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# EDITORIAL

by Keith Poulter

## THREE MILLION WORDS AND COUNTING

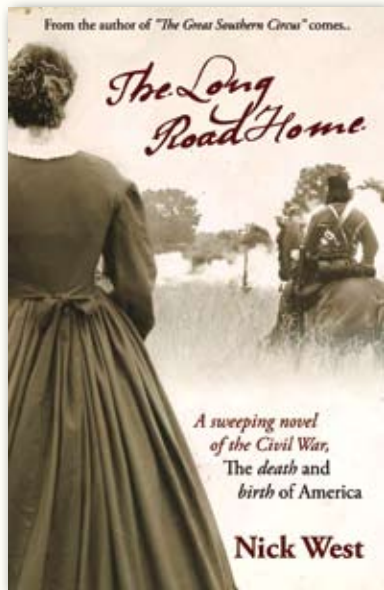
Gordon Rhea's *Fellow Southerners!* in this issue will no doubt distress some readers, though it really shouldn't. Given that our policy, when controversy rears its head, is to allow for the expression of a variety of viewpoints, my first thought was to publish a contrary view in the next issue. However, searching through existing contrary statements in hopes of identifying an appropriate author, I couldn't find one that I considered intellectually honest. One of the most promising candidates, for instance, in a piece arguing that "it wasn't about slavery," mentioned that the secession ordinances of the seven Deep South states that initially seceded all explicitly stated that secession *was* about slavery, then nudged that aside by remarking that the ordinances of the other four secessionist states were more about Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion. A good point, but surely if you are arguing that secession was not about slavery, you have to address the fact that the majority of the seceding states said it was. Not to do so, to my way of thinking, is intellectual dishonesty. So, failing to find someone to argue a contrary view, I invite readers to write in (keep it down to 300 or 400 words if you can), and we will either publish the letters in the *Crossfire* column, or as a separate "reader-response article."

In any case, Gordon's article got me to thinking what an excellent thing it would be if all those who "still hear the guns" could arrive on the same page, a page without historical distortions. I will be perfectly frank: I find Gordon's argument irrefutable. It really is time for neo-Confederates (for want of a better term) to stop trying to reconstruct history. The only reason they do this is because they wish to present the cause for which their ancestors fought in a light that is politically correct to modern Americans. Some of them even invent tens of thousands of black Confederates in order to muddy the waters with respect to the racial origins of secession, though in doing so they expose themselves to the derisive laughter of all but a handful.

Yet acknowledging the historical truth about the motivation of the leading secessionists does not mean we have to denigrate the individual soldiers in gray. *North & South* is living proof of that: although we have often taken pains to point out the origins of secession, I defy anyone to find a single word in the magazine—and there have been more than three million words between its covers so far—that denigrates the men in gray.

We must make two important distinctions. In the first place, we must distinguish between the motivations of the authors of secession and the motivations of the mass of Confederate soldiers. The former were concerned to protect and preserve the institution of black slavery. This was made explicit in a multitude of congressional debates, judicial clashes, sermons, and so forth in the decades prior to the war; and above all in the secession ordinances of the seven Deep South states and in the addresses of the secession commissioners. Slavery was to be protected as the economic mainstay of the Southern elite, but even more so as the underpinning of white supremacy. *Some* of the Confederate rank and file were certainly motivated by the latter, but a great many were not. So far as they were concerned, they were fighting to protect their way of life (albeit including slavery) and to (*Continued on page 10*)

# A New Novel from the author of *The Great Southern Circus*



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(Continued from page 2) stand by their community in the face of external threats. Many of them bought into the “states’ rights” argument, even though prewar pro-slavery leaders had often favored the *expansion* of federal authority *vis a vis* the states when that was seen as beneficial to slavery—as witness, for example, the strengthening of the Fugitive State Laws and the curtailment of the rights of the free states. Yes, most Confederate soldiers were what we would now call racists—but so were most Union soldiers; bigotry was the rule in the mid-nineteenth century. To repeat, the motivations of Confederate soldiers were many and various, just like those of the men in blue, and should be distinguished from those of the leaders of secession.

The other distinction we must make is between motivation and *consequences*. One result of the Union victory was the abolition of slavery. Can anyone doubt that one result of a Confederate victory would have been the continuation of slavery? Whatever the motivation of the individual Confederate soldier, should

his martial prowess have produced victory, he would in effect have been *fighting for slavery*. That’s what I mean by consequences. As Gordon remarks, throughout history there have been many instances of good men fighting for bad causes.

In his article, Gordon mentions the website of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and its statement that “the preservation of liberty and freedom was the motivating factor in the South’s decision to fight the Second American Revolution.” Isn’t it about time for the SCV to come clean? For them to continue to deny historical truth in order to portray their ancestors as politically correct is not merely historical vandalism, it is moral cowardice unworthy of their sires. And so unnecessary! Acknowledging the truth about secession, accepting that the “cause” espoused by the leaders of secession was evil, will be a painful exercise, but it does not in any way denigrate the courage or dedication of the bulk of their ancestors.

So I would like to challenge the lead-

ers of the SCV to post on their website the complete Secession Ordinances of all eleven seceded states, plus the complete addresses of the secession commissioners. They can put as many other statements as to cause as they like, from before and during the war—but not including the weasel words of people like Jefferson Davis *after* the war, when they were merely trying to rationalize their actions. Oh yes, Confederate vice-president Alex Stephens’ speech regarding the nature of the Confederacy should also be included. Those words are not politically correct, but that’s no reason to hide them or to reinvent them. There is no shame in acknowledging historical truth. Nor need such truth in any way diminish the Confederate soldier—whose valor, determination, and sacrifice was equal to that of any.