**How the West Abolished Slavery**
**Guest: Jim Powell**
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***Jim Powell is the author of numerous books, including* Greatest Emancipations: How the West Abolished Slavery.**

**WOODS:** *Greatest Emancipations* is such an important book, I think, and it's telling a story that we all should know. It's one of the glories of Western civilization to have ended slavery, and it's one of the glories of the whole tradition of thought known as classical liberalism to really have this as its capstone achievement, and yet, the nuts and bolts of exactly how it worked I think are not known. What you've done here is a comparative study looking at about a half dozen places and the different ways in which they ended slavery.

Let's start with England as a great example. England is going to be different. England is going to be in one of the categories in which slavery was ended peacefully. How exactly did they go from a situation in which slavery is a really remote problem to most people in England—it's not something they see every day, and it does seem to be sanctioned by religion and law and longstanding tradition—to leading the way to abolishing slavery?

**POWELL:** Well, that is an excellent question. Before I get into the specifics of that, I might say I am very well along with the first comprehensive history of liberty from ancient times to the present, and one of the major questions is: how do you get from some kind of authoritarian regime that most people have been born under and spent all their lives in to a reasonably free society if you have a revolution and the revolutionary force is successful in overthrowing a ruler with an army? Then how do you control the revolutionary force? Often you end up with a civil war, which makes it impossible to end up with an amicable settlement that everybody will agree on.

Okay, well, my book *Greatest Emancipations* addresses that same question. How do you get from here to there? And of course, in the United States everybody thinks the answer is we have a civil war. We have some kind of military solution. But as you noted, the English ended up with the most peaceful of emancipations in the 1830s. There was no civil war. I am reminded of a quotation by Jefferson. I forget the exact words, but he basically says that the best protection for a free society is the people. You can have a group of American founders who sit around the

table and have brilliant ideas, but if the general population doesn't know what you're talking about, or they don't support it, or they don't think it's important, you're not going to go anywhere. In the case of England you had a very long period in the 1600s, 1700s, when opinion was being developed and influenced. The whole process really starts with the group called the Levelers I know you're familiar with, during the English Civil War of the 1640s, and that is when John Lilburne, Richard Overton, and a number of other pamphleteers during the English Civil War developed the first-ever agenda for liberty, which involved individual rights, secure private property, freedom of contract, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, anti-conscription, and so on. Those ideas were picked up by John Locke several decades later, and he provided a much more coherent case for natural rights, so that becomes the basis, the principal basis for opposing slavery, for people to make a case against slavery in England.

You have two other lines of argument against slavery. The first is natural rights. The second is the humanitarian. People want to abolish slavery because they want to end the brutal treatment of slaves. So it's humanitarian, but that doesn't get you to abolition. The humanitarian argument says you want to get people to be treated better. You don't want to have them jammed up in the hulls of these terrible slave ships and chained and whipped and all of that, but that doesn't argue for liberation. And the third argument against slavery, that is really the Quaker argument, is the violence of slavery that they opposed. But again, if you don't whip them and you don't do all these terrible things, but they are still slaves, that argument doesn't carry you as far. So the natural-rights argument had to develop and get widespread understanding in the population. People had to come to understand what you're talking about, why that's a very reasonable point of view. In fact, natural rights is the principal argument that people everywhere use when the law is against you. If you can't make an argument based on the constitution—because most countries do not have effective constitutions and some, of course, don't have anything at all more than window dressing, like the Soviet constitution—the natural-rights argument, that's your basic foundation.

The second issue that came up in England, and that had to be answered before the argument could go very far is, okay, it's the self-ownership principle—everybody owns themselves, which means nobody can be owned by somebody else. That's where the natural-rights argument developed. But suppose you abolish slavery in England. England was the world's largest slave trader. If you abolish slavery—which is what the economy seems to be based on, because the Caribbean colonies were extremely lucrative, sugar and related tropical crops—is the economy going to collapse? If most people believe the economy is going to collapse, then they are not going to try to do anything with natural rights. Well, we had the series of natural-rights authors that I started to mention, of course, in the United States. We have Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, a number of others. Adam Smith became one of the most influential authors and Jacques Turgot in France. This is in the late 1700s. They were among those who made the argument that not only does an economy not need slavery to function, people are going to be far more prosperous without slavery. So the economy can thrive, do better than it ever did before

without slavery, without mercantilism, without regulations, government ownership, nationalizations, all that stuff.

