

Any student who has taken the U.S. history survey to 1877 from this reviewer over the past twenty years would nod along as they read the introduction to this book, thinking, “yes, that’s how Professor Gruenwald explained it.” Marc Egnal writes that he opposes scholars who offer an idealistic interpretation of the causes of the Civil War—that the North fought primarily to free the slaves. Slavery was not the cause of the Civil War, he argues. But such a characterization of his work seems designed primarily to stir up controversy, because of course slavery was the cause of the Civil War even, in his view, in the territories west of the Mississippi. Though there were fundamental differences between North and South, people of both regions shared a commercial orientation, the desire to increase their wealth and status, and a craving for new territory. In the end, they did battle over who would control it. Egnal is indeed doing battle with popular ideas about the causes of the Civil War but is not really challenging prevailing scholarly interpretations.

In part 1, “An Era of Compromise,” Egnal details the growing national economy of the 1820s and 1830s and the way it bound North, South, and West together. Sectionalism occasionally bedeviled the second party system of Democrats and emerging Whigs, but compromisers like Henry Clay always managed to broker deals. In part 2, “Roots of Conflict,” he describes the strengthening of bonds between North and West along the canals and Great Lakes, the emergence of the abolition movement in the North, and states’ rights rhetoric in the South, as well as changes within the border states. In part 3, “The Clash of Sections,” the author begins with civil war in Kansas and then traces the polarization between North and South that came about as a result. Part 4, “The War Years and Beyond,” would have been better titled “Republicans in Power,” which are the first words of the two chapter titles included there. Egnal analyzes the political goals and strategies of the North during and after the war and exposes the fundamental interests of the majority of national leaders for what they were. “Economics more than high moral concerns produced the Civil War,” Egnal concludes. Of course, one should not separate economic and moral concerns, for each side sincerely believed that their economic goals were morally correct. Still, it is useful to put Northern myths of fighting the evils of slavery and Southern myths of fighting for liberty and states’ rights under the same microscope, for neither is a completely satisfactory explanation for why the Union broke in two.

Egnal explicitly states that he believes that the evolution of the economy and its impact on politics were the most important factor that led to the Civil War. It was not the only factor, he writes; he just judges it to be the most important. This is an excellent book about the topic; it is engagingly written for popular audiences and for teachers. Egnal provides excellent anecdotes and examples for freshening up lectures.