

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

As the title of Marc Egnal's book suggests, *Clash of Extremes* is a study in Civil War causation. According to Egnal, historians have generally misunderstood the primary cause of the Civil War to have been the controversy over slavery and its territorial expansion. Certainly, the slavery question was a cause, but, says Egnal, it was not the primary reason for the disintegration of the Union and the ensuing war.

Egnal's general thesis is that a reorientation--largely completed by the late 1850s--of interregional trade from a longtime North-South axis to an East-West one weakened North-South alliances within the Whig and Democratic parties, and fostered alliances between the industrializing northeastern states and the wheatbelt states along the Great Lakes as transportation innovations bound those two regions more closely together. This realignment of economic interests catalyzed the Republican party's transformation (by 1860) from a party based on opposition to the extension of slavery into one pledged to high tariffs, free land, and free labor.

Meanwhile, according to Egnal, soil exhaustion caused by poor crop choices and tillage practices and general inefficiency due to reliance on enslaved laborers in the lower South's cotton-growing plantation districts threatened planters' profits. That pressure moved planters toward a radical form of the Democratic party's traditional opposition to nationally oriented public policies. The economic stage had been set, and its configuration impelled an increasingly polarized political cast to speak lines and take actions that inexorably moved the nation into the successive crises of disunion and civil war.

If Egnal's thesis seems familiar, it is because it is essentially the one advanced more than eighty years ago by Charles A. Beard and more recently summarized by James M. McPherson's *Ordeal by Fire* (1982), which noted the significant political consequences of the "reorientation of trade patterns" (p. 8). The difference between Egnal's version of Beard's thesis and the original is that Egnal is precise in his economic geography and offers quantitative data to support his characterizations of the Republican party, the North's economic dynamism, and the South's comparative economic stagnation. And unlike McPherson's general observation, Egnal's work examines specific aspects of the interregional nexus of trade and politics. All in all, Egnal makes an engaging rhetorical case for what might be called a neoeconomic determinism of Civil War causation. His analysis, however, is less convincing upon examination of some of its underlying assumptions and data.

Egnal's argument depends in part on quantitative evidence connecting regional economic interests and roll call voting. Although such data figure in the book's account of the period prior to 1850, there is almost no comparable evidence for its crucial decade, the 1850s. Also, Egnal's assertion that soil exhaustion reduced plantation productivity is largely refuted by Carville Earle's 1992 essay, "The Myth of the Southern Soil Miner" (Donald Worster, *The Ends of the Earth*, 1988, pp. 175-210). And Egnal's contention--one important to his overall argument--that southern per capita income growth lagged behind that of most of the rest of the country is unsound because it divides southern aggregate income by the South's total population. The more appropriate

comparison is between income per northern capita and income per southern *free* capita--a comparison that indicates that in 1860 the South not only exceeded the national average but compared favorably with the North.

These problems notwithstanding, *Clash of Extremes* is well written and energetically argued. It would, however, be a more persuasive study in Civil War causation were it more rigorously constructed, supported by more quantitative evidence, and more attuned to the complexities of the relationship between economic interests and political principles. Readers desiring such an approach may wish also to read James L. Huston's 2003 book, *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War*.

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