

I want to thank Matthew Mason for proposing this interactive forum. I'm also grateful to John Ashworth for the seriousness and scope of his remarks. In the comments that follow I've tried to respond fully to the chief points he makes. Broadly viewed, I suggest that Ashworth misreads the historiography of the Civil War and gravely distorts the contentions in *Clash of Extremes*. My goal is not only to set the record straight, but also to engage the important arguments Ashworth raises about the sectional conflict. War. I'll look at his critique under four headings: historiography, the overall shape of the book, the North, and the South.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Ashworth stumbles in his reading of recent interpretations—a topic that frames his discussion of my book as well as my analysis of the Civil War. He dismisses the notion that idealism or moral concerns might characterize the prevailing outlook. Rather, Ashworth views the current emphasis on slavery much like a stew pot into which all ingredients can be dumped, seemingly in equal measure. He states: "Virtually all historians who now advance a 'slavery' interpretation of the Civil War emphasize not merely the moral issues raised but also the economic dimension (and often the political one)."

His approach, however, misses the structure of current interpretations, and the way that leading historians subordinate other causes to the moral one. James McPherson, the most important scholar writing on the Civil War today, is a case in point. "The paths of development [in the North and South] increasingly diverged over the first half of the nineteenth century," McPherson notes, "and, in the process, generated increasingly polarized ideologies about what kind of society and what kind of nation the United States ought to be. And that focused on the institution of slavery, which by the 1830s was being increasingly attacked by Northern abolitionists as contrary to ideals of liberty that the country had been founded on . . . while the South grew increasingly defensive and turned aggressive in its defensiveness . . ."

McPherson continues, emphasizing the moral concerns that led to secession. "Southern leaders," he remarks, saw their "way of life . . . was in jeopardy under a United States government completely in the hands of people who opposed the expansion of slavery and whose leaders branded slavery a moral wrong that must eventually disappear from American society. So they seceded." [1] McPherson appropriately called his magnum opus, *Battle Cry of Freedom*.

THE OVERALL SHAPE OF THE BOOK

Ashworth's comments are wide of the mark not only in discussing historiography, but also in presenting my overall argument. A reviewer's first responsibility is providing readers with an accurate summary of the book in question. This Ashworth does not do.

Contending that "the book is so opaque and confused as far as its central thesis is concerned," Ashworth does not present that thesis — even though it is emphatically set down in the Introduction: "*Clash of Extremes* . . . argues that more than any other reason,

the evolution of the Northern and Southern economies explains the Civil War" (7-8).

Nor would a reader know from Ashworth's review that the first third of the book discusses how the economy brought the sections together between 1820 and 1850 and so encouraged the resolution of a series of divisive sectional issues. The importance of the Mississippi as a north-south axis; the prosperity and expansion of the cotton states; the ties between Northern manufacturers and planters; and the increasing links between the Border States and the North all helped weave sectional peace. So did a burgeoning economy that affected all states and created the basis for two parties, Whigs and Democrats, defined by issues of class and not section.

Some of these centripetal forces continued to operate after mid-century. But the reorientation of trade in the North around the Lakes and Erie Canal, and the declining fortunes of the cotton kingdom led individuals to think in different, more sectional ways.

Ashworth also does not note that *Clash of Extremes* explores concerns apart from economics. These include religion, local politics, and particularly the rise of the antislavery movement. The book's contention is that economic change was the most important, but never the only factor leading to the Civil War.

And readers of Ashworth's review might be surprised that most of the book is structured around a series of biographies of men and women, many famous and some not. Although economics is in the subtitle, *Clash of Extremes* presents no equations and only a few tables. Rather, as the Introduction makes clear, a focus on individuals is basic to the book's methodology. Any broader developments must work on the personal level.

THE NORTH

Ashworth's remarks are also questionable when he discusses developments in the two sections. To begin with, after dismissing my approach to the free soil campaign as "highly idiosyncratic," Ashworth sets forth his own, poorly reasoned analysis. He states that "historians almost always class as antislavery those who adamantly opposed the expansion of slavery." But that assumption - if true - would label almost all Northerners as "antislavery," since virtually all Northern congressmen applauded the Wilmot Proviso, limiting the spread of slavery, and overwhelmingly Northerners opposed President Buchanan's efforts to force a pro-slavery government on Kansas. Such a definition strips the term "antislavery" of much of its meaning, and doesn't help in evaluating the current emphasis on moral concerns.

