

---

[Journal of Southern History](#) 76.2 (May 2010): p448(2). (916 words)

Show details

---

**Full Text :**

COPYRIGHT 2010 Southern Historical Association

Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War. By Marc Egnal. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009. Pp. [xiv], 416. \$30.00, ISBN 978-0-8090-9536-0.)

Perhaps more than any other theme in American history, identifying the main cause of the Civil War undergoes constant reinterpretation. Past generations have cited the incompatibility of southern and northern economic worldviews, incompetent and blundering policy makers, the breakdown of the Democratic-Whig party system, and the moral debate over slavery as the critical variable to explain secession and, perhaps more important, the long, bloody war that followed. Marc Egnal offers his own take on the subject in *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War*. Rather than attempting a completely novel explanation for why the conflict occurred, Egnal draws on an older school of historiography for inspiration. Although he incorporates the work of recent historians and new demographic data in support of his argument, this book adopts an interpretative framework that Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard made popular in the early twentieth century. Simply put, Egnal "contends that the evolution of the Northern and Southern economies, more than any other factor, explains the conflict" (p. 17).

A great deal is familiar in this book. The economic, or Beardian, interpretation maintains a strong presence in the imagination of most historians, even as recent scholarship has given the moral and political dimensions of slavery a stronger role. The cartoonish version of the Beardian approach characterizes the Civil War as a bourgeois revolution that signaled the arrival of industrial capitalism and destroyed the South's premodern agrarian mentalite. Egnal squarely rejects this reliance on what he terms "abstract, disembodied Larger Forces" and instead chooses to focus on individual agency (p. 15). As a result, readers encounter a recognizable cast of characters. Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Edmund Ruffin, and Ulysses S. Grant all make an appearance, along with a host of the other usual politicians and policy makers. The end result of these twin emphases on economic development and individual agency is a very accessible narrative that should find a wide readership, even as it might frustrate some historians seeking Egnal's take on the larger questions of American capitalist development.

The narrative structure of *Clash of Extremes* takes a well-worn course, but Egnal has several new insights on sectional divergence. Most significant is his convincing portrait of the emerging importance of the Great Lakes region in the antebellum period. As states like Illinois and Michigan developed, he argues, their politicians demanded government action in growing their economies. Improved harbors, canals, and railroads all fell into this category, and Great Lakes boosters expected federal policy makers to pitch in with land grants, funding, and friendly legislation. In response to these economic imperatives, the Republican Party arose--not coincidentally claiming its mythical origins in the Great Lakes state of Wisconsin--as "a new, purely Northern party that joined together two overlapping groups: the strongest critics of slavery and the advocates of federal programs to develop the North" (p. 122). The emphasis on the need for an interventionist federal state to improve the region's burgeoning transportation network, and not simply its reliance on free labor, thus set the Great Lakes on a collision course with the Deep South and its states' rights doctrine.

As Republicans blended antislavery sentiments and federal action to dominate northern politics, the significant differences in the economic worldviews of the upper and lower South became increasingly apparent. Of course, southern politicians often rallied to the defense of slavery with a single voice, but their willingness to court secession as a political remedy to solve sectional crises varied by region. To Egnal, the correlation among slaveholding, cotton production, and attitudes toward secession is not coincidental. States in the upper and border South struggled to make sense of both Lincoln's election and the Deep South's rush to secede because "greater urbanization, stronger ties with the North, proportionately fewer slaves, and a more diversified approach to development fostered a different vision of the future" and kept a vibrant two-party system in place there (p. 286). In the end, sectional interests

triumphed over regional ones in the upper South but not in the border South. Egnal concludes that "trade, place of birth, class, and levels of slaveholding--not just the desire to defend a social system--determined who seceded and when" (p. 306).

Egnal should be commended for tackling a huge historical question with an effective blend of traditional and innovative approaches. Future generations of historians will undoubtedly revise the conclusions offered in *Clash of Extremes*, but they would be wise to recognize the various accomplishments made in this single volume. Perhaps most notable is Egnal's constant stress on regional dissent within the sections: all the South was not South Carolina; all the North was not Massachusetts. His suggestion that the Republican Party fused northern economic interests in ways that slavery could not unify the South is likewise a well-supported and convincing theme that merits further exploration. Egnal might stress the zero-sum relationship between moral and economic indictments of slavery a bit too much. Modern readers might want to draw a strict line between these approaches, but free labor advocates in the 1850s embraced the ideas that slavery tarnished the nation's soul and its economic future with equal vigor. This aside, *Clash of Extremes* is a fine addition to the storied list of works dealing with the origins of the American Civil War aimed at a wider readership.

SEAN PATRICK ADAMS

University of Florida

**Named Works:** *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Nonfiction work) Book reviews

Source Citation

Adams, Sean Patrick. "Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War." *Journal of Southern History* 76.2 (2010): 448+. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 22 May 2010.

Document URL

[http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A226821429&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=yorku\\_main&version=1.0](http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A226821429&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=yorku_main&version=1.0)

**Gale Document Number:**A226821429

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

- [Contact Us](#)
- [Copyright](#)
- [Terms of use](#)
- [Privacy policy](#)

