

Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War

By Eric London
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The 2016 film *Free State of Jones*, directed by Gary Ross, has generated considerable enthusiasm amongst moviegoers and yet has been received with hostility by layers of academia and the professional identity politics crowd for allegedly highlighting the “white savior” role of the film’s protagonist, Mississippi abolitionist militant Newton Knight.

Opposition from figures like the *Atlantic*’s Vann Newkirk is typical. Newkirk denounced the film on the grounds that it highlights Knight’s “message of universal class-based solidarity,” which is “about as offensive as they come. ...” According to Newkirk, Knight’s “philosophy that economic justice underpins all societal ills seems to motivate his strange goodness and also allows him the inhuman ability to recruit white Mississippians into the ranks of the escaped slaves to form a group of economic freedom fighters who only bicker once about race.”

Though Newkirk injects a tone of cynical irony in these lines and claims *Free State of Jones* is “a quasi-historical telling,” his criticism is exposed as fraudulent by historical fact.

Newkirk’s presentation of a racially unified South bears much in common with “Lost Cause” historiography, which portrayed the Confederacy as an indivisible body of whites aimed at defending slavery against “northern aggression.” Newkirk and his ilk likewise find a monolithic “Solid South”—of white racists.

A 2008 book published by The New Press titled *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* shatters these myths. It presents abundant evidence of class struggle in the American South during the Civil War. As the book’s author, Professor David Williams, explains on the cover fold: “[I]nstead of the united front that has been passed down in Southern mythology, the South was in fact fighting two civil wars—an external one that we know so much about and an internal one about which there is scant literature and virtually no public awareness.”

The South mobilizes for war

Williams describes the changing economic and demographic position of the American South in the decades leading up to the Civil War. The discovery of the cotton gin in the 1790s undercut the abolitionist purpose of Article One, Section 9, Clause 1 of the US Constitution, which barred the importation of slaves after 1808.

The immense wealth of the slaveowners produced an aristocratic order in the American South. By 1850, Williams explains that although “the proportion of slaveholders in the South’s general population was falling, their numbers in Southern state legislatures were on the rise. In Mississippi, for example, the percentage of state lawmakers who owned slaves rose from 61 percent to more than 80 percent.”

Strikes of workers opposing slavery occurred throughout the South in the first half of the 1800s. In 1830, stonecutters struck in opposition to the use of slave labor in the construction of a dock in Norfolk, Virginia, on the grounds that it drove down the wages of workers. Throughout the 1850s, Southern whites working with slaves to encourage slave rebellions were prosecuted and jailed for inciting rebellion. Williams notes that “In Mississippi, twenty-one ‘bleached and unbleached’ men were hanged for

plotting a slave revolt,” while other whites were hanged for organizing slave revolts in Charleston, South Carolina; Lynchburg, Virginia; Jefferson County, Georgia; and Iberville, Louisiana.

As the clouds of war gathered over the United States in the latter half of the 1850s, conferences and conventions were called across the South to discuss the question of secession. Williams explains that secessionism was largely opposed by poor Southern whites in the lead-up to war. In fact, many of slavery’s defenders supported moves to enslave poor whites before the outbreak of war. In the 1854 pamphlet *Sociology for the South; or The Failure of Free Society*, George Fitzhugh wrote that slavery was “the best form of society yet devised for the masses” and “that slavery, black or white, was right and necessary.”

Slaveowners in Alabama wrote in 1860 of their fears that “slavers are constantly associating with low white men who are not slave owners. Such people are dangerous to the community.” Again, white men in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Mississippi were captured and hanged for plotting to unite poor whites with slaves to rise up against the slaveowners.

Secession was held to statewide votes across the South, and was roundly defeated by poor whites. Professor Williams notes:

“The balloting for state convention delegates [preceding the war] makes clear that the Deep South was badly divided. It also suggests that those divisions were largely class related.” Williams explains that non-slaveholding whites in Louisiana saw “the whole secession movement as an effort simply to maintain ‘the peculiar rights of a privileged class,’” and that poor counties in Alabama, for example, voted to elect anti-secessionist delegates by margins of up to 90 percent.

Another historian, David Potter, notes that “At no time during the winter of 1860-61 was secession desired by a majority of the people of the slave states.” Williams describes a process by which secessionist aristocrats throughout the South pulled a series of parliamentary maneuvers and bribery schemes aimed at revoking anti-secessionist votes of local delegations. One secessionist leader wrote to Confederate President Jefferson Davis after the outbreak of war that “nothing is now in peril in the prevailing war but the title of the master to his slaves,” and that many poor whites had “declared that they will ‘fight for no rich man’s slaves’...I leave you to imagine the consequences.”

Anti-Confederate rebellions broke out as early as 1861. In Winston County, Alabama, several union leaders organized mass meetings of unionists and declared the “Free State of Winston,” while poor whites did the same in East Tennessee; West Virginia; Green County, Mississippi; Choctaw County, Alabama; Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin, Mississippi; and southwest Georgia. Small slave rebellions took place in Decatur County, Georgia; Charles City County, Virginia; Monroe, Arkansas; and Owen and Galatin counties, Kentucky. Abolitionist-set fires tore through New Orleans as the war broke out.

