Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the prominent speakers scheduled to speak at the 2016 CWI conference about their upcoming talks and their thoughts about Reconstruction and its legacies. Our first interview is with Dr. Gregory Downs, Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Davis. Dr. Downs is the author of Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861-1908 (University of North Carolina Press, 2011) and most recently, After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War (Harvard University Press, 2015), which uses the lens of occupation to examine the immediate period after Confederate surrender as an extension of wartime.

CWI: It is popular perception that the Civil War definitively and "neatly" ended at Appomattox, and so most media outlets declared the commemorations of the Civil War Sesquicentennial over in the summer of 2015. In what ways have such understandings of the war inhibited a fuller understanding of the enduring challenges and unanswered questions that Americans faced in the postwar period?

DR. DOWNS: Ending the war at Appomattox Court House has allowed Americans now to do what Americans then could not--separate the Civil War from emancipation and Reconstruction. By defining the Civil War narrowly as a contest on battlefields, Americans operating within a Brothers' War framework have drained the war of political and ideological meanings obvious to its participants. They have made the Civil War neat and clear by separating it from its drawn-out, messy, and inherently political conclusion in the years between 1865 and 1870.

An Appomattox myth that venerated the meeting between Grant and Lee as the close of the war began to circulate immediately after the fabled surrender. And over time it has been picked up by those who wished to see the war as noble but not as inherently political, and by those who sought to use the meeting as a foundation for a reunited nation, a cornerstone of a new unity among white Americans. But Grant--like many generals and politicians--understood that the Civil War could not end at Appomattox Court House because the work of the war was not done. And the South could not be defeated, nor could slavery be ended, nor could any kind of post-war settlement be reached through normal peace powers. Only by holding on to the force of war could
the United States complete the work that it had taken up as the war progressed, work that reflected the fact that a war for Union had become a war to end slavery and to create a new order in the South.

CWI: In what ways did Reconstruction provide revolutionary social and political change in the United States, and for whom? In what ways, and for whom, did Reconstruction fall short of its social and political promises?

DR. DOWNS: Reconstruction truly was a revolutionary moment. The end of slavery--completed through the war powers but months after Appomattox Court House--was among the largest property transfers in world history and altered the economic foundation of the South forever. Additionally the United States used its military power to complete the work of the war and to create basic civil rights for freedpeople, rights that the white Southern governments would never have granted them, including basic things like the right to travel or own property or testify in court. Then in 1867, the United States Army was charged by Congress with registering freedmen to vote in new constitutional conventions, setting the stage for freedpeople to exercise new political rights in the South. This made the United States one of only two large-scale slave societies in the 19th century world to extend the vote so quickly to former slaves. And then those ex-slaves elected governments that modernized the South, creating public school systems, hospitals, and other programs, often for the first time.

It also was a revolutionary moment because it depended on violence. Reconstruction was enacted frequently by military force because these changes were impossible in normal politics. Like other revolutions, this one produced a powerful and intensely violent counter-revolution that eventually drove Republican governments from power, assassinated legions of freedpeople and politicians, disfranchised African-Americans and many poor whites, and drew sharp lines of racial segregation. All of this, of course, was shocking to people--white and black--who hoped for a different world. But, as with many revolutions, Reconstruction put in place changes that outlasted the counter-revolution. The Constitution was altered forever, in ways that shape our own lives to this day. And the world that Confederates imagined in 1861 could not be revived; there would be no slavery. Even the hard caste lines that ex-Confederates aimed for in 1865 and 1866 could not be revived. Although Jim Crow segregation was brutal and oppressive, it had to be constructed through gestures to race neutrality; they could not rely upon the same tools they used in 1865. And ex-Confederates had to work much harder to limit mobility and exclude freedpeople from the court system. There is no question that the counter-revolution, while incomplete, dashed many of the hopes for freedpeople, but still Reconstruction blocked a much-worse 1866 system from enduring.

CWI: What are some of the key points that you hope to cover in your sessions on Reconstruction and the continued military occupation of the South at the 2016 conference? Why is it so important to include discussions of Reconstruction in our
conversations on the war as a whole? Why do these issues still matter in contemporary society?

DR. DOWNS: Reconstruction still matters because the ideas it introduced into American life remain crucial today. What kind of protection can people expect from the federal government when they face oppressive local governments? What rights do Americans have? How can they defend them? Who can vote?

Reconstruction remains a touchstone in these debates. We live in the Constitution Reconstruction created and in some of the same arguments Reconstruction inspired.

At Gettysburg, I will talk about the crucial effort of the National Park Service and others to commemorate Reconstruction in its inspiring achievements and its crushing defeats. Until we make an effort as a society to remember Reconstruction, we will fail to understand or remember the Civil War.