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Introduction by Jay Sexton, University of Missouri

H-Diplo readers need to have a look at this round-table review, which provides a superb primer to the historiographic developments and accompanying debates that are revolutionizing our understanding of U.S. nineteenth century foreign relations, particularly those concerning slavery. Recent scholarship has transformed our understanding of how the Old South fit into the Victorian global order in three general ways. First, rather than a backward, quasi-feudal economy resistant to change, the slaveholding South is emerging in recent literature as a key player and innovator in the emerging global economy. Second, we are learning how the slaveholding class in America was as concerned with international developments—particularly the British Empire’s turn toward abolition in the 1830s—as it was with combating Yankee rivals in the domestic sphere of U.S. politics. Third, and related, Southern secession is emerging in this new literature as a forward-looking and assertive act of diplomacy whose logic stemmed from the presumed geopolitical and economic power of the slaveholding South.

Matthew Karp’s This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy engages with all of these themes, pushing them in new directions and providing fresh empirical texture to the statecraft of a group of Southern elites who called many of the shots in mid-nineteenth century U.S. foreign policy. The six reviews included in this round-table all applaud Karp’s work. Two call it a “landmark book.” They all note the historiographical roots of the argument, while emphasizing the new directions in which Karp has taken the topic. In particular, the reviewers highlight the significance Karp’s argument accords to the British Empire’s turn to anti-slavery, a transformation which dramatically changed the geopolitics of slavery in the Western Hemisphere, as well as the political debate over the peculiar institution within the United States. The reviewers also draw attention to how Karp argues that pro-slavery elites were less interested in advancing the cause of “state’s rights” than they were in bolstering the powers of the central state to advance a pro-slavery foreign policy.

The reviewers raise questions about Karp’s work, as well as offer praise. Many of these concern how Karp’s thesis fits with what we know about the Old South. Paul Quigley wonders if the statesmen that Karp zooms in on, many of whom hailed from South Carolina, were representative of the South as a whole. Asked another way: how does Karp’s argument, which emphasizes unity among pro-slavery Southerners, fit with the work of William Freehling, which foregrounded the geographic and ideological divisions within the Old South? William E. Weeks presses Karp on the political divisions expansion created in the earlier period of the 1820s, as well as the nature of the antebellum central state. Patrick Kelly wonders if the Mexican War—the largest act


of U.S. expansion in period covered in This Vast Southern Empire–fits with Karp’s thesis of a distinctly pro-slavery foreign policy. Matt Clavin reminds us of the power of the opponents of the slave-power within the United States, not least the emerging Republican Party of the 1850s. Does Karp understate the significance of anti-slavery forces to U.S. foreign policy?

These trenchant reviews reflect the significance of Karp’s book, as well as the vitality of the new scholarship on U.S. foreign relations in the nineteenth century. Viewed in the big picture, this roundtable makes it clear that the days are long gone when nineteenth century foreign relations fell under the label of “the great American desert” of historiography.3

Participants:


Jay Sexton is Kinder Institute Chair and Professor of History at the Kinder Institute, University of Missouri, and emeritus fellow at Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford.

Matt Clavin is Professor of History at the University of Houston. He is the author of Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers (Harvard University Press, 2015) and Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: the Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). His current research examines Negro Fort in Spanish Florida and its destruction by Andrew Jackson and the United States armed forces in July 1816.

John Craig Hammond is Associate Professor of History at Penn State University. He is co-editor (with Matthew Mason) of Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Freedom and Bondage in the New American Nation (University of Virginia Press, 2011), and author of Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West (University of Virginia Press, 2007), along with numerous articles and book chapters on slavery and expansion in North America from the American Revolution through the Civil War. He is currently at work on a book length treatment of slavery and politics in North America and the Caribbean from the 1760s through the 1830s.

Patrick J. Kelly teaches history at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He is the most recently the author of “The Cat’s Paw: Confederate Ambitions in Latin America,” in Don Doyle, ed., American Civil Wars: The United States, Latin America, Europe, and the Crisis of the 1860 (University of North Carolina Press, 2017.)

Paul Quigley is Director of the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies and the James I. Robertson, Jr. Associate Professor of Civil War History in the History Department at Virginia Tech. A graduate of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, he is author of Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American

South, 1848-65 (Oxford University Press, 2011). Among his current research projects are a study of Preston Brooks, the South Carolina Congressman who achieved notoriety by caning Senator Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate in 1856, and the crowdsourced digital archive “Mapping the Fourth of July in the Civil War Era” (july4.civilwar.vt.edu).