Clash of Extremes takes a finer-grained approach to issue of free soil. It suggests that while both motives-moral and economic-were present in the opposition to slavery expansion, the economic was more important. Economic not moral motives explain why a racist Democrat like Stephen Douglas, along with his followers, stood up to Buchanan and demanded that Kansas enter as a free state. Regardless of their political affiliations, Northern farmers felt these lands must be preserved for them, not slaveholders. The preeminence of economic motives in this crusade also helps explain why the Republicans backed no other initiatives to end bondage. As a party they did not oppose the fugitive slave act, call for freedom in the District of Columbia, or demand the end of the interstate slave trade, more rights for free blacks, or abolition. The Republican platform included a

host of economic measures (such as higher tariffs, internal improvements, a homestead act, and a transcontinental railroad) but no other concrete steps directed against the slave power.

In explaining the rise of the Republican Party, Ashworth rejects the approach in *Clash of Extremes* which emphasizes the economic realignment of the North. The book shows that the Republicans drew their votes from the districts around the Lakes; Whig counties in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Indiana; and rural New England. Antislavery was in the mix, but did not predominate in party formation. Most significantly, these areas applauded the pro-development policies of the Republicans. Those policies included, but were hardly limited to, preserving the West for free farmers.

Dismissing that explanation, Ashworth poses what might be called the "incrementalist" approach to the Republican triumph. Antislavery forces just grew and grew, or as he puts it: "Large numbers of Northerners . . . became increasingly hostile to the existence of slavery." But this explanation floats freely like an untethered balloon, not tied down by any analysis of constituencies or any examination of the events of the 1850s. If Northerners were growing steadily more hostile to slavery why didn't those individuals turn up in 1852 when the Free Soil Party polled only 7 percent of the Northern vote, half the percentage it commanded in 1848? Why didn't they swell the ranks of abolitionist societies, which still commanded only about 5 percent of the Northern population? Why didn't they make their impact felt at the local or national level where the Republican Party took very moderate positions on race and slavery?

THE SOUTH

Ashworth's critique devotes less space to a discussion of the South, but even so, his remarks on the slave states comprise one of the most puzzling parts of an often puzzling review. I was left wondering how much of the book he had read.

For example, he states that in explaining the sectional clash, "slave resistance is not even considered in this work [*Clash of Extremes*] as a contributory factor." In fact, I argue that concern about unruly servants was a principal reason planters demanded new territories. I note that, "Southern rights leaders feared that slave rebellions would erupt if the growing African American population were confined to the existing states." And again, "In public speeches and private letters, Southerners vented their fears about rebellious servants in a constricted South" (161, 162).

Similarly, his comments about my analysis of the slave states appear many removes from what I wrote. Ashworth remarks: "But once again Egnal's reasoning is shallow, his categorization too crude. It is essential to recognize not merely the existence or the absence of slavery but instead the strength, the intensity, and the nature of the commitment for or against it."

Contrary to Ashworth's allegations, *Clash of Extremes* devotes many pages to examining the wide variations within the regional economies of the South and in the political commitments of its citizenry. Not only are the Border States (DE, KY, MD, MO), Upper South (AR, VA, NC, TN), and Deep South (SC, GA, FL, AL, MS, LA, TX) considered separately, but every individual slave state is examined at length. Broadly viewed, I argue

that the Border States were pulled into the orbit of the Northern economy and their moderate politics reflected this orientation. The Upper South felt the same tug, if to a lesser degree. Even in the Deep South a growing overland trade with the North helped divide the northern districts from the southern ones. Patterns of settlement, crop choices, and concentrations of slaves also had a significant influence. The title, *Clash of Extremes*, points to the dynamic role played by the northern part of the North and the southern part of the South.

To conclude, Ashworth's comments stumble in their depiction of historiography and provide a badly flawed discussion of my book, and more broadly the origins of the Civil War. Readers may want to consult the book's web site:

[www.clashofextremes.com.](http://www.clashofextremes.com/) < [http://www.clashofextremes.com./](http://www.clashofextremes.com/) > It provides links to the many blogs discussing *Clash of Extremes* as well as all reviews, favorable and unfavorable. No review, however, has been as critical as John Ashworth's, nor has any reviewer so clearly failed to provide an accurate summary of the text.

NOTES

[1] James McPherson interviewed by William R. Ferris, *Humanities Magazine*, March-April 2002, accessed on-line, <http://www.neh.gov/howeare/mcpherson/interview.html> . McPherson also notes the "nationalism of the Northern people, or a majority of them," who adamantly rejected secession and backed Lincoln's call to arms.