

## Military Objectives and Political Policy

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*The question of whether or not to free and arm slaves for the Confederate Army during the American Civil War is one that has brought suspicion and discussion about our nation's most terrifying time. In times of war, leaders are needed to step up and make difficult decisions and propose controversial issues in the face of internal dangers. This paper will examine one of the central conflicts within the South during this critical era. The argument centers on Confederate General Patrick Cleburne's 1864 proposal to arm and free slaves to the Confederate Army in the face of an opposing culture and government. Many historians feel that the proposal Cleburne made to arm and free slaves in January 1864 failed at the time because of his mistaken belief that the South's military goals outweighed its political foundations. The resources collected for this paper will focus on the debate to arm slaves for the Confederacy initiated seriously by Cleburne against his government's values. Did the benefits of enlisting slaves to fight for the Confederacy outweigh the setback of betraying Confederate government ideals?*

On the night of January 2, 1864, Patrick Cleburne stood in front of his fellow officers of the Army of Tennessee and delivered his proposal to arm and free slaves to fight for the Confederacy, an army in desperate need of men. The Army of Tennessee commanders present in the room on the night were split on how they felt about Cleburne's plan for victory. Word of Cleburne's proposal went to President Jefferson Davis where he immediately forbade any discussion of it to avoid further controversy. The document failed at the time to attain Southern recognition and stopped Cleburne's further promotion in the military.<sup>1</sup>

The debate after the war began with Nathaniel Stephenson's article "The Question of Arming the Slaves", the pioneering work on the subject done in 1913 in the *American Historical Review*. Stephenson's primary focus is on the prospect of arming slaves for the Confederacy's cause for liberty, which was Cleburne's focus. Stephenson forms many questions challenging the foundations of the South's government and said discussion of it further hurt the Confederacy's chances. He is confused on the impact President Davis actually had as a leader of the confederate system. Although he later advocated for slaves being used in his army, he did so at a time when the South was virtually out of options, not even considering any action until November 1864 in the war's final stages.<sup>2</sup>

Charles Wesley's 1919 article "The Employment of Negroes as Soldiers in the Confederate Army", claims both armies would benefit from African American assistance. The result of the war

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<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne & the Civil War*. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 9-44, 184-187; Howell and Elizabeth Purdue, *Pat Cleburne: Confederate General*. (Hillsboro, TX: Hills Jr. College Press, 1973), 2-49, 268-274.

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel W. Stephenson, "The Question of Arming the Slaves", (*American Historical Review*, XVIII: January 1913), 295-308 in Robert F. Durden, *The Gray and the Black: The Confederate Debate on Emancipation*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 291-292; Charles H. Wesley, "The Employment of Negroes as Soldiers in the Confederate Army", (*Journal of Negro History*, IV: July 1919), 239-253 in Durden, *The Gray and the Black*, 292-293.

depended on which side was willing to utilize them more. The early historiography reveals scholars showed confusion about emancipation and its meaning for the South. So there was a debate over emancipating slaves during the war, and after the war the reasons behind that emancipation came into question among scholars. Thomas Robson Hay's article "The South and the Arming of Slaves", examines the comprehensive discussion of the controversy during the war years. Cleburne made his proposal to strengthen the army and to give new life to the failing military goals of the Confederacy. He formed his plan not to end slavery but to vindicate his position on state rights and the South's cause to win their war for independence. Wesley and Hay agree on Cleburne's motives and the position of power the African Americans in the South held during the war.<sup>3</sup>

Recent writings on Cleburne and his proposal have interpreted the document as strictly military-based to win a war or something that questioned one's loyalty and patriotism to the South. The first definitive biography to be done on Cleburne would not be released until the 1970's. Professors Howell and Elizabeth Purdue wrote the book in 1973 entitled, *Pat Cleburne: Confederate General*. One chapter of the work is devoted to Cleburne's proposal to arm slaves, arguing that it sought to make an increasingly weak army stronger. Cleburne wanted something done immediately for the Confederacy, not for the issue to be addressed when all other options had failed.<sup>4</sup>