Tim Roberts is author of Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism (University of Virginia Press, 2009), and “Lajos Kossuth and the Permeable American Orient of the Mid-Nineteenth Century” Diplomatic History 39:5 (November 2015): 793-818, among other works on the early American republic. He is currently writing on the role of French Algeria in Franco-American relations in the nineteenth century.

William E. Weeks is a lecturer at San Diego State University. His publications include John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire (University Press of Kentucky, 1992); Building the Continental Empire, American Expansion from the Revolution to the Civil War (Ivan R. Dee and Co., 1996); Dimensions of the Early American Empire, 1754-1865 (Cambridge University Press, 2013). Currently, he is working on a collection of narratives from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars tentatively entitled “Writing War, Remembrance, and Reconciliation.”
Perhaps no area of early American historiography is as unrecognizable today from what it was a generation ago than the antebellum South. Where specialists once considered the ‘Old South’ an anachronism, the relic of a pre-modern society deeply rooted in antiquated institutions and ideas, they now consider it to have been on the cutting edge of extraordinary and unprecedented economic and technological change. With the rise of ‘King Cotton’ across not only the South but the entire world, southern slaveholders ascended to incredible political heights, which enabled them to shape the young Republic’s culture, laws, and geographic boundaries to their benefit.

Riding the wave of this new and exciting scholarship, Matthew Karp asserts that slaveholders’ hegemony extended to American foreign policy, and in the process he challenges some of the fundamental assumptions about slaveholders and the world they made. Among them is the idea that antebellum slavery was not the peculiar institution American abolitionists insisted it was. Though outlawed in the northern United States and other parts of the Americas by the first decades of the nineteenth century, it still flourished in the American South as well as Cuba and Brazil, while similar forms of ‘unfree’ labor continued to thrive globally. As a result, southern politicians in the decades before the Civil War steered the Republic in the direction of a defense of slavery that was not only local and national but also hemispheric and global. Through their dominance of the White House, Congress, and War Department, they were enormously successful.

Over the course of the book’s ten main chapters, all of which are studious and well written, several themes stand out. First, Great Britain’s efforts to abolish the Atlantic slave trade and eliminate slavery throughout its empire made it—rather than the small group of politically impotent immediatist abolitionists in the North—the bête noire of southern slaveholders; consequently, United States opposition to British imperialism was in large part due to a fear of British abolitionism shared by influential foreign-policy players like John C. Calhoun, Francis Pickens, and Duff Green. From the small dustup over the slave revolt aboard the American brig Creole in the British West Indies, to the international imbroglio over the annexation of Texas, slaveholders considered British intervention into American affairs an existential threat to their lives and property—and the American government resisted it accordingly.

Second, anxiety over British-inspired abolition across the globe led southern slaveholders to demand a massive increase in the size and strength of the United States armed forces and the projection of this power abroad. Whereas the study of American imperialism typically begins at the close of the nineteenth century, in this analysis it begins fifty years earlier when slaveholders seized control of the nation’s military apparatus and launched an unprecedented peacetime military buildup that, despite periodic resistance from Washington, helped turn many of their dreams of a pro-slavery foreign policy into reality. In the area of defense, southern slaveholders were among the nation’s staunchest advocates of a strong central power, but not because of a blind faith in southern military culture. This impulse “sprang, rather, from a careful and crucial distinction between domestic and international balances of power” (218).

Third, the most significant foreign-policy decisions of the 1840s and 1850s can only be understood in the context of the federal government’s commitment to promoting and protecting slavery. The United States government’s decision to fight a war with Mexico in order to gain possession of Texas; its refusal to fight a war with Spain in order to gain possession of Cuba; and even its commitment to eliminating the Atlantic slave trade to Brazil—the largest slaveholding society in the Americas outside of the South, all happened because they served the slaveholders’ interests. The federal government’s dogged pursuit of these and other
important foreign policies demonstrate that more than just King Cotton, it was the Emperor Slavery and its worldwide dominions of rice, sugar, and coffee that drove American foreign policy for decades.

Given slaveholders’ success at achieving so many of their ambitions, one wonders why they ever considered withdrawing from the United States and forming a new nation. In some of the book’s most original and no doubt debatable chapters, Karp contends that secession was “a foreign policy decision” (9) driven by slaveholders’ faith in racial science, social and economic progress, and the international future of unfree labor. Above all else, it was the drive to permanently secure slavery’s future both at home and abroad that led slaveholders to create a new central power modeled on the one they had only recently dominated: “Secession did not produce a flight away from central authority but the eager embrace of a new and explicitly proslavery central authority” (244). The best evidence of this was the Confederate Constitution, which closely mirrored the United States Constitution with the obvious exception of the permanent protection of slavery.