Natural rights and the dynamics of a free economy, those were the two essential things that had to be widely understood and supported before the movement could go forward. Then you have the first anti-slavery society get started in the late 1780s in England. A similar one starts off in Philadelphia, but it does not become a mass movement. In England, you have Thomas Clarkson, who becomes a principal organizer of mass rallies. He does a tremendous amount of research on slavery, which becomes the basis for arguments and campaigns and speeches and everything else. I might add that Clarkson in England—because England depended utterly on its merchant marine, there was a doctrine in England that slavery was the nursery of seamen because you had all these slave ships, you had all these sailors, all the people trained in how to maintain and sail ships, and in the event of a war, thank God, England had all these sailors who were on slave ships who could be used to staff warships.

**WOODS:** But it turns out that these were terrible conditions that these sailors were living in on these ships.

**POWELL:** That's exactly right. Clarkson was interviewing. He got the lists of sailors, and what happened to them? Of how many who died and who deserted and so on, and he found that slavery—it was as bad for the sailors because you had these terribly unhygienic conditions that the slaves were in, and a lot of those situations involved communicable diseases that ended up affecting the sailors, too, because they were all in the same, confined environment on ships for weeks or months at a time. So in fact that became a national security argument. That's what began to get traction in Parliament in the 1780s and 90s. They were actually undermining England's naval capacity by maintaining slavery because it kills sailors. So the national security argument turned out to be crucial, especially because of the wars that were going on at that time.

So those three arguments got the movement in England underway—natural rights, and then how a free economy works without slavery, and then the specific national security argument that was applied in England, and the ultimate solution, skipping ahead: the English abolished the slave trade. The reason their strategy began by focusing on abolition of the slave trade is they recognized that because England was the world's largest slave trader—it carried a higher percentage of slaves crossing the Atlantic than any of the other European countries, and there were so many suppliers, the bankers who provided financing for the slave voyages, the people supplying hardware and sails and food and everything else that the ships needed—the interest groups defending slavery would be too much if they tried to do everything at once. So they first go after the slave trade, and the importance of the slave trade is that everywhere except in the United States during the 19th century, slave populations tended to decline because of the harsh conditions—the tropical disease, and so on. So if you cut off the flow of new slaves into an economy, whether it's Cuba or Jamaica or Brazil or some other place, the slave population is going to go down and eventually collapse. The United States was the exception because it had a

natural increase in the slave population without any further imports, which gets into a whole separate set of problems.

But the solution that was eventually offered in the 1830s in England was for Parliament to appropriate, as I recall, about 20 million pounds to pay off the slaveholders and get them out of the slavery business. Now, this runs completely counter to what most people might think makes sense. William Lloyd Garrison, who energized the American anti-slavery movement in the 1830s, ’40s, ’50s, his mantra was emancipation without compensation to the slaveholders. The slaveholders didn’t earn it. They didn’t deserve it. It was the slaves who were forced to work for nothing.

That is all true. However, I think the British had greater wisdom, and the wisdom was that after emancipation the former slaves and the former slaveholders were likely to still be in the same place, the same society, the same economy because most people are going to prefer to be where the places are familiar to them. They understand how everything works. They know who the good guys and the bad guys are. And most of them couldn't afford to move. Most certainly the former slaves didn’t have money for a voyage to America or some other place that might offer a better deal.

So most of these people after emancipation are going to be in the same place. And the former slaveholders had more clout than the former slaves. The key issue there and in so many other places was that nobody could be counted on to protect former slaves if the former slaveholders were motivated by revenge to get even with the slaves. So in other words, what we have in the United States, and what is happening in some other places, is you have a violent emancipation. You take the slaves away from the slaveholders, and you may prevail for a while, but after that, what happens? The British didn’t have a continental-sized army. So they weren’t going to emancipate the slaves to have a forced emancipation and then leave an army behind forever to try to protect the slaves from the former slaveholders. So they weren’t going to protect them, and nobody else was going to protect them. So they anticipated that you really don’t want to bankrupt the former slaveholders and then go home because they are going to take it out on the slaves, and they have enough clout they can do it.

