

[Bailey on Karp, 'This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy'](#)

Review published on Monday, June 5, 2017

Matthew Karp. *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 368 S. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-73725-9; \$19.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-674-98677-0.

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Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=48274>

This Vast Southern Empire by Matthew Karp identifies and evaluates the impact of the political worldview of elite southern slaveholders from the 1830s through the Civil War. Throughout this period, southerners were represented disproportionately among presidents, secretaries of the army, navy, and state, foreign ministers, and heads of relevant congressional committees—giving them a strong hold on the levers of foreign affairs. Karp argues that these officials (and the class to which they belonged) envisioned a global struggle between slavery and abolitionism, and used their sway over the nation’s foreign policy to protect and expand slavery in the Western Hemisphere. The “vast southern empire” that Karp describes, then, is the United States itself—a rising imperial power under the careful influence of southern slaveowners.

To make this argument, Karp draws from familiar sources such as prominent newspapers, congressional debates, and other publications and addresses by prominent southern leaders. He also builds on much of the most recent scholarship on the economic, cultural, and transnational history of the South. In particular, he draws from historians such as Edward Baptist and Walter Johnson who argue that slavery was not economically retrogressive, and that slaveholders were not simply insular, patriarchal traditionalists.[1] By necessity, an economy based on cash crop exports had to be connected to the outside world. Consequently, elite southerners were deeply aware of the worldwide battle over racialized bound labor—a system they believed was the next step in global economic progress.

Karp traces many of the slaveholders’s fears to Great Britain—specifically, its abolitionist policies throughout its empire, aggressive policing of the international slave trade, conflicting land claims with the United States, and pursuit of influence in Central and South America. southerners feared Britain might become increasingly aggressive in its fight against slavery in the 1830s and 1840s and recognized that in the event of war with Britain, the slave-rich southern coast would be extremely vulnerable to invasion by the Royal Navy—an event likely to be accompanied by slave insurrection (p. 34). These fears and a desire to ensure that the developing world economy favored bound labor led slaveowners to adopt a “hemispheric defense of slavery.” This “foreign policy of slavery” is one of Karp’s most important ideas (p. 7). The hemispheric defense outlook took for granted slavery’s natural state as the most powerful economic institution in the world, but recognized that all slave societies shared a mutual vulnerability to instability, invasion, and insurrection. According to Karp,

while historians usually discuss the Republic of Texas alongside Oregon and California, southerners often thought of Texas together with Brazil and Cuba—as the largest slaveholding societies outside of the United States (p. 82). Many southerners considered these slaveholding states to be allies or clients with inherent shared interests, and a need for protection from abolitionist forces such as Great Britain.

Karp makes another important contribution here by pointing out that filibusters and expansionists are not the only (or even the best) examples of proslavery foreign policy. He observes that despite the fervor for expansion, “in virtually every situation ... the preservation of [foreign] slave institutions took priority over the acquisition of new land” (p. 7). For example, many southerners recognized that as much as they might desire an American takeover of Cuba, they would rather it remain in Spanish hands than risk disruption of slavery there. When they did interfere with other slave societies, it was usually to shore up slavery. In such situations, slaveholders justified their actions with the fact that the United States—with its superior Anglo-Saxon blood, Christianity, size, and economic development—was the natural leader of a kind of imagined, hemispheric slave confederation.

Rather than relying primarily on territorial expansion, therefore, southerners pursued their foreign policy aims using a variety of tools. For example, in the minds of many slaveholders, naval force was absolutely necessary. It could project national power in support of slave societies in the hemisphere (by making timely visits to unstable regions, for example), or in case of war, ensure that fighting happened at sea, away from the vulnerable southern coast with its population of potentially rebellious slaves. These considerations help explain the unusual push for centralizing policies such as naval expansion by southerners whom historians have often portrayed as antifederal. Karp develops this dissonance between southern agitation for both federal power and states' rights in his final chapter on the secession crisis—adding one more nail in the coffin for the claim that southern political leaders valued states' rights more than slavery.

After US victory in the Mexican-American War and a decline of British abolitionism in the 1850s, slaveholders pushed their agendas even more vigorously. To many southerners, these events had vindicated the economic and social superiority of slave societies over free labor and proved the South's ability to shape national foreign and military policy in the name of slavery. But their own strength began to undermine them as the North began to turn against the “Slave Power,” and the Republican Party rose to control the government. The powerful government and military apparatus that southerners helped create in order to defend global slavery could now operate in support of abolition. Unable to tolerate losing control of their empire, southerners resolved to secede and rebuild their own empire free from Northern abolitionism.

One must be careful not to overgeneralize from Karp's conclusions. The small cadre of elite slaveowners were a minority even among planters, and within their own class some still disapproved of “modern” capitalism, military expansion, and foreign entanglements. Furthermore, Karp does not generally address regional differences, such as those between the upper and lower South. Differing opinions on issues such as the revival of the international slave trade, for example, must have strained the shared ideology that Karp outlines, yet this debate is almost entirely absent. Similarly, while slaveowners in Missouri would probably have been concerned by the possibility of British invasion and slave insurrection along the Gulf Coast, their concern (and willingness to raise taxes for

naval construction) would likely have been much less pronounced than it was among those in southern Louisiana. He does touch on these differences in passing, but rarely elucidates how they complicated southern-led foreign policy (p. 35).

Despite these omissions, however, Karp convincingly articulates the vision and impact of this important cadre of southerners. *This Vast Southern Empire* is a much-needed redirection of focus away from the eccentric filibusters who dominated memory of antebellum proslavery expansion toward the actual policymakers who were more directly influential in shaping the government's relations with slavery, expansion, and America's neighbors to the south. The irony inherent in their story is that these southern policymakers were the leading proponents of the military and diplomatic power that contributed to their own destruction. Nevertheless, as Karp points out, "slaveholders can be seen as a vanguard for the coercive, state-powered racism that characterized the international relations of the late nineteenth century" (p. 254). Ultimately, although the Civil War officially ended slavery, the key elements of the foreign policy crafted by slaveholders lived on.

Note

[1]. See Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York :Basic Books, 2014); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013).

Citation: Roger Bailey. Review of Karp, Matthew, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48274>

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