Karp closes his analysis with a poignant reading of W.E.B. Du Bois’s commencement address at Harvard College in which the pre-eminent black intellectual of the turn of the twentieth century traced the white supremacist origins of the Age of Empire to the proslavery imperialism of Jefferson Davis and other southern architects of the United States’ antebellum foreign policy. Where so many thinkers and writers in the decades after the Civil War portrayed the Old South as an underdog, a sectional minority that was worthy of sympathy and compassion, Du Bois saw it as something far more powerful and sinister. It was a sophisticated and racist civilization with imperialist ambitions that after seceding from the Union became “a people fighting to be free in order that another people should not be free” (253).

After closing the pages of this important book, I am left wondering if it underestimates the amount of resistance to this highly successful pro-slavery conspiracy, largely because of the mountain of evidence marshalled to show slaveholders’ influence on American foreign policy. From the rise of the American abolitionist movement in the early 1830s through the emergence of the Republican Party in the 1850s, northern and western civil and political leaders and the men and women they served and represented continually challenged and occasionally frustrated slaveholders’ ambitions. Slaveholders held a disproportionate amount of influence on the American government from the earliest days of the republic through the Civil War, but that epic conflict only took place because opposition to that influence was significant and growing.

Because the book takes southern politicians, diplomats, and military commanders at their word, they appear on the pages of this book in distorted form as a group of cocky and self-assured men (and women in the extraordinary case of Louisa McCord) in full command of the situation and their surroundings. In reality, slaveholders were not confident men but confidence men, a paranoid people full of fear and insecurity because the sectional slave society they dominated was a powder keg. The Haitian Revolution had at the opening of the century convinced them that their lives and livelihoods where always in jeopardy, and decades later both the persistence of fugitive slaves across the South and the rise of violent abolitionism in the North and West—culminating in John Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid in 1859—made it clear that slavery’s days were numbered at home. This explains why slaveholders fought so hard to secure the institution’s future abroad.
This landmark book is one of the most fresh, provocative, and significant monographs I have read in the past decade. Focused on southern elites’ control of antebellum foreign policy, Karp’s book offers a strikingly original institutional and ideological history of the “proslavery internationalism” practiced by the cabal of southern elites who directed U.S. foreign policy from the 1830s through secession. More than that, This Vast Southern Empire offers a fresh telling of the relationship between southern elites and the federal government from the 1830s through the start of the Civil War. It provides a strikingly unique account of the sectional, national, and geo-politics of slavery. It presents an invigorating analysis of the political economy of slavery and modernity forged by antebellum southern elites. Finally, it expertly situates southern political economy among emerging global histories of race, bound labor, commodities, and empire in the mid-nineteenth century.

From the 1970s through the early 2000s, antebellum southern historiography was dominated by two emphases. On the one hand, some historians emphasized differences and diversity within the South; the supposed romanticism of archaic slaveholders; and the personalities of hotheads, eccentrics, and eccentric hotheads. In another vein, historians probed the sources, practices, and extent of southern and Confederate nationalism. Embedded in both of these historiographical emphases was an assumption that the South was pre-modern or agrarian, and thus out-of-step with economic and political developments in the larger Atlantic world, including natural rights ideologies, political democracy, and industrial capitalism. From there, historians accepted that southern elites’ actions, beliefs, and institutions stemmed from their defiant fight to maintain their anachronistic world in the face of trans-Atlantic modernity, industrial capitalism, and democracy. With their loss of power within the Union in 1860, southern elites made a desperate gamble for independence.

Over the past decade, historians have carefully challenged once prevalent historiographical assumptions about slavery’s decline and its place in a growing system of trans-Atlantic capitalism, how southern slaveholders understood themselves and their place in the mid-century trans-Atlantic world, the national politics of slavery, the political-economy of slavery, and the size, scope, and uses of state power by the pre-Civil War nation-state. This Vast Southern Empire rests heavily on the recent historiography on the slave South and slavery in

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1 For representative works, see, for example, William W. Freehling, The Road to Disunion. 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Lacy K. Ford, “Deliver Us from Evil”: The Slavery Question in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).


the broader Americas. Central to Karp’s argument is the recognition that, at mid-century, the imperial uses of unfree labor to produce cash-crops and commodities was growing. It was growing in the sheer numbers of people of African descent who were enslaved; in the extent of territory with slave-produced cash-crops under cultivation; in the diversity of systems of bound labor that European empires were introducing in the East Indies, the West Indies, and in India; and in the significance of slave-produced cash-crops—cotton, sugar, tobacco, and coffee—to the trans-Atlantic’s growing working and consuming classes. In what historians increasingly label a period of “second slavery,” the trans-Atlantic trade in slaves and slave-produced commodities continued its sustained growth in the 1850s, while the territorial reach of the institution expanded greatly. At mid-century, the interests of nation-states, empires, merchants, planters, and consumers in the Atlantic world favored expanding empires using state power to force more slaves and bound laborers to produce more cash crops. Mid-century southern elites saw themselves as the vanguard of a racialized imperialism that used enslaved people of color to produce cash crops and commodities on a global scale.4