That’s exactly what happened in the United States. The North won the Civil War, but it lost the Reconstruction. I mean, that was the most hideous case in the United States during the Civil War—all done with the best of intentions, of course. The North won the war, and they abolished slavery. Most of the fighting took place in the South. So there was a lot of destruction, a lot of loss, property destroyed, crops destroyed. Everybody celebrated the emancipation. And then after Lincoln was assassinated, his hand-picked successor, Andrew Johnson, becomes president. Andrew Johnson used to be a Tennessee senator, and he was the only southerner who remained in the Senate and supported the Union. That’s why he was still around. But Andrew Johnson turned out to be fairly close—he was certainly supportive of white supremacy and all of that. So his idea of what to do after the Civil War—what to do with these freed slaves, his idea was to get the South back into the Union as quickly as possible. So he

appointed governors who were acceptable to the southerners, and they had the power to appoint everybody who was working for the state governments—all the people. So this is all white supremacy, and within just a few years after the Civil War in the late 1860s the abolitionists in Congress start to fade away or turn to other things.

In 1868, Thaddeus Stevens died, Carl Schurz, former Union general, he starts to focus on sound money. He figures he's done everything. Well, the slaves were emancipated, so what more is there to do? So then the abolitionists turned to dealing with other issues—the Indians, the exploration of the West. By the mid-1870s, there was almost nothing being done in the way of following up with the former slaves, and then you have the contested 1876 election. It was a contested election, and there was a stalemate between the Democrats and the Republicans, and eventually, they made a deal. The Republicans decided that their top priority was to have their guy, Rutherford B. Hayes, become president, and the top priority for the Democrats was to have complete control of the South. So the Republicans agree. So the Democrats agreed. Hayes could go to the White House. And the Republicans would see that the remaining federal troops would be withdrawn from the South, and that's what they did. So the Democrats then had complete control in the South for the next 100 years.

Now, you had a very peculiar dynamic with these freed slaves. The slaveholders, although they might often be cruel, because they paid a lot of money for the slaves they did not have incentives to kill them, as cruel as they certainly were. But they certainly tried to stop short because otherwise they were just taking money out of their own pocket if they kill slaves that they paid for. But after the war they lost the slaves, and they hate the slaves whom they are blaming for their bankrupted, you know, their burned crops and destroyed mansions and so on. So after the war, you have all these white supremacist groups; the Knights of Camellias, the Ku Klux Klan, all of the rest of them. They are avenging their losses. So you had large numbers of slaves who were terrified, who were killed. The South starts public school systems. They are 100% for the whites. Blacks have nothing to do with these school systems that blacks and everybody else is paying for—school taxes—the terrorist supremacy groups—all of that. And the abolitionists in Congress took over for a few years, but as I indicated, they were focusing on other things within three or four years after the end of the Civil War.

So I made the case in my book *Greatest Emancipations* that it might very well have been better to let the South secede. Let them go for several reasons. As I said, the Reconstruction was a disaster, and of course, you had suppression of the liberties of blacks for another 100 years. There really was no such thing as a military solution to American slavery because you had official emancipation. We had three more constitutional amendments that try to deal with that. But there were no unionists in the South. The elections that were there during the Reconstruction years, the unionists, who in the South, really didn't have roots in the communities, they came from the North down to the South to look for opportunity. Most of these people were professional politicians, and if they didn't win elections, they had nothing else to fall back on. These were not doctors and other professionals in the communities. They

didn't have any roots in the community. So it was white supremacist dominated for another 100 years.

**WOODS:** Well, that is the key objection you're going to run into, because your thesis here strongly suggests, or even outright says, that in the cases that you study in which slavery was abolished more or less peacefully, the long-term results for everyone were better for slaves and non-slaves, and that in the cases in which violence was used, well, the situation was more problematic to people. This holds also in the cases of Haiti and Cuba?

**POWELL:** Yeah, in Cuba you had a 10-year war. It was an off and on war, not a steady fighting. But it was a struggle for independence. There had been a number of efforts in Cuba to get an abolitionist movement going, and they kept getting interrupted by the struggle for independence. So you had more than one thing going on. By the end of this 10-year off-and-on struggle—it was a guerrilla struggle. It kept moving around. One side would dominate. Then it would run out of guns or food or something. So it would stop and somebody else would dominate. Anyway, by the time all that was over—it was finally resolved in 1886—basically, all the defenders of slavery were exhausted. That was an unintended consequence of this 10-year struggle for independence. It just took all the air out of the big planters who were defending slavery.

Now, in Brazil you had a very interesting combination of anti-slavery strategies. You had revolts. You had slave revolts. So by that time—this is the 1880s—it was clear that slavery was a risky business. If you were a slave owner, be careful. You've got to keep an eye of what's going on behind your back because the people you are treating badly. They don't like it, and they may take it out, and that may be the end of you.

