

The Late Unpleasantness in Idaho: Southern Slavery and the Culture Wars

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The so-called “culture wars,” though maddeningly difficult to define, have begun to set previously complacent Americans against one another in unexpected ways and to challenge some of the basic goals and assumptions of late twentieth-century U. S. social policy. Critics on the right have stepped up attacks on multiculturalism, “political correctness,” and even on the general framework of “secular humanism” that has guided much of western thought since the Enlightenment. In many cases, these critics propose the adoption of a “Biblical worldview” as the only viable solution to America’s cultural and social problems. Different “worldviews,” they argue, lead people to see the same events in a very different light. But can such a shift in “worldview” lead rational adults to praise the institution of slavery as it existed in the antebellum South? And when professional historians point out that the experience of slavery was not generally a happy one for African Americans, are they merely blinded by “abolitionist propaganda” and knee-jerk liberalism?

Such questions brought the small college town of Moscow, Idaho, home of the University of Idaho, to the brink of open hostility during the past year. Previously friendly neighbors perfected outrageously inventive insults for one another and in some cases cut off communication altogether. Boycotts were threatened, Christmas lights pulled down, safes allegedly stolen, tires slashed, and soda cans thrown at “nigger lover” professors. At the center of the furor is a small thirty-nine page booklet entitled *Southern Slavery: As It Was*, co-authored by local pastor Douglas Wilson and League of the South co-founder Steve Wilkins, on the one hand, and an even shorter book review of it, on the other hand, by two University of Idaho history professors entitled *Southern Slavery As It Wasn't: Professional Historians Respond to Neo-Confederate Misinformation*.

Wilson’s and Wilkins’ booklet, published by Wilson’s “Canon Press” in Moscow, argues that southern slavery was not only sanctioned by the Bible but, thanks to the patriarchal kindness of their wise evangelical masters, a positive, happy, and pleasant experience for the majority of southern blacks. Wilson and Wilkins are quite specific about the many benefits of slavery for African-Americans, and they conclude that southern slaves genuinely appreciated those benefits and supported the system that provided them. As such, they claim that “slavery produced in the South a genuine affection between the races that we believe we can say has never existed in any nation before the War [the Civil War] or since.” (p. 38). Their praise of the institution is almost unbounded in places. “There has never been,” they argue, “a multi-racial society that has existed with such mutual intimacy and harmony in the history of the world.” (p. 24). They repeatedly deride the consensus view of slavery that has emerged over the last fifty years of academic scholarship as “abolitionist propaganda” and “civil rights propaganda.” Most of the modern problems confronting the United States, they feel, are the logical result of the theological heresies implicit in the abolitionist movement and its unfortunate victory over the South in the Civil War.

In response, my colleague Sean M. Quinlan and I naively wrote a book review to rebut their arguments and point out what we considered to be obvious: that slavery was not a happy experience for southern blacks. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews with former slaves are *not*, we argued, conclusive proof that African Americans were overwhelmingly content and pleased to be enslaved. The slave narratives are *not*, we stressed, conclusive proof that “the majority” of slaves remembered the experience of forced labor as being “so pleasant” that they wished to become slaves again. As we wrote the book review, we often found it difficult to believe that anyone would have to explain these things. We expected to be vilified and attacked, of course, by Wilson and Wilkins, but we failed to anticipate the depth of their commitment to pro-slavery ideology and the sophistication of their attacks. We underestimated the extent of their support base in northern Idaho and the ability of organizations such as the League of the South to refocus their efforts on Moscow and to mobilize activists.

We initially thought we had scored a major victory in November, 2003, when our local newspaper, *The Moscow/Pullman Daily News*, published a front page photograph of a smiling Ira Berlin above the headline “Nation’s Top Historians Dispute Moscow Pastor’s View of pre-Civil War Slavery.” Dr. Berlin, one

of the country's most revered experts on the topic, provided generous quotes explaining why Wilson's and Wilkins' "understanding of slavery is extremely anachronistic." Drawing on his years of complex work in the field, the Bancroft Prize winner felt confident enough to assert that "the slaves were extremely unhappy." Peter Wood of Duke University claimed that it was "ridiculous to even ask if slavery was a harmful institution." He equated Wilson and Wilkins with "holocaust deniers." Clayborne Carson of Stanford University also responded to our hardworking *Daily News* reporter. "I haven't heard of this argument," he told her over the phone, "since the pre-Civil War period when people actually believed the slaves were really happy with their lives ... why would anyone want to waste their time with this argument? It's incomprehensible." U.C. Berkeley's Saidiya Hartman, an expert on the WPA narratives, called Wilson's and Wilkins' arguments "obscene."