The military impact of the “Inner Civil War”

In April 1862, the Confederate legislature passed the first conscription

act, followed in October by the “Twenty Slaves Act,” which exempted slaveowners from military service.

As Williams points out, “So few men of means served that soldiers in Virginia sarcastically grumbled that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter Camp Lee.” Corporal James Atkins from Georgia wrote in the winter of 1861-1862 that Southern soldiers “widely feel the unjust oppression and partial hand that is laid upon them, and in my opinion the spirit of the army is dying.” By the end of 1862, the Southern Army was already beginning to disintegrate from rank-and-file discontent.

It is estimated that up to two thirds of all Southern soldiers deserted from the army during the war. What’s more, 300,000 Southerners fled the South at the onset of the war to fight for the Union army. This number nearly equals the total number of Union soldiers killed throughout the course of the war.

The denial that there existed a crisis of class rule in the Confederacy has helped to generate other enduring myths about the Southern war effort. Professor Williams calls attention to the claim that the Confederacy lost the war for lack of munitions production. In his estimation, “no Confederate army ever lost a battle for lack of munitions.” On the other hand, had the Army of Northern Virginia been supported by one-third additional troops at the Battle of Gettysburg, for example, the battle would have likely been lost, and Lincoln may have lost the 1864 election to Democrat George McClellan, who campaigned on a platform of negotiated peace.

Conditions for poor Southerners during the Civil War

The Civil War was a boon for the Southern aristocracy, whose war profiteers capitalized on the rise in global cotton and tobacco prices. As a result, farmland that could have been used for food production was switched to cotton, driving hundreds of thousands into starvation. While luxury items were available for those who could afford to purchase on the black market, food scarcity led to a groundswell of food riots during the war. Wrote one mother to Jefferson Davis in 1862:

“It is folly for a poor mother to call on the rich people about here. There [sic] hearts are of steel. They would sooner throw what they have to spare to their dogs than give it to a starving child.”

The Confederate government sought to provide for the army by stealing from the poor through a process called “impressment,” depicted skillfully in *Free State of Jones*. Indeed, thousands of poor Southern whites opposed attempts by the Confederacy to steal their property. Opposition to war profiteering took shape in various ways, most notably through strikes and protests by poor women. Industrial accidents were extremely common as Southern industrialists cut costs. Factory explosions killed hundreds in places like Jackson, Mississippi. In Virginia, a cartridge-manufacturing plant exploded, “scattering workers like confetti.” Child labor was especially common.

Strikes broke out from the onset of the war, led by a strike of ironworkers at Richmond, Virginia’s Tredegar Iron Works. In retaliation, the Confederacy’s Conscription Act of 1862 included a provision requiring conscription for striking workers.

One worker wrote to a local newspaper in opposition to the use of Confederate troops to attack strikers: “Freemen...are to day slaves—nay, worse than slaves.” Another worker wrote to the *Savannah Morning News*: “The crime is with the planters. As a class, they have yielded their patriotism, if they ever had any, to covetousness...for the sake of money, they are pursuing the course to destroy or demoralize our army—to starve out the other class dependent on them for provision.”

The inner civil war deepened in 1863. On the war front, high desertion rates contributed greatly to the Southern losses at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, in July. On the home front, the enmity of the poor toward the big planters threatened to take on political forms.

In several cities throughout the South, white workers organized

Mechanics’ and Working Men’s Tickets to challenge the planter class’s control of the Confederate legislature and state legislatures. One South Carolina planter wrote: “The poor hate the rich & make war on them everywhere & here especially with universal suffrage.” Planters devised the idea of a poll tax to limit class opposition from finding reflection during the 1863 elections.

Bread riots spread like wildfire in 1863. Shops were ransacked, planters’ stores of tobacco and cotton were burned, and soldiers were sent to attack and jail demonstrators. A Mobile, Alabama, newspaper noted in April 1863 that an “army of women” with “axes, hatchets, hammers, and brooms,” swept through the town with banners that read “Bread or Blood” and “Bread and Peace.” According to a local merchant: “The military was withdrawn from the field as soon as possible—for there were unmistakable signs of fraternizing with the mob.”

Higher rates of desertion were spurred in no small part by fiery letters from poor wives and mothers writing to soldiers at the front, encouraging them to desert and return home. One soldier wrote to North Carolina Governor Vance: “I am fearful we will have a revolution unless something is done as the majority of our soldiers are poor men with families who say they are tired of the rich mans war & poor mans fight. ...”

The repression directed by the planters against Unionists was ferocious. Suspected Union men were dragged from their homes, chained up, and boiled alive in front of their families by secessionists for refusing to take loyalty oaths. German immigrants who had settled in Texas after the European revolutions of 1848 were forced to flee for Mexico, and several were killed while trying to cross the Rio Grande. Hundreds of white unionists were hanged, shot, skinned alive, tortured, or killed by being driven full of splinters. Many of those killed were teenaged boys.