So you had slave revolts. You had a lot of runaways. That was an issue. People would pay money for slaves, and then they were gone. They were all the field hands. So they'd find a place they can go. Now, to me, one of the most interesting things about the Brazilian case was that you had a lot of people who were going door-to-door. They started in cities and towns and spread to the rural area. Private individuals are going person-to-person trying to persuade people to emancipate their slaves. Now, these start out with people who only had a couple of slaves, you know, household slaves in a town, but they are going from place to place, and in some cases they are raising private money to purchase the liberty of slaves. In other cases, maybe the slaves are older, and they are not as effective as they used to be. So people don't lose that much by giving it up. But what they created were slave-free zones. Initially they were small, but they popped up in more and more places throughout Brazil, and the small ones got bigger. Well, one thing that meant was these are places where runaway slaves could go. So they could go everywhere. In the case of the United States, they basically had to get to Canada, which was a very long trip, especially forbidding in the winter because southerners didn't have reason to have winter clothing. But anyway, what happened in Brazil was you had all these slave-free zones, and that had an effect of triggering more runaways. You had people going to

plantations and providing directions. You can go to this one over here, or you can escape and go to that one over there.

So you had multiple anti-slavery efforts going on. And one of my conclusions is that there is no single anti-slavery strategy that's likely to do the whole job because it's such a difficult thing, as I mentioned in the beginning, to go from some kind of authoritarian regime, or slavery system, to a free society. That's so difficult. The entrenched interest groups you're going against are so tenacious, and they can be very violent. So you need multiple strategies. You saw a number of them together in Brazil. You saw some of them in the case of England, where they simply appropriated about 20 million pounds and gave it to the slaveholders, with the one proviso that they cannot be in the slave business anymore. What happened was the slaveholders in Jamaica and the other British slave colonies in the Caribbean, some of them took the money and invested it in machines, if you can imagine that, for more efficient operations, and they came to recognize that slavery is a pretty inefficient way of running a business because you're having to maintain the slaves year-round. In many cases, you may have a seasonal need, either no need at all at certain times of the year, or you don't need them as much in slow periods, and to maintain these people so they can be ready for the one time when you do need them, the free market is much more efficient. You use them for however much or however little. You put up your help wanted ads. You contract with people on a periodic basis. But some of the planters in the British Caribbean took the money and went to the United States, got in a different business, and some of them went to England and became landed aristocrats—all of which was far better than what happened in the United States, where with the military approach or the war to liberate the slaves, you bankrupted the opposition, and they wanted to avenge their losses, and so you had the Ku Klux Klan and so on. That's the worst solution to me.

Among the anti-slavery strategies that I talk about in greater detail in my book *Greatest Emancipations*, the number one is the slave rebellion. That's something that slaves can do to help themselves, and it makes clear that slaveholding is a risky business. The second one is abolitionist campaigns that involve publications, speaking tours—things like that, aimed at influencing opinion and generating public rejection of slavery and support for emancipation. So you're trying to change opinion there. And the third strategy: once public opinion is going against slavery is you have campaigns to elect politicians to the American Congress or to whatever legislative body that may be relevant. Then you need to provide encouragement and assistance for runaway slaves, especially if there's a climate issue, as there was in the United States in preparing to deal with the travel through forests in the winter. So you have to provide support for these people. Another thing is to raise funds to buy the freedom of slaves, and finally, to appropriate taxpayer funds for slaveholders to basically to pay slaveholders to get out of the slavery business, and that's all of that. It's a lot cheaper than a war. Nothing that government does is more costly than wars. So these—any one or combination of these strategies is what seems to have worked. There is no one thing that'll do it. But to recognize that we are constantly told in the United States that the choice was to have a civil war or do nothing, and that's not the choices that were available when you look at the other cases, as I

did in the British Caribbean and Brazil and Cuba. Those are the principal, by far, the largest concentrations.

**WOODS:** Well, it's a very important book, and what surprised me was that you had to write it. That really, it's hard to find, especially among libertarians, people interested in classical liberalism, a really good comparative study of this most momentous subject. Well, the project you're working on right now sounds like a labor of love, but also a bear given how large the subject is. Are you in the thick of it right now? Or can you see a light at the end of the tunnel?

