

Taliban on the Palouse?

A religious empire based in Idaho is part of the far-right theological movement fueling neo-Confederate groups

By Mark Potok

MOSCOW, Idaho -- The fliers showed up one day last fall, scattered around the sprawling campus of the University of Idaho at Moscow and looking for all the world like a routine advertisement for a couple of visiting scholars.

"Meet the Authors!" the one-page announcements shouted, referring readers to an upcoming February conference on campus that would be featuring speakers Douglas Wilson and Steven Wilkins, the co-authors of *Southern Slavery, As It Was*. There followed five excerpted "highlights" from their book.

"Slavery as it existed in the South ... was a relationship based upon mutual affection and confidence," the excerpts read in part. "There has never been a multiracial society which has existed with such mutual intimacy and harmony in the history of the world. ...

"Slave life was to them [slaves] a life of plenty, of simple pleasures, of food, clothes, and good medical care."

This flier was no advertisement. It was a call to arms.

In the months that followed, sparked by the fliers anonymously distributed by antiracist activists, an uproar erupted that convulsed the campus, the town, and even the community around Washington State University, another huge school some eight miles away in Pullman, Wash.

Before it was over, the presidents of both universities had condemned Wilson and Wilkins' book in unsparing terms, dozens of newspaper articles, editorials, advertisements and letters to the editor had been printed, major demonstrations had been held, new antiracist groups had formed, and a whole array of counter-events had been organized for the Wilson/Wilkins event.

Few who lived on the Palouse, as the region is known, avoided the boiling controversy.

The reason for the powerful reaction wasn't just that the two men had written a repulsive apologia for slavery and the antebellum South. More important was the fact that one of them, Doug Wilson, had been in Moscow for 30 years.

And during those three decades, largely beneath the radar of his neighbors, Wilson had built a far-flung, far-right religious empire that included a college, an array of lower schools, an entire denomination of churches, and more.

At the same time, with longtime collaborator Wilkins, Wilson was developing a theology that married an enthusiastic endorsement of the antebellum South with ideas of religious government — an ideology now at the center of the neo-Confederate movement.

Doug Wilson, it seems, was raising a religious army.

Back to the Future

The racism and sorry scholarship that informed *Southern Slavery, As It Was* — and that set off the recent hullabaloo in Idaho — did not spring full-blown from the minds of Doug Wilson and Steve Wilkins. In fact, these ideas were born long before.

During the 1960s, as part of a backlash against the civil rights movement, a theologian named Gregg Singer rediscovered the work of Robert L. Dabney, the chaplain to Civil War Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Soon, he was joined by another far-right theologian, Rousas John Rushdoony, who also came across Dabney, a man who had spent the 30 years after the Civil War popularizing the idea that the "godly" South had been victimized by godless Yankees.

Both Singer and Rushdoony admired Dabney's ideas, which included a view of the South as a religiously ordered society, an "orthodox" Christian remnant in a nation increasingly overtaken by rationalist and anti-religious thought.

Dabney's virulent racism — he saw blacks as a "morally inferior race," a "sordid, alien taint" marked by "lying, theft, drunkenness, laziness, waste" — also supported Rushdoony's dislike for the civil rights movement and ongoing desegregation. Dabney explicitly defended slavery as godly, a theme Wilson and Wilkins would later repeat.

In 1973, Rushdoony published *Institutes of Biblical Law*, a book that established him as the founding thinker of a radical theology that came to be known as Christian Reconstruction.

The book fleshed out Rushdoony's vision of a society "reconstructed" along Old Testament lines — a world in which religious governors would mete out biblical punishments like the stoning to death of gays, adulteresses, "incorrigible" children and many others. Relying on a literal reading of the Bible, Rushdoony espoused a society of classes with differing rights, opposed interracial marriage, and scoffed at egalitarianism.

Even Ralph Reed, then the highly conservative executive director of the Christian Coalition, warned that Christian Reconstruction represented a threat to the "most basic liberties ... of a free society."

