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CLASH of EXTREMES THE ECONOMIC ORIGINS OF THE CIVIL WAR MARC EGNAL



Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War

by Egnal, Marc **Publisher:** Hill and Wang **Retail Price:** \$30.00
hardcover **Issue:** Summer 2009 **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