*The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1826-1856*, written by William J. Cooper Jr., addresses the political issue of arming slaves for the South's military means. Slavery was embedded in Southern society, but proposals had come early in the war for its abolishment. Cooper uses this political subject to describe the secession crisis and the struggle between the slave and free societies. The South had become a society torn apart by different values and beliefs with Jefferson Davis trying to fight a war where the South was vastly outnumbered and under-funded. He needed a united front instead of one where the motives and consequences of war had become blurred. Military affairs have been linked with the politics of the times, and that was never truer than for the Confederacy during the American Civil War. Howard and Elizabeth Purdue contend that Cleburne truly felt that Southern politics would take a backseat to any military objectives while Cooper believes the military issue of the proposal was prohibited by the political issue of arming slaves. In *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism*, historian Paul Escott examines this intersection by focusing on the reasons for Confederate defeat and the political ramifications behind it. At the outset of the secession controversy was a divide between American and Southern nationalism, with slavery right in the middle. Secession became

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<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Wesley, "The Employment of Negroes as Soldiers in the Confederate Army", (*Journal of Negro History*, IV: July 1919), 239-253 in Durden, *The Gray and the Black*, 292-293; Thomas Robson Hay, "The South and the Arming of Slaves", (*The Mississippi Historical Review*, 6;1: June 1919), 34-73.

<sup>4</sup> Howell and Elizabeth Purdue, *Pat Cleburne: Confederate General*. (Hillsboro, TX: Hills Jr. College Press, 1973), 268-274.

a way to vindicate what the South had been saying for so many years. The Confederate government allowed for slavery in part to help the Southern workers who would profit from the higher wages.<sup>5</sup>

During the war, a more contemporary philosophy was formed to abolish slavery for the greater good of achieving Southern independence. Escott states, “Despite the fundamental importance of slavery to the economic and social system, this new philosophy had to overcome religious and political values which were deeply rooted in Southern culture.”<sup>6</sup> President Davis said having slaves was a constitutional right, but Davis was one of the first to advocate emancipating slaves to fight for the South in 1865. In regards to Cleburne’s proposal, Escott believes what happened was a result of the election year of 1864, not in the Confederacy but the United States. If African Americans were used in the Confederacy, it would strengthen the chance that Lincoln would be re-elected in the North as an indication his new policies for African Americans were being used even by the enemy. So Cleburne’s proposal never stood a chance in early 1864 in the South because of the fear of Lincoln coming back to power.<sup>7</sup>

In *The Gray and the Black: The Confederate Debate on Emancipation*, Robert Durden sees Cleburne’s proposal as the freest debate on arming and enlisting slaves. The proposal could have, if taken seriously in January 1864, turned the tide of the war immediately in the South’s favor. His book *The Self-Inflicted Wound: Southern Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, looks at the 1800’s as a whole and the problems the South brought onto themselves during the century. It looks specifically at the Confederacy and its failures during the American Civil War. It was a “self-inflicted wound: the gradual surrender of the Southern white majority beginning in the 1820’s to the pride, fears, and hates of racism”, that led to the South’s ultimate defeat. Durden considers Cleburne “one who did not ignore the nascent controversy and the realities that lay behind it.”<sup>8</sup> Despite the praise for Cleburne, Durden additionally feels there is a distinct weakness in Patrick Cleburne’s proposal. The Constitution of the Confederacy mentions that slavery and the abolishing of it was the responsibility of the individual states. So in effect, Jefferson Davis did not have the authority to emancipate the slaves and arm them and as Durden states it “might just as well have advised the sun not to rise or the tides of the oceans to cease.”<sup>9</sup> Durden continues with the debate initiated by Southern newspapers during the four years of war, which is covered more in his previous work *The Gray and the Black*. Durden and Escott both believe that Cleburne’s proposal and resulting controversy is one that had a much larger political accusation on the South than any further military action.

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<sup>5</sup> William J. Cooper Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1826-1856* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Paul Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), ix, 24, 25, 28, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 229.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xii, 19, 24-25, 28, 32, 180-181, 228, 235, 242-254.