Karp also accepts and builds on recent arguments that slaveholding elites formed a savvy, cosmopolitan class.5 They proved dynamic and amendable to change, as was reflected in their eagerness to force their slaves to adjust to the changing demands of trans-Atlantic markets for slave-produced commodities. Slaveholders might have been on the defensive within the Union, but they were on the offensive abroad, eagerly working to secure and strengthen the remaining slave societies of the Americas. This Vast Southern Empire should also put to rest whatever remains of the canard that southern elites were principled devotees of limited government and state rights. They opposed federal power when it undermined their own, but they actively and enthusiastically advocated for a more powerful federal government to protect slavery at home and abroad. Karp’s argument reinforces the conclusion that, above all else, Southern elites were loyal to the preservation of slavery and the dominance of the planter class. By the early 1830s, southern elites imagined themselves to be


5 Baptist, The Half has Never Been Told; Edling, A Hercules in the Cradle; Johnson, River of Dark Dreams; May, Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics; Barnes, Schoen, and Towers eds., The Old South’s Modern Worlds; Schoen, Fragile Fabric of Union; Guterl, American Mediterranean; O’Brien, Conjectures of Order.
engaged in a “larger struggle that spanned the Atlantic world.” (6) As Anglo-American abolitionists sought to end the institution in the United States, Texas, Cuba, and Brazil, southern elites turned to propping up planter classes abroad. To do so, they sought “firm control over what might be called the ‘outward state’–the sector of the federal government responsible for foreign relations, military policy and the larger role that American power assumed outside American borders” (5). The power and sovereignty of the United States would be wielded to protect planter classes both at home and in the Americas’ remaining slave societies.

British Abolition in the early 1830s forced southern elites into grappling with the place of slavery in a rapidly changing Atlantic world and the uses of state power to protect slavery at home. Over the next two decades, they envisioned themselves to be engaged an epic, hemispheric struggle with British emancipationists. Fearing that the contagion of abolitionism would spread from the British Caribbean, southern slaveholders seized control of U.S. foreign policy. Firmly in control of the State Department, southern elites adopted a policy of protecting and upholding slaveholder regimes wherever they remained in the Americas. At the same time, a loose, proslavery foreign policy cabal gained control of the War and Naval Departments, along with key congressional committees. Belying their reputation as small government, state rightists, they sought an aggressive and expensive military build-up and program of modernization, and claimed for the executive branch an expansive list of powers. Much like President Andrew Jackson, they were sectional nationalists, not secessionists or separatists. They imagined themselves as the nation, identified slaveholder interests as national interests, and sought to protect those by, through, and within the Union. For this cabal, “extremism in the defense of slavery was no vice, and moderation in the pursuit of hemispheric slave power was no virtue.” (51) In the 1840s, the defenders of slavery grew confident in their ability to use state power to protect slavery at home and to prop up slaveholding regimes abroad.

Treating the Tyler and Polk presidencies as more-or-less a single administration, Karp offers a convincing analysis of Texas annexation and the U.S.-Mexico War, along with important U.S. overtures to slaveholding regimes in Brazil, Spain, and Cuba. As southern elites understood matters by the 1840s, abolition in the Caribbean and Latin America provided incontrovertible proof that free, racially mixed societies fostered degeneracy and chaos. Conversely, the southern states, Texas, Cuba, and Brazil demonstrated that racialized slavery fostered stability and prosperity, progress and civilization. Already prone to see the hand of wily British abolitionists at work in Texas, President James K. Polk and the proslavery foreign policy cabal feared British designs on “the Gulph of Mexico, Cuba, Texas, and Florida.” (105) Southern elites such as John Calhoun and Polk might have dickered over the details of Texas annexation and war with Mexico, but they stood in fundamental agreement that the main purpose of war, peace, and diplomacy in the 1840s was to save slavery in the United States, Cuba, and Texas from British abolitionists.

In the 1850s, further modernization projects for the Army and the Navy—it was southerners who forced the U.S. Navy to move from sail and wood to iron and steam—only increased their confidence that they would be able to meet foreign challenges to slavery. And though they lost influence and numbers in Congress, they maintained control of the executive branch, including the key departments of War, Navy, and State. At the same time, the adoption of free trade policies in Britain signaled that “the American political economy of slavery and free trade had defeated the rival British model of