

The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War

John Benson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Benson, John (2004) "The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss4/22>

Review

Benson, John

Fall 2004

Holt, Michael F. *The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War.* Hill and Wang, \$20.00 ISBN 809095181

Cause for concern

The approaching crisis

What caused the Civil War? That question seems simple to answer. However, it is one of the most complex to explain. Many historians have weighed in; James McPherson even won the Pulitzer Prize in the process. As clearly illustrated by the flurry of books produced on the subject over the last few years, that central question has yet to be fully answered. The issues of slavery and states rights, often from a sectional viewpoint that concentrates on the ideas and statements of the press, citizens and abolitionist movements, have been examined in depth. Often overlooked are the political acts of politicians that kept the issue of slavery alive long enough for it to divide a nation.

By all accounts the slave system had little hope of surviving outside the southeastern region. Given world opinion and the ability of technology to replace the need for manual labor, it may have eventually died out altogether. But politicians often resuscitated it and the tempers it produced for purely political gain. According to Michl F. Holt, politicians in Washington, especially members of Congress, realized the partisan value of the issue and acted on short-term political calculations with minimal regard for sectional comity. War was the result. Politicians fanned the flames for their own benefit. **The Fate of their Country** is one of the few books to expressly look at these political maneuvers.

According to Holt, politicians fanned a dying flame when necessary for political benefit. This premise is undeniably true. As support for his thesis, Holt looks at the final formation of the two party system, the Wilmot Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act to show how politicians used the issue of slavery to gain political power. While other events are

mentioned, they are neither highlighted nor explained in great depth. Thus ignored are many other events that stirred the debate as much, if not more, such as the Nullification Crises, Nat Shay's Rebellion, or the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Holt notes that he intentionally kept the book short in order to reach a new and wider audience. Presumably this audience is either younger and thus prone to reject voluminous tones of academic discourse, or adults with only a peripheral understanding of the issues and thus not interested in detailed politically based writings. Regardless, while the book is thought provoking and may spur further study, it is also somewhat misleading. To fully understand how politics contributed to the start of the Civil War you need to look at all of the major events of the period, not just some of them. Boiling the issue down for simplicity of understanding is helpful but unnecessary. Other important events can also be included, boiled down and allow for a much better understanding of the issues involved. It took years of miscommunication and personal abuse to drive a rift large enough for an entire country to divide. One cannot be led to believe that four events irreversibly put a nation on the road to civil war. Holt's premise is good but lacks substance.

Without question, the four events chosen by Holt are critical to an understanding of the sectional crises. The creation of the two party system first highlighted the differences of the northern and southern mindset. Republicans dominated the North and Democrats the South. Based on beliefs in the size and role of government and later fueled by issues in the Missouri Compromise and a war with Mexico, the two parties formed a line, not based on idea, but on geography. Ideas became platforms, platforms had to be supported, and politicians had to be elected who would support those platforms. The result became a sectional divide instead of a political debate.

Likewise the Kansas-Nebraska act, the Wilmot Provisio and the Compromise of 1850 illustrate how each section was hell bent on achieving superior numbers in representation in Washington. The South appeared eager, even at the cost of War with Mexico, to obtain greater land holdings for plantations and thus the use of slavery. The North was not willing to allow bondage of fellow human beings expand beyond the existing borders.

Simplicity aside, Holt writes a thought provoking book. His writing is interesting and pleasant to read. He has boiled the issues down and makes the overall issue easy to understand and the events themselves clear and concise. Of course simplistic analysis challenges the author to prove his thesis with less

support. Holt battles this problem with limited success. Many statements or opinions expressed by Holt lack quotes, facts or figures as support. Ideas are often generalized. Political speeches are often cited without any proof that they had an impact at all. Much of the time we are left to take Holt's word as gospel. While this may suffice for younger readers, historians require more evidence. Proof requires fact, not opinion.

While the book is 160 pages, only 126 are self authored. The remaining pages are dedicated to an extensive appendix containing important speeches and letters that define the political thought at the time such as President Abraham Lincoln's House Divided speech, President Zachary Taylor's Annual Message to Congress on December 4, 1849, and Henry Clay's Compromise Resolutions of January 29, 1850.

Unfortunately, the printer's proof lacked any footnotes or endnotes, preventing an analysis of the source material used. The book appears to have illustrations or pictures though they were not included in the proof copy.

What caused the Civil War is a complex question, one requiring more than 126 pages to explain. However the true benefit of **The Fate of Their Country** is its wider appeal. Yes it has boiled down the issues of the time too far. Yes, it may mislead some to believe that the war was caused solely by these four events. However, it also quickly defines how politics impacted the national attitude. This in turn will appeal to many who might not have read a lengthy discourse on the cause of the war. Hopefully this will be the jumping off point for many to read, get their feet wet, and then explore further. While not conclusive it is informative. For \$20.00 you can quickly and easily learn about the political undermining of national unity during our country's critical expansion years. Just take it with a grain of salt, it is not conclusive but then again, it was not meant to be.

John Benson is a Deputy District Attorney in Bucks County Pennsylvania. He is the past President of the Bucks County Civil War Roundtable and also lectures on the causes of the war. He is currently working on a biography on General Winfield Scott Hancock.