<sup>8</sup> Durden, *The Gray and the Black*, 291-293; *The Self-Inflicted Wound: Southern Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985), ix, 98.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

Historian James McPherson in *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* also provides an interesting interpretation regarding the political events around the Confederacy during the Civil War. McPherson claims Cleburne felt slavery would have ended soon after the war and the South should have been willing to lose it over their independence from the Union. He states “Cleburne cut to the heart of a fundamental ambiguity in the Confederacy’s *raison d’etre*. Had secession been a means to the end of preserving slavery? Or was slavery one of the means for preserving the Confederacy, to be sacrificed if it no longer served that purpose?”<sup>10</sup> Because Davis respected Cleburne, he did not dismiss the general but did withhold promotion, implying that Cleburne received the minimum punishment for his actions.<sup>11</sup>

*Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War* by Craig L. Symonds is another extensive biography done on Cleburne with a descriptive chapter regarding his proposal. Symonds agrees with Howard and Elizabeth Purdue’s previous interpretations, but he adds that Cleburne may have failed to recognize that many Southerners saw that owning slaves came with their liberties and freedom rights in the South. The South seceded with liberty and slavery being two constant interchangeable parts of the southern way of life. Cleburne knew the dangers of the proposal but the potential good of winning the war was itself grounds for emancipation. His ultimate objective was for the Confederacy to achieve self-government. Symonds agrees with Durden in his interpretations of liberty in the South and how some in the South viewed liberty at home as the right to own slaves. Cleburne, however, firmly believed that Southerners would give up this liberty in order to keep the greater premise of that liberty. Losing the war would take away that liberty anyway. Patrick Cleburne had only been in the south since 1850, and even then his time was in Arkansas, a state that was southern but was not a dominant slave state. Although Cleburne may have believed the South would give up one liberty for the chance at a greater one, modern scholars Symonds and McPherson approach the subject from two different angles but arrive at the same conclusion that the military man, Cleburne, spoke his heart while shielding his eyes and mind to the greater political picture.<sup>12</sup>

Mark Hull’s essay, “Concerning the Emancipation of the Slaves” in *A Meteor Shining Brightly: Essays on Maj. Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne* by Mauriel Phillips Joslyn also takes this stance, despite being part of a larger biographical work. Cleburne did not foresee the potential problems among his own officers and the strong reaction from his fellow commanders. His central arguments of choosing independence over slavery may have been doomed from the beginning. Cleburne’s own peers that he fought bravely with had a strong rebuttal to his statements which made Cleburne fear that President Davis might remove him from command. In short, the opposition to arming slaves made it impossible for any legislation to pass through the Confederate Congress to arm and emancipate slaves until the war was nearly over.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 832.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 833, 865-867.

<sup>12</sup> Symonds, *Stonewall of the West*, 184-188, 191.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Hull, “A Proposal to Arm the Slaves”, in Joslyn, *A Meteor Shining Brightly*, 150-157, 160, 165.

Bruce Levine's work *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves During the American Civil War* devotes the introduction to Cleburne's proposal and the debate that ensued during the war. Levine sees Cleburne's proposal and the denial of it by Davis and the South "not surprising" given the immediate outcry that would happen later on in 1864 when Davis himself began advocating arming African Americans. The questions posed from the proposal include the motives behind secession and slaves fighting willingly on the Confederacy's behalf. Levine poses "Had this plan succeeded in rescuing the Confederacy from defeat, what would it have meant for the future structure and functioning of the South's economy?"<sup>14</sup> Other views held by previous historians are also interpreted. The opposition's argument to Cleburne's proposal to emancipate and arming slaves was "If the Southern states had left the old Union to preserve gracious slavery-and if they had warred since 1861 for the same purpose- why would they agree in 1865 to sacrifice their central war aim for the sake of military success? Wasn't this illogical - indeed, irrational?"<sup>15</sup> Supporters argued over the state rights issue and how independence and a new government structure was what Southerners fought for. Since slavery was subordinate to the military objectives of those leaders, they were prepared to sacrifice slavery for independence. Devine states that "southern army officers and political leaders began to contemplate the use of black troops only because (and only when) they recognized the depth of the crisis into which these southern difficulties had plunged the southern war effort."<sup>16</sup>

