

### Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War

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## Review

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**Egnal, Marc** *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War*. Hill and Wang, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9780809095360

### An Economic Interpretation of the Coming of the Civil War

Most historians readily acknowledge that economics played a part in the sectional crisis that led to the American Civil War. But recent scholarship has focused on the primary place of slavery as the cause of the conflict and little attention has been to economic matters. Marc Egnal offers both a correction and a challenge to historians of the Civil War in this important new interpretation by arguing that "Economics more than high moral concerns produced the Civil War" (348). Egnal then proceeds to show just how that happened in a sophisticated and engaging analysis that avoids the reductionist tendencies of economic determinism by placing individual historical actors at the center of the story.

A major economic interpretation of the Civil War is long overdue. Although economics certainly served as a component of the modernization theories popular in the 1980s, no full-scale economic explanation has been offered since Charles and Mary Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927). That earlier view argued for a capitalist North defeating an agrarian South and suffered from being too simplistic and deterministic. Today, scholars returning to the Beards find much worth reconsidering and resurrecting. *Clash of Extremes* stands as a perfect example. Egnal admits the Beards' faults, but sets out to correct their errors in his own work. The result is a much more complex and nuanced economic interpretation that includes ideas and individuals while avoiding the pitfalls of mechanistic and determinism inherent in over-arching theories.

Egnal begins by showing how the national economy unified the North and South in the decades before 1850. Trade routes centered on the Mississippi River tied together those living in the Northwest and Southwest, while cotton joined

the planters of the South with the textile industry of the North. Southerners in need of fresh land supported nationalism, while the border states nurtured beneficial ties to the North. Truly national parties emerged from the similar kinds of divisions found in each state, as Whigs and Democrats battled over economic issues while fiercely defending national unity.

Then, Egnal argues, things changed. The rise of the Great Lakes economy in the North shifted the business networks that served as the economic foundation of unity. Instead of trading north-to-south, more Northerners now operated along an east-west transportation system. Furthermore, antislavery grew stronger across the North, as the radicalism of the abolitionism spurred political action and larger numbers of Northerners adopted a more moderate form of antislavery ideology. These changes created the foundation for the new Republican Party in the 1850s. The Republicans clearly favored economic policies over moral concerns, a fact reflected in their party platform which adopted a rather moderate stand on slavery. But the party's very existence and its opposition to the expansion of slavery indicated the growth of more extreme doctrines across the region.

To be sure, not all Northerners changed. For many in the Northwest, trade continued along the Mississippi River network. The Republicans did not enjoy much support in large areas of the Ohio Valley. But many Southerners leaped to conclusions about the Republicans and Northerners at large because of the changes taking place in the South itself. In the Deep South, planters held fast to cotton and slavery. Land and slaves served as the basis of the economy. With the growth of abolitionism and anti-slavery sentiment in the North, these Southerners became increasingly defensive of their institutions. The doctrines of states' rights became more extreme as Southerners felt more threatened and feared that the expansion of slavery might be stopped. Again, not everyone agreed. Even in the Deep South, some continued to support nationalism and the union, while others longed for reforms that would bring a diversified economy to the South. Upper South and Border State residents experienced change as well. In the Border States, increasing trade with the North strengthened ties to that region, while decreasing numbers of slaves weakened the connection to the South. In the Upper South, unionists enjoyed widespread support, but states' rights doctrines grew strong enough to challenge them. Deep rifts in states like Virginia and Tennessee foreshadowed the way the Upper South divided during the war, with West Virginia breaking away from and parts of East Tennessee vigorously opposing the Confederacy.

In 1860-1861, the Civil War began as a clash of two extremes—the most radical proponents on both sides led the way to conflict. During the war itself, the Republicans pursued their economic and moral agenda by helping African Americans and developing the economy in the North. But their actions again reflected their uneven dedication to these principles: the Republicans dedicated the first half of the war to saving the union and economic matters, only turning to African Americans when the fighting grew more difficult and a long war became a reality. Military concerns dictated emancipation, while ideology and self-interest directed the nationalist policies that brought laws that included creating a national bank, promoting internal improvements, and building a transcontinental railroad.

After the war, the Republicans at first overcame their own internal divisions and sought to again develop the economy while also helping African Americans. Reconstruction brought strong actions to overcome the resistance of defiant white Southerners. But the political divisions in the party and the realities of politics in the North soon caused the Republicans to abandon the former slaves in favor of keeping their economic nationalism. By the early 1870s, the idealists left the Republican Party, which turned ever stronger toward big business and corporate capitalism.

This general outline of the book does not do it justice. While readers will find some of the tables and statistics one would expect in a work of economic history, they do not diminish the power of Egnal's writing and the engaging way in which he presents his analysis. Throughout the book, biography plays a powerful role, as he places individuals at the forefront. Far from being a deterministic, mechanistic interpretation, this is a story with a human face. Egnal skillfully recounts how people made choices, how they changed, how they understood themselves and their world. In these individual actors, he joins ideology and economics and the result is a sophisticated and complicated view. Abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates, the businessman and the worker, political leaders and female observers, farmers and tycoons, all have a voice and play a part.

Economists will no doubt find specific issues on which to challenge Egnal's interpretation. And historians will surely find fault with some of his arguments. But such debates will only serve to underscore the power of this book. It promises to stand as not only an example of how to write good economic history,

but also as the work that revived the economic interpretation of the Civil War.

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