**POWELL:** Oh, yeah, my table of contents has about 70 chapters. I am more than halfway through—more than half the chapters are in draft form, you know, a reasonable draft, and then half of the remaining needed to be started from scratch, and the other half I've got a tremendous amount of material that has to be edited into an appealing narrative. So hopefully in another year I will have a complete draft, not a final draft, but a complete draft. I very much look forward to that, but there is—what I am focused on is how, as I said before was how do you get to a free society? That is different than, let's say, the history of classical liberalism. That is certainly an important element of the story, very important element of the story, but that is not a complete story about how do you establish—how do you develop a free society? Because you are always encountering opposition, and as I touched on, if you are pursuing a revolt, well, there's going to be pushback, and you may end up with a civil war, but that's the worst kind of war because everybody is fighting for the same home turf.

So that can go on and on and on, and what you end up with is simply inflaming hatreds which make it impossible to reach and amicable settlement that people are not going to immediately start to try to subvert, and so there's a lot of fighting, you know? You have a free society in one place, and the more successful it is, the more likely somebody else is going to come along and try to take your stuff. History is full of collapsed nations and civilizations. So there's a whole another subject there, but I will say I think, if you don't mind the diversion a bit, I believe America has flourished because we have had more things going for us than anybody else, and that is if we need all the things that worked out in our favor because not everything works out all the time. There are a lot of places that have a good president or a good congress or a good something else, but that's not enough. America was lucky. We have the best location anywhere in the world for a free society—flanked by two gigantic oceans that make it very hard to invade us. If we were in the middle of Europe or someplace else in East Asia where we were surrounded by neighbors and some of them are friendly and some of them are not, you're going to have to have a standing army. Standing armies are often the source of oppression.

So they're hard to control, but if you don't have them, for sure, you're going to be invaded. So we're fortunate to have the location that we do. We were fortunate to develop as English colonies because of the constitutional limitations—the constitutional traditions that developed in England. If we had been Spanish colonies, it wouldn't have worked out that way, because all of the Spanish colonies were incorporated into the crown. On a related point, we were very lucky that no gold was discovered in America until our constitutional system had been worked

out, and we had a fairly large, growing, diversified economy—a lot of other things going on beside extracting metals from the ground and sending it across the ocean in the king's ships. As you can imagine, the fact that gold and silver were discovered in Spanish America led the government to be heavily involved in managing those colonies, whereas in England in the American colonies, England's American colonies, we were fortunate that the English kings had their own problems to attend to, and so the colonies were neglected. And that enabled us to do all sorts of things that they would have not otherwise been able to do, and we were fortunate that private property was affirmed very early on in the American colonies by the failure of the first two colonial ventures in Jamestown and in Plymouth. They tried to do without private property.

So they learned that lesson early on, and there was a lot of experience gained with representative government, with legislative assemblies of one sort or another during the 1600s so that by the time that there is a confrontation in the mid-to-late 1700s, we have a lot of experience with the legislature standing up to executives, to colonial governors or to the English Parliament. So there were a lot of things—you would have to say there is a lot of luck there. We were fortunate to have a lot of talent among the founders, but as I also noted, it's not enough to have some very smart people at the core of it. We had the popular culture starting perhaps in the mid-1700s saturated with ideas on liberty; sermons, and pamphlets, and broadsides, and books, and all kinds of things. These were issues that were widely understood and widely supported, and if the people did not support them, nothing would have happened. We were very fortunate to have a commander. We needed a military commander, and there weren't many military commanders with any kind of experience—certainly not successful experience.

So we were very fortunate, extraordinarily fortunate, with George Washington, who is about the only military commander I know of—unless you go back to Cincinnatus in Rome—who did not have political ambitions—who deferred to civilian authority. In fact, who suppressed a revolt—a planned coup—against the American government—the Articles of Confederation because they hadn't paid the officers. They hadn't paid the soldiers either. They were broke, and the most important meeting in American history was between George Washington and his officers in March of 1783. We could have ended up with a military coup. But he put it down, and then, of course, he didn't want to run for a third term. If he had died in office, that would have set a precedent for a president for life. As I said, aside from Washington and Cincinnatus, I am sure there must be somebody else who did not have political ambitions and seized dictatorial power, but I haven't—at this point, I can't name a third one. It's easy—you know, in ten minutes you could write down 20 military commanders who ended up seizing dictatorial power.

**WOODS:** Well, there must a reason that King George said of George Washington, he truly is the greatest man in the world, because it was highly unique for him to have behaved this way. That's one thing I will hand to Washington, as you say, because there are many people who

were in his position who we now know today as czars, dictators, whatever, and we don't know him that way.