



**Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War** Marc Egnal. Hill & Wang, \$27 (384p) ISBN 978-0-8090-9536-0

This incisive, if overstated, study locates economic interests rather than clashing ideologies and social systems at the roots of the Civil War. British historian Egnal (*A Mighty Empire: The Origins of the American Revolution*) traces America's polarization in the 1850s to antagonistic sectional economies. In the North, he contends, the Republican Party, beholden to a burgeoning "Great Lakes economy" and focused on promoting industrial growth, conceived its effort to ban slavery in America's Western territories—the issue that precipitated the war—in terms of the economic interests of Northern settlers. Conversely, he argues, Southern planters, their soils depleted, saw expansion of slave agriculture onto the fresh soils of those territories as a dire economic necessity; for them, "secession was a rational act." Egnal's perceptive, fine-grained analysis of fragmentation within the North and South around local patterns of trade, agriculture and manufacturing is especially revealing. Still, economic motives alone don't seem powerful enough to have started a war without the atavistic forces of racism and nationalism energizing them. While not a sufficient account, Egnal's is an illuminating contribution to our understanding of the Civil War's causes. 11 maps. (Jan.)