# Interview with Dr. Elizabeth R. Varon

**CV:** This is Casey VanSise, the current Thomas J. Davis Fellow at the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy (CENFAD) for the 2021-22 academic year. And we have with us today Dr. Elizabeth R. Varon, who is presenting for CENFAD on her book *Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War*, which was published by Oxford University Press a couple of years ago now?

**EV:** Yeah. It was published in 2019.

**CV:** Perfect! So I guess I will open by asking you, Dr. Varon: what is the overall thesis of the book, and what is the subject matter that you are looking at? Obviously, the book is focused on the US Civil War, but what is your overall contribution to the field by, for instance, looking at the Union and the Confederacy, and this "politics of deliverance" on the Union side, as I understand it? Could you explain a bit to our audience a bit more about what the "politics of deliverance" was, what the Confederate response to that was, and how that informs your work?

**EV:** Sure. So, I was commissioned to write a textbook about the Civil War, and the idea was that it would be suitable for college students. There are some wonderful textbooks on the Civil War out there, such as James McPherson's famous *Ordeal by Fire* and *Battle Cry of Freedom* volumes. And so I went into this project without a thesis, *per se*, or even a provisional thesis. I just had a sort of research design, and that was to write a book that integrated military and political history with social and cultural history, and was a sort-of holistic narrative of the Civil War, in which the experiences of noncombatants, the story of the process of emancipation, and all of these things would be throughlines rather than chapters that were set aside. And there is so much recent scholarship that is so good that I wanted to bring to bear, and update our standard narrative.

By training, I am a historian first and foremost of the American South, and so I had studied Southern places and figures in a lot of detail. I wrote a book about a Union spy named Elizabeth Van Lew, who lived in Richmond, and I had written a book about [Robert E.] Lee's surrender to [Ulysses S.] Grant at Appomattox in Virginia, so I knew as I started writing this textbook that I had a bit of a learning curve with regard to Northern politics and the Union side of the war. So as well as wanting to apply this method of really wanting to integrate military and political history with social and cultural history, I also wanted to answer for

myself and for my readers some key questions about the Union war effort. Again, if I were to ask you or anyone here in your circle about why the South fought the Civil War, people would have strong opinions. Hopefully, they would say that it was to preserve and extend slavery, which is at the core of secession and the Southern war effort. If you were to ask people why the Union men enlisted—why the professor in Maine, or the factory worker in Philadelphia, or the farmer in Connecticut, and so on would sign up and march hundreds of miles to go fight this long and bloody war in the South—the answer there is a little tougher and more elusive.

So I wanted to answer that question about what motivated Union soldiers, and I wanted to also get a better sense of [Abraham] Lincoln and his coalition-building. A major premise of the book is that neither the North or the South are monoliths. They are societies with various kinds of fault-lines and divisions, so the Union and the Confederacy as political constructs required coalition-building on both sides to mount a war effort. And I was interested in the nature of the Union coalition. To make a long story short, I discovered that, though I had not been as keen to this when I started, as I got into the sources—soldiers' letters and diaries, and also public discourse of all kinds, such as speeches, proclamations, and so on—I kept finding this pledge that Northerners were making, both in private and public, to "deliver" the South, to save the Southern masses from the leaders of the secession movement.

And I was surprised that this theme was so prominent, and mostly at how persistent it was. It is not surprising that, early in the war, Northerners might have thought, "well, secession sentiment is shallow, so maybe a show of force will bring Southerners to their senses," and so on. But what I found is that, deep into the war, even after tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of people died on the battlefield, Northerners clung to this idea that secession was the work of a small band of conspirators, and that if they could "break the spell" that those conspirators had cast, they could change Southern hearts and minds, rekindle Southern allegiance to the Union, and deliver the Southern masses from the slaveholding elite.

**CV:** Well, very fascinating! I am sure readers will find it very illuminating to look more into this, since that is not often a theme that is explored, so I appreciate your book bringing that to the field.

**EV:** Thank you!

**CV:** I guess one follow-up question from that is that, obviously at the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy, we host many Civil War historians. We have already hosted, for instance, Dr. Judkin Browning last semester—

**EV:** Sure, yeah! His work has influenced mine a lot.

**CV:** Very good. And we just had Dr. Allen Guelzo here presenting on his new book about Robert E. Lee. So it is great to have so many Civil War historians here. And what I wanted to ask is that, since CENFAD looks at a vast range of historical periods and contexts inasmuch as it is exploring history subject matter, I am curious what insights your book might have about our politics in the United States or just in general today, despite looking at the Civil War?

**EV:** Sure. Yeah, so there is definitely a diplomatic history angle to this book in the sense that part of what is at stake for the

North—for the Union and the Lincoln administration—is denying the legitimacy of the rebellion, in part because they were afraid of the potential for European powers coming in on the Confederate side, something that the Confederates were very keen on and hoped would happen. [Instead, they would] say, "this is not a legitimate democratic revolution," as the slaveholders claimed it was – an odd definition of democracy they had. [Union policymaker said,] "this is the insurgency of a small band of rebels, and therefore illegitimate, and it is a project that should not inspire the support of 'great powers' and so on." And that was one of the things that was at stake.

I think, in a way, that this project is fundamentally about the power of propaganda and ideology, and the power of ideology to shape the way that people see the world and perceive reality. So folks on the Union side clung to this idea of "saving the South from itself" even in the face of massive evidence that Confederates did not want to be saved. They clung to that idea in part because their sense was that America was a political project that depended on the affection of citizens for each other, and a consensual rather than coercive society. So they had to imagine that, if they could somehow "cut the head off the secessionist snake," they could restore that kind of consensual Union. The Confederates had their own powerful ideology that they used to counter these "deliverance" appeals, and Confederate ideology posited that "North and South" could never again be countrymen and brethren, and the Confederates claimed that the "Yankees" were intent on creating a war of "merciless subjugation, extermination, and annihilation" – those were the kinds of phrases that you see in Confederate propaganda. The Confederates began saying this before the first shots were fired, creating a propaganda frame for everything that was to transpire.

So the two sides were very much driven by ideas that are starkly opposed, and to me, one of the takeaways in terms of our modern politics is to avoid the pitfall of "false equivalency." The war was a brutal one on both sides, but the Union and the Confederacy really did represent, at their core, very different projects. The Confederates were the avowed enemies of change who wanted to prolong the power of slaveholders in the American government. The Union side had a range of views on the issue of slavery and emancipation, but there was a consensus that slaveholders should no longer rule the United States, and that slaveholders, particularly elite, wealthy ones, who were a small minority, should not exercise this undemocratic sway over the population.

Alas, another big message relevant to your CENFAD themes is that Lincoln builds this coalition around "deliverance" during the war, but once the war is over, the fault-lines within that coalition come to the fore. The coalition loses some of its momentum, and ex-Confederates are able to assert and promote their own view of what the war had meant and what defeat had meant – the "Lost Cause" propaganda that we still live in the shadow of. And so these political battles, and this discourse and ideology, persists long after the war.

**CV:** Absolutely. Well, I think our time is limited, so this is the extent of our interview, but I just want to thank Dr. Varon for appearing here, and remind readers and viewers of this interview that her book is *Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War*, published in 2019. So thank you so much, Dr. Varon, for presenting and for your interview!

**EV:** Thank you so much!