Paul Escott re-evaluated his previous stance from the book he wrote a generation earlier when he added to the scholarship with a short article in 2010, called "We Must Make Free Men of Them", claims "no one developed as thorough an argument for arming and freeing the slaves as Cleburne."<sup>17</sup> One can see the difference in Escott's two interpretations written twenty years apart and the further knowledge Escott developed during this time. In *After Secession*, he clearly believed Jefferson Davis was the first to advocate arming slaves and did so to the best of his ability. But here in this article, he talks about Cleburne's proposal and Davis's early refusal in January 1864. Davis, in fact, made a severe error by waiting nearly an entire year to bring the issue back to light. Cleburne failed to see the whole picture in making his proposal to soldiers, but Davis failed to act knowing the dangers of not acting as the leader of the Confederate government.<sup>18</sup> Bruce Stewart Jr.'s recent biography of Cleburne, entitled *Invisible Hero*, describes Cleburne's stance further. Cleburne believed slavery would end one way or the other. With African Americans being used as soldiers, it could take away the prejudices they had towards white Southern men. But he failed to see his government for what it was. Stewart explains "Cleburne looked at the Confederacy as one entity. He did not grasp the fact that the focus of the secession movement had never been on the creation of a new Federal government, but rather on the independence of each

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm the Slaves During the American Civil War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2-15, (6).

<sup>15</sup> Levine, *Confederate Emancipation*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Escott, "We Must Make Free Men of Them," (*Civil War Times*, June 2010: Vol. 49, Iss.3, 44-51 (44). <http://web.ebscohost.com.libproxy.troy.edu/ehost/> (Accessed February 8, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-51.

individual state.”<sup>19</sup> Since the Southern government was in fact a Confederacy, Cleburne did not have to just convince the officers and Jefferson Davis of his plan but all the governors of the Confederate States, each with their unique say on how their states would respond. Stewart calls the whole thing “wishful thinking at best.”<sup>20</sup> Stewart’s work is interesting because it incorporates both of Escott’s previous works, one an extensive book on Southern politics and the other a short article on the proposal to arm and free slaves. Stewart understands both perspectives from years of research. Patrick Cleburne was a valiant military man, but when it came to the political world he lived in, he fell short even to the point of being naive. The time period demanded an immediate change that could realistically never occur. The controversy of allowing slaves in the army intersected with the South’s struggle to keep away from a centralized government they felt would further suppress their rights and liberties. The government they fought to hold onto cost them at the most crucial time of the war.<sup>21</sup>

There have been several correlations between interpretations over the years from the authors’ unique perspectives and focus. The Cleburne biographers, particularly Purdue and Stewart, cast Cleburne as a heroic military figure; others see Cleburne from his proposal, regarding that as his most courageous act or most traitorous. But each of the biographers cannot argue any case for or against arming slaves without first mentioning the proposal, which because of the renewed interest, has received further research and scrutiny from scholars. Escott’s writings clearly reflect the changes that have taken place within a generation to change certain misinterpretations. He now sees Cleburne in much the same way as the biographers do: as a military man that risked his position for the fate of his country at a time when others around him failed to do so. McPherson and Durden approach the subject from a distance, not focusing so much on Cleburne’s proposal, but the politics of war in the South during the 1860’s with a glancing look at the proposal and its impact. Bruce Levine produced his larger work as the same type of context as previous article writers Hay and Wesley. Their works focus solely on the debate of emancipation in exchange for freedom and what the Confederate government stood for and came to represent through words and lack of action.

The question of arming and freeing the slaves during the American Civil War is one that has sparked plenty of research and debate. History writers continue to theorize what could have happened if Cleburne’s idea of immediate action had taken place. Cleburne spoke to his men in January 1864, believing his proposal to be the best option for the South to win their ultimate struggle for independence. Because the war ended the way it did, the research and scholarship to this question garnered more and more attention and additional findings. Although the effort to win the war for the South would have prolonged the struggle further, the South would most likely still be defeated. Cleburne’s plan seems the best remaining option, but it was also a best-case scenario in which all the obstacles standing in the way of Confederate victory would fall with one signing of a bill by Confederate President Davis. This was never to be the case no matter how quickly

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<sup>19</sup> Bruce H. Stewart Jr., *Invisible Hero: Patrick R. Cleburne*, (Macon Georgia; Mercer University Press), 2010, 217.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-220.

Davis could have acted. Cleburne made an action that needed to additionally be made in unison by a Confederacy. It was a fundamental fallacy that Cleburne hoped in vain could be overlooked.

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