Rushdoony also developed a strategic plan. The most effective way of implementing his vision, he said, would be to develop Christian homeschooling and private schools in order to train up a generation to take the reins of society. So vigorous was his pursuit of this strategy that Rushdoony would eventually come to be known to many as the father of the Christian homeschooling movement.

It was an exciting time for Rushdoony. Some of his principal co-religionists and followers became active in the 1970s, and his influence began to extend to some of America's leading evangelical churches.

And it marked the start of an important collaboration between people who viewed themselves as "orthodox Christians" and "Confederate nationalists," a merging of the theocratic idea of religious government and a view of the 19th-century Confederate

cause as fundamentally right.

Building a Movement

In Moscow, Idaho, a Southern-born recent graduate of the University of Idaho was working as song leader in the town's Christ Church. In 1977, just as Christian Reconstruction was picking up momentum nationally, Doug Wilson gave a sermon for the former pastor at his church, who had just moved away. That sermon led to a permanent job, and Wilson to this day remains leader of Christ Church.

Over the following decades, Wilson built up an empire. He created the Logos School in Moscow, a private Christian academy that is a template for Wilson's "classical schools" movement and instructs students in Greek and Latin.

He formed the Association of Classical and Christian Schools as a kind of accrediting agency for such schools and, since then, some 165 schools with curriculums similar to that of Logos have been started around the country.

Many of them, along with thousands of homeschoolers, order their books from yet another Moscow-based Wilson creation, Canon Press. The firm has published and sells 31 books by Wilson.

Wilson also helped start the Confederation of Reformed Evangelicals (CRE), the denomination that includes Christ Church and some 20 other churches with similar ideas. At his own church, Wilson created a three-year training program for ministers, Greyfriars Hall.

Graduates, who must promise to engage in "cultural reformation," have started several churches around the country.

And, in 1994, Wilson's Christ Church founded New Saint Andrews College, a Moscow institution that teaches Wilson's brand of Christianity and now has an enrollment of about 120 students. (On its Web site, the college treats Rushdoony and Dabney as foundational thinkers on the order of Plato and Aristotle.)

Many Moscow residents say the college, like Wilson's Logos School and Christ Church,

also has shown a strong taste for the Confederacy, with paintings of Civil War Confederate heroes and the like. Some parents have reported that Logos School celebrates the birthday of Gen. Robert E. Lee, another hero in the Confederate pantheon.

The same year that Christ Church kicked off New Saint Andrews, another organization with a liking for things Confederate was in the works. In Alabama, a college professor named Michael Hill founded what would come to be called the League of the South. The league quickly adopted radical positions such as calling for a second Southern secession as disputes over the Confederate battle flag heated up around the South.

With Hill, a founding league director was Steven Wilkins, a man who already had been hosting Confederate heritage conferences for years (and still runs the R.L. Dabney Center for Theological Studies out of his church).

It wasn't long before the League of the South became more or less openly racist. Hill said his aim was the "revitalization of general European hegemony" in the South. The league went on record as officially opposing interracial marriage.

Hill painted segregationist Alabama Gov. George Wallace as a hero, and other league thinkers defended segregation as safeguarding the "integrity" of blacks and whites alike.

The league was theocratic from the start, with Hill arguing publicly for a restructuring of the South as a "Christian republic" — a place where others might live, but only if they acknowledged and obeyed the rules of his religion.

He asserted that the South was fundamentally "Anglo-Celtic" and ought to remain that way. And he explicitly rejected egalitarianism as "Jacobin" and argued for a society composed of classes with differing legal rights — all ideas extremely similar to those of Rushdoony.

Developing these concepts, and adding his reverence for Dabney to the mix, was Wilkins, the pastor of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, La., and a close

friend to Hill — something emphasized by Hill's move to Monroe for several years ending in 2003.

With his sympathy for the Confederacy, his admiration of Dabney's ideas, and a bent toward theocracy, Wilkins became a leading religious ideologue of the league — a group that today claims 15,000 members organized into 87 chapters in 16 states — and the larger neo-Confederate movement.

By the mid-'90s, Wilkins also had become a close collaborator and fellow ideologue of Wilson's.