Local responses to the controversy varied. The majority of the community (overwhelmingly Christian and Republican) found the *Daily News* article and our book review persuasive, and many began organizing to oppose what they viewed as yet another eruption of white supremacy in their own backyard. In fact, a number of them were proud veterans of the battle against the Aryan Nations only two years earlier in Coeur D'Alene. Ira Berlin's credentials meant little, however, to some Idahoans who had already written off the last fifty years of historical scholarship on slavery as "abolitionist propaganda." Douglas Wilson, one of the author's of the now infamous pro-slavery booklet, actually dismissed Berlin publicly as an "abolitionist." Efforts to discuss these differences only served again and again to clarify the chasm separating the two camps. Sincere invitations to dialogue and communication succeeded only in demonstrating that dialogue and communication made the problem worse. No one could remember anything quite like it.

In addition to marking out skirmish lines, the controversy made it clear that Douglas Wilson was more than just a local troublemaker and southern partisan. He had established two "Reformed" evangelical churches in town whose congregations, thanks to nationwide recruitment efforts, now represented 10 percent of Moscow's entire population. He had founded a k-12 school called "Logos" that taught history from a "Biblical Worldview" and an unaccredited college called "New Saint Andrews," where he had installed himself as "Senior Fellow of Theology." Other faculty members at the college included Wilson's son Nate, his brother Gordon, and son-in-law Ben. Wilson, it turned out, had cultivated an empire of "classical" schools based on a biblical worldview that included over 165 private academies around the country, all of which purchased educational materials published by his personal "Canon Press" in Moscow, Idaho, or affiliated "Veritas Press" in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His empire of private academies paled, however, in comparison to his real passion for home-schooling. Wilson's view of slavery currently services thousands of home-school families around the country with materials published by Canon and Veritas Presses.

Information about Wilson's ninth annual "history conference" in February 2004 turned out to be the final straw for many residents. Wilson had scheduled himself as the keynote speaker, praising the southern racist ideologue R.L. Dabney, but he had also scheduled as co-speakers white supremacist League of the South co-founder Steve Wilkins and the anti-gay Tennessee minister George Grant, notorious for advocating the extermination of all homosexuals in his book *Legislating Immorality*. University of Idaho students were especially outraged that the conference was surreptitiously scheduled to take place on their own campus in the Student Union Building. Wilson had apparently paid good money for the facility well in advance, and nobody had balked at taking it. Student anger, however, ultimately forced the president and provost of the University to issue a joint disclaimer of the event, which tried retroactively to take the moral high ground by denouncing efforts to "recast or minimize the evils of slavery."

Responding to the activism of a much larger African American Student Association, the president of nearby Washington State University, V. Lane Rawlins, enthusiastically issued a simultaneous statement assuring Washingtonians that "the planned conference to be held in February 2004 in rented space on the University of Idaho campus in Moscow has nothing to do with Washington State University." In his official statement, Rawlins claimed that he had been informed "about a booklet that defends slavery as a social institution." He made reference to the "article in the *Daily News* on the weekend of Nov. 8-9 where historians from the University of Idaho, the University of Maryland, and Duke University exposed the

booklet for what it is, self-published propaganda disguised as history.” Most importantly, he wanted the Washington State community “to know that those views and others sympathetic to them are intellectually and morally reprehensible and unacceptable to me and to the leadership of WSU.”

Wilson’s affiliated enterprises in Moscow launched an aggressive campaign to denounce the presidents of the two universities, the “abolitionist” historians, and community civil rights activists as the deluded representatives of “modern secularism.” In prominent advertisements in several local newspapers, Wilson and his supporters argued that “slavery isn’t the issue.” “Establishment secularism,” they claimed, “can’t stand real criticism. It can’t bear real differences.” The advertisements suggested that the real goal of local critics of Wilson’s defense of racial slavery was “silencing dissent.” Less publicly, however, Wilson and the dean of his “New Saint Andrews College,” Roy Atwood, began working to silence the University of Idaho historians who had brought the slavery booklet to the attention of the community. They were especially upset that the University’s director of Diversity and Human Rights, Raul Sanchez, had placed a hyperlink to the Quinlan/Ramsey book review on the Diversity Office website. In an angry letter to the university provost, Wilson claimed that the book review was “slanderous” and “defamatory” and demanded disciplinary action and a public apology, while Atwood wrote a similar letter to the president. Failing to get the desired response, Wilson wrote to Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne asking him to step in and “remove the University of Idaho as a launching pad for their mortar rounds.”

