the war was the US annexation of Texas in December 1845. President James Polk (1845-49) attempted to negotiate the purchase of California in 1845. When this attempt failed, the US prepared for war. Fighting began in March 1846 and lasted until September 1847, when American troops occupied Mexico City. By the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (February 2, 1848), Mexico ceded forty percent of its territory to the US and received an indemnity of $15 million.

The Wilmot Proviso was an amendment put to a bill before the House of Representatives during the Mexican War in 1846. The proviso, sponsored by Rep. David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, would have prohibited slavery in any territory acquired by the Mexican War. The amendment failed in the Senate and never became law, but it heightened the political tensions between pro- and anti-slavery forces.

The Compromise of 1850 was an attempt to resolve issues raised by the territorial gains of the Mexican War. Under its provisions California was admitted to the Union as a free state; the issue was to be decided by popular sovereignty in New Mexico and Utah; the slave trade was prohibited in the District of Columbia; Texas boundary claims were settled; and a more stringent fugitive slave law was passed. As a Northern opponent of the Compromise observed, “the question of slavery in the territories has been avoided. It has not been settled.”

In 1850 Congress strengthened the existing fugitive slave law. “All good citizens” were required to obey it on pain of heavy penalty; jury trial and the right to testify were prohibited to fugitives. The Abolitionists and their supporters deliberately defied these provisions.

The issue of whether Kansas was to be a slave or free state took center stage in American political life in the mid-1850s. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 represented a major concession to pro-slavery forces. The bill, spearheaded by Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois, divided the Nebraska territory in two, creating Nebraska and Kansas, left “all questions pertaining to slavery in the Territories ... to the people residing therein,” and repealed the ban on slavery north of 36(30') in the Louisiana Purchase territory, provided for by the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The passage of the bill set off a bitter political and physical struggle in Kansas.

John Brown (1800-59), militant Abolitionist and leader of an armed attempt to liberate Southern slaves in 1859. He was hanged December 2, 1859, and became a martyr of the anti-slavery cause.

Horace Greeley (1811-72), American newspaper editor. He founded the New York Tribune in 1841. An opponent of slavery, he was one of the first members of the new Republican Party. He later ran for president against Grant in 1872, but was soundly defeated.

Karl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), Prussian general and writer on military strategy.