"Collaboration between the Christian Reconstructionist movement and the League of the South has ... increased," wrote scholars Edward Sebesta and Euan Hague in a 2002 study of Dabney and the neo-Confederates, "evidencing a growing overlap in the historical, political and theological perspectives of participants in both organizations.

"This indicates a conflation of conservative, neo-Confederate and Christian nationalisms into a potent reinterpretation of United States history, one centered upon the thesis that the Confederate states were a bastion of orthodox Christianity standing in the face of the heretical Union states."

An ideological merger, in other words, was under way.

But Are They Reconstructionists?

As the Idaho controversy reached a fever pitch, Wilson flatly denied that he was a Christian Reconstructionist. That movement, he told a reporter, was "dead."

But while Wilson may have slight differences with one or another Reconstructionist, it is false that the movement is dead — and not true that Wilson is no part of it.

In fact, Wilson's theology is in most ways indistinguishable from basic tenets of Reconstruction. And, going back to the 1990s, both he and co-religionist Steven Wilkins

have been tightly linked to America's leading Reconstructionists.

In the early 1990s, Wilkins began hosting annual Confederate heritage conferences in Monroe. Within a few years, Wilson was a regular speaker.

These conferences also featured some of the leading lights of Reconstruction, including Otto Scott; George Grant, a leading speaker at Wilson's 2004 conference at the University of Idaho; Larry Pratt, a gun rights radical who had to step down as co-chair of Pat Buchanan's 1996 presidential campaign because of his links to white supremacists; Joe Morecraft III; and Howard Phillips, founder of the U.S. Taxpayers Party, reincarnated as the Constitution Party in 2000, both of them shot through with strong Reconstructionist elements.

Similarly, Wilson and his journal, *Credenda/Agenda*, began hosting "history" conferences in the mid-1990s that highlighted Wilkins and Reconstructionists like Grant. (Grant is a Tennessee anti-abortion activist and former state leader of the U.S. Taxpayers Party.)

Like Wilkins' Louisiana conferences, Wilson's well-attended gatherings in Idaho frequently included speeches extolling Dabney, who Wilson and Wilkins describe, incredibly, as "a godly man who fought for the South."

In 1996, the two men wrote their *Southern Slavery, As It Was* — a full-throated endorsement of the views of Dabney and the Reconstructionists on slavery and the Civil War.

Credenda/Agenda is also linked to the Coalition on Revival (COR), a far-right Christian group, formed in 1982, that has mixed key Reconstructionist ideologues like Rushdoony, Gary North (Rushdoony's son-in-law), Gary DeMar, David Chilton and Morecraft with more mainstream Christian Right hard-liners.

COR's Web site still carries links to *Credenda/Agenda* — which was inaugurated as a Christ church ministry in 1988 — and a number of Christian Reconstructionist Web

sites.

'Overthrowing Secularism'

Wilkins and Wilson have together probably done more than any others to construct the theology now animating much of the neo-Confederate movement. But there is more to their ideology than a defense of the South and slavery.

In his voluminous and often tedious writings, Wilson lays out an array of hard-right beliefs, many of them related to family and sexual matters. Overall, he told congregants last year, his goal is "the overthrow of unbelief and secularism."

The world as Wilson sees it is divided not by race but by religion — biblical Christians versus all others. As he says in one of his books, "[I]f neither parent believes in Jesus Christ, then the children are foul — unclean."

"Government schools" are godless propaganda factories teaching secularism, rationalism, and worse. Wilson's congregants are instructed to send their children to private Christian schools (like the one he started) or to home-school them.

Woman "was created to be dependent and responsive to a *man*," Wilson writes. Feminists seek "to rob women of their beauty in submission." Women should only be allowed to date or "court" with their father's permission — and then, if they are Christian, only with other Christians.

If a woman is raped, the rapist should pay the father a bride price and then, if the father approves, marry his victim.

Homosexuals, Wilson says, are "sodomites," "people with foul sexual habits." But the biblical punishment for homosexuality is not necessarily death, Wilson says in trying to distance himself from Reconstruction. Exile is another possibility.