Wilson’s “history” conference in February, 2004, saw the arrival of League of the South co-founder Steve Wilkins, anti-gay minister George Grant, and nearly 800 fundamentalist culture warriors intent on challenging the secular worldview of northern Idaho (and touring the New Saint Andrews College facility with their home-schooled teenagers). Wilkins readily acknowledged to local reporters that the League of the South hoped to secede from the United States and create a new Confederate Nation dedicated to states’ rights, Biblical Law, and the restoration of the “cultural hegemony” of Christian southerners, but he angrily denied that it was a racist or white supremacist organization, as claimed by the Southern Poverty Law Center. To make his point, he organized a special lecture, entitled, “The Sin of Racism,” in which he condemned all forms of racial discrimination and reiterated that southern slavery was not a racist institution but one based on mutual affection and social harmony. Many Idahoans found it unpersuasive.

The University of Idaho, meanwhile, scheduled simultaneous educational activities to celebrate Black History month and promote the ideals of tolerance and diversity. In support of the university and area minorities, nearly 2,000 volunteers from the community traced their hands on pieces of paper, cut them out, and pasted them on giant letters that spelled out “Hands for Human Rights.” The letters were then arranged in front of the Student Union Building where the conference was being held so that culture warriors would have to walk past them every day. The president of the Seattle chapter of the NAACP, Carl Mack, arrived to denounce the pro-slavery booklet of Wilson and Wilkins as “white supremacy” in a spirited rally that brought over 300 student protestors, mostly white, to their feet. One African American student from Washington State University, interviewed afterward by the *Daily News*, said that she was happy that Mr. Wilson would finally “see people who look like him standing up for people who look like me.” Hundreds of protestors then marched peacefully through the snow with signs that read “Slavery Bad,” and “The Civil War is over.” By the end of the weekend, civil rights advocates were almost too worn out to fully appreciate the detailed presentation by Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center, explaining the white supremacist ambitions of the League of the South and Doug Wilson’s ties to national neo-confederate networks.

That was unfortunate, because Potok’s research offered some of the most sobering evidence to date that Moscow, Idaho, had been intentionally targeted as a major battlefield in the culture wars. He quoted from a sermon delivered by Douglas Wilson on December 28, 2003, posted publicly on his church website. Wilson explained to his congregation the military significance of what he called a “decisive point” in an enemy’s defenses. A decisive point, he said, was a military target that was both “strategic,” meaning that it would be a debilitating “loss to the enemy if taken,” and one that was also “feasible.” Boville, he argued, was a “feasible” target but not “strategic.” New York City, on the other hand, was “strategic” but not “feasible.” “Small college towns with major research universities,” he continued, such as “Moscow and Pullman . . . are both strategic and feasible.” A number of audience members gasped as Potok read from

Wilson's sermon. According to Potok, Wilson concluded his sermon by stating the obvious, "that is why the conflict is here."

Few people outside the state have really paid attention to these events so far, aside from the NAACP, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and "abolitionist" historians like Ira Berlin, Peter Wood, and Clayborne Carson. Many Idahoans, in fact, seem to be taking an irrational comfort in this neglect by reminding themselves that Idaho simply does not matter to the nation. Presidential elections, for instance, are an undisputed exercise in futility for a state with only a handful of electoral votes that straddles two time zones in the west. Idaho, however, is currently a major battle ground between competing visions of our national future, and the outcome here will assuredly affect the national temper in generations to come. Culture warriors in Idaho envision a future in which the educational power of both the University of Idaho and Washington State University will have been harnessed to the propagation of a "biblical worldview" and the overthrow of "Civil Rights propaganda" nationwide. It may be worthwhile, therefore, for educators elsewhere to take notice of this tempest while it is still contained in a distant teacup and remember that our country's commitment to civil rights and equality are in truth only a generation old. There are still many Americans who consider the South's surrender at Appomattox a temporary setback. If Idaho is any indication, brothers and neighbors may yet be forced to choose between those same two sides again.