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Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War

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Marc Egnal believes that most histories of the origins of the American Civil War have overemphasized the significance of ideas about slavery. This book, which expands upon the author's influential article, "The Beards Were Right: Parties in the North, 1840–1860" (Civil War History [March 2001]), contends that the Civil War was caused by changes in economic geography. "More than any other reason," Egnal argues, "the evolution of the Northern and Southern economies explains the Civil War" (pp. 7–8). By the 1850s, this book explains, the rapid economic growth of the Great Lakes region overshadowed the commercial ties between North and South that had served during the first half of the century as a unifying force. By mid-century, the Northeast was linked by strong commercial ties to the upper Midwest, whose politicians pursued an aggressive campaign for government-funded economic development that alienated the South. According to Egnal, these developments explain the rise of the Republican Party and the loosening of economic bonds between North and South, both of which contributed to the descent into war.

After introducing this provocative thesis, Egnal presents a series of well-written chapters that amount to a survey of antebellum American political history. Drawing on the rich secondary literature on this subject as well as the author's original readings of published speeches, these chapters focus on well-known national political leaders, from Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun to Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. Using such men as his main characters, Egnal relates the familiar story of the dissolution of the second party system. Whereas in the 1840s the Democrats and Whigs had been cross-regional parties that tempered conflict between North and South, the political reorientation of the 1850s created new alignments that pitted the two regions against one another. To supplement his discussion of leading politicians, Egnal describes the political geography of the antebellum states in detail, demonstrating that there was great variation in patterns of economic activity and party allegiances within each state, at the microregional level. By combining this evidence from high political discourse and county-level quantitative data, *Clash of Extremes* provides an informative, synthetic account of antebellum political development.

While its attempt to highlight the critical role of economic geography is welcome, *Clash of Extremes* mostly fails to meet the expectations raised by the author's bold assertions. Part of the problem is the book's inadequate treatment of the historiography. Citing only a few pages of the writings of the eminent Civil War historian James McPherson to characterize a large and sophisticated literature on antebellum politics, Egnal writes that historians have exaggerated the importance of northerners' principled, "idealistic" opposition to slavery. In fact, many scholars have been careful to argue that the majority in the North objected to the extension of slavery in the West for self-interested reasons, including racist ones. Furthermore, most textbooks already describe the economic growth of the upper Midwest, accelerated by the growth of a new railroad network, as an important factor in the North's economic and political separation from the South.

Egnal does depart from other scholars in the degree to which he is willing to downplay the importance of the slavery issue while emphasizing the causal power of local economic development. In his account of the rise of the Republicans in the 1850s, Egnal contends that "antislavery remained a secondary concern and economics was primary in the formation of a strong Northern party in the 1850s" (p. 124). This assertion is never sufficiently defended, unless "antislavery" is defined narrowly. Certainly, *Clash of Extremes* succeeds in showing that northern voters and politicians in the late 1850s were concerned with internal improvements and the tariff. But, as Egnal acknowledges, political debate in these years was dominated by discussions of slavery and its place in the West. Having relied mainly on evidence from politicians' speeches to characterize early nineteenth-century developments, Egnal implies that the preponderance of political discourse in the late 1850s was mere rhetoric that obscured the more fundamental economic interests driving political behavior. To explain what really motivated northern voters, Egnal offers up some intriguing anecdotal evidence from a handful of letters and speeches, along with some county-level election data. Those figures, which show that Republicans made some of their biggest gains in the late 1850s in central Pennsylvania and southern Indiana, are supposed to show that it was the party's attention to purely economic issues, such as the tariff, that enabled Lincoln to gain victory in 1860. Exactly how the data show this remains unclear. The truth is that it is very difficult to disentangle the various elements of party platforms and ideologies and to measure their relative importance. The evidence and analysis in this book are too limited to overcome this problem.

A more obvious weakness, given the book's central argument, is its failure to present a substantial discussion of changing patterns of interregional trade. Certainly, Egnal is correct to claim that, by the 1850s, the upper Midwest had become a more important trading partner to the Northeast, thus diminishing the importance of the Mississippi River trade. However, a significant volume of trade between North and South continued into the 1850s. Why didn't this substantial commercial connection continue to discourage war, as it had earlier? Egnal's implicit argument here is that a relative decline in the South's share of domestic commerce was enough to tip the balance toward secession, but he offers remarkably little measurement of the volume of trade among the regions. Nor is there much discussion of the presumed relation between trade and war. Have divergences in regional economic development and trade caused civil wars in other national cases? Should such divergences be understood as a sufficient condition for a war of secession, or a necessary one? In the American case, are we to believe that the economic changes Egnal highlights were such a powerful force for disunion that no alternate history of choices made by political leaders after

1850 could have prevented war? Clash of Extremes succeeds in raising such questions, but more satisfactory answers to them will require further study.