Cursing one's parents *is* "deserving of punishment by death," Wilson adds. "Parental failure is not a defense." And Christian parents, by the way, "need not be afraid to lay it on" when spanking, he says.

Indeed, "godly discipline" would include spanking 2-year-old children for such "sins" as whining. (On a similar note, Dabney called opposition to whipping wrongdoing slaves "Godless humanitarianism.")

Scripture does not forbid interracial marriage, Wilson says. But "wise parents" will carefully weigh any union involving "extremely diverse cultural backgrounds."

Wilkins summed up many of his and Wilson's ideas in 1997, when he told *The Counsel of Chalcedon*, a Reconstructionist journal edited by Morecraft, that he wanted "the principles upon which the South stood" reinstated.

These ideas, taken together with the unusual historical views expressed by Wilkins and Wilson, are critically important. Reconstructionist commentator James Wesley Stiver said as much in a recent essay, describing Wilson, Wilkins and George Grant — the three main speakers at Wilson's University of Idaho conference this February — as part of a "Celtic sunrise" within Christian Reconstruction.

Here Comes the Sun

Is Doug Wilson working toward a theocracy?

Certainly, some of his close friends are. George Grant, the Tennessean who Wilson has repeatedly invited to give speeches at his history conferences, once described his goals as "world conquest," according a 1998 article in the journal *Reason*.

"It is dominion we are after. Not just a voice, not just influence, not just equal time. It is dominion we are after."

As the February conference approached, Wilson tried hard to distance himself from suggestions that he was interested in such a "takeover" of society, noting that his theology favored the "regeneration" of persons first and saying that he was not interested in secular power.

He told a reporter that only far in the future, perhaps "500 years" from now, could he

envision any kind of Christian republic.

That may be. But there is no question that Wilson is working toward his theological goals right now, with determination and in very substantial ways.

Today, Wilson and Christ Church are expanding, buying up properties around downtown Moscow, and many in the region fear that it will soon become a dominant force in the area.

The church, with a congregation that has now reached about 800, also hosts several major conferences every year — including "history" conferences such as the one that attracted almost 850 people this February.

Wilson held his conference amidst a major controversy, kicked off by the fliers circulated months before. University students and officials were particularly outraged that the Feb. 5-7 gathering, headlined "Revolution & Modernity" and focusing on the participants' deep hatred of what they described as "revolutionaries" who oppose the will of God, was scheduled during Black History Month.

Wilson, whose shoddy scholarship in *Southern Slavery, As It Was* had earlier been attacked by two University of Idaho historians in a paper entitled "Southern Slavery, As It Wasn't," mocked "intolerista" academics at his February conference.

Wilson also offered a tepid criticism of Dabney's racism, but watered even that down by asserting Northern racism was worse than that of the South. "I condemn the racism of Dabney," he added sarcastically, "and the racism of Abraham Lincoln, [Planned Parenthood founder] Margaret Sanger, Charles Darwin and Ted Kennedy."

Outside the Student Union where Wilson's conference was held, some 350 students and others demonstrated against the gathering. University officials hosted antiracist speakers, and antiracist literature was distributed. Radio stations, student newspapers and media from as far away as Seattle came to cover the events.

Wilson was defiant throughout, portraying his critics as small-minded and incapable of honest scholarly inquiry. What he did not do was make clear exactly what his goals are as he continues to expand his religious empire.

But he offered a substantial clue last Dec. 28, when, in the midst of the controversy, he gave a sermon discussing evangelistic "warfare" to his congregation.

Good Christians, he said, needed to look for "decisive points" in society, places that are both "strategic and feasible" targets to be "taken." New York City, for instance, is strategic but not feasible — too many godless liberals. Other places are feasible but not strategic — unimportant places in the theological wars that Wilson foresees.

"But," Douglas Wilson added in an upbeat note that day, "small towns with major universities (Moscow and Pullman, say) are both." And that, say many residents of the Palouse, is what has them so frightened.