As the war dragged on, opposition to the Confederacy took on increasingly insurrectionary forms, especially guerrilla warfare. The armed band of deserters and escaped slaves depicted in *Free State of Jones* were extraordinary but not unique, in fact. Similar bands controlled parts of the Chattahoochee River north of Columbus, Georgia; Randolph County, North Carolina; northern Alabama; Montgomery County, North Carolina; Dale County, Alabama; Decatur, Mississippi; Simpson County, Mississippi; Rapides and Washington Parish, Louisiana; the Texas Red River area; Greasy Cove, Arkansas; Cades Cove Tennessee; Wilkes and Cherokee Counties, North Carolina; Greenville, Pickens, and Spartanburg counties, South Carolina; Montgomery, Floyd, and Giles counties, Virginia; Dale County, Alabama; and all along Florida’s Gulf Coast. These pro-Union groups, often composed of blacks and whites, numbered in the tens, if not hundreds of thousands. They constructed their own lines of communication, supply lines, and fortifications.

Secret meetings against the war began to attract wide followings in 1862 in Montgomery, Alabama; Natchitoches and Sabine Louisiana; Charleston, South Carolina; the Arkansas Ozark Mountains; Cooke County, Texas; Eastern Tennessee; northern Alabama; Opelika, Alabama; Wake County, North Carolina; Surry County, North Carolina; Union County, Georgia; and many other places. A network of safe houses was set up for deserters and abolitionists leading from Alabama through Chattanooga, the Sequatchie Valley and Possum Creek, Kentucky, leading to Union territory.

The Confederacy disintegrates

In fact, an essential purpose of secession had been to create a regime in which opposition to slavery could be destroyed. Williams notes that “Slaveholder fears of lower-class cooperation across racial lines had been on the rise throughout the late antebellum era. Those fears helped drive them to establish a Confederate slaveholders’ republic in which they hoped resistance might be more easily controlled.”

The war produced numerous examples of whites plotting to help slaves lead rebellions. Five whites were arrested and whipped in Mitchell

County, Georgia, for plotting to provide weapons and ammunition to slaves, and three white men were whipped and dipped in hot tar in the spring of 1862 in Calhoun County, Georgia. A white man and three slaves in Brooks County, Georgia, were lynched for plotting another slave uprising, and similar plots involving whites and blacks were uncovered in Adams County, Mississippi; Taylor County, Florida; and Colombia, South Carolina.

Whites were hanged throughout the South for providing travel passes to slaves, while whites and blacks often provided food and defensive assistance to one another when on the run from Confederate authorities. One slave, Nancy Johnson, wrote how “some of the rebel soldiers deserted & came to our house & we fed them. They were opposed to the war & didn’t own slaves & said they would die rather than fight. Those who were poor white people, who didn’t own slaves were some of them Union people. I befriended them because they were on our side.”

By 1864, wide sections of the South began to initiate popular votes to end the war or secede from the Confederacy. Anti-war meetings spread throughout Georgia as thousands of poor whites voted with near unanimity to end the war, kick out Confederate officials, and raise defensive militias if they received opposition. Irwin County seceded from the South in February 1865. Portions of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Virginia, and other states began to set up their own anti-Confederate governments throughout 1863 and 1864. Williams writes:

“From its inception, the Confederacy had been fighting a two-front war: one against the North, another against disaffected and dissident southerners. With deserted and layout gangs, many allied with local blacks, controlling vast stretches of the countryside, one editor had written in 1863 that southerners were ‘fighting each other harder than we ever fought the enemy.’ ”

The profound anger over the war that was boiling over by 1865 was expressed by one poor Southerner, who wrote a letter directed to the wealthy in a local newspaper:

“That is right. Pile up wealth—no matter whether bread be drawn from the mouth of the soldier’s orphan or the one-armed, one limbed hero who hungry walks your streets—take every dollar you can, pay out as little as possible deprive your noble warriors of every comfort and luxury, increase in every way the necessaries of life, make everybody but yourself and non-producers bear the taxes of the war; but be very careful to parade everything you give before the public—talk boldly on the street corners of your love of country, be a grand home general—and, when the war is over, point to your princely palace and its magnificent surroundings and exclaim with pompous swell, ‘these are the results of my patriotism.’ ”

The ferociousness with which self-satisfied layers of the upper-middle class view *Free State of Jones*’s honest portrayal of one small piece of this vast historical record expresses the right-wing character of the racial approach to history. The facts presented by David Williams in his book serve as a mountain of evidence against the claim that the film was “quasi-historical,” and for this reason it is valuable.

Williams is correct that there is scant interest today among the upper-middle class world of academia in the role played by poor whites in opposing the Confederacy during the Civil War. Williams’s important work can only scratch the surface in the long history of opposition among Southern whites to slavery and later Jim Crow segregation.

More histories—and films—are needed to finally bury the racist view of history, first invented by the partisans of the Confederacy, and now promoted by the careerist promoters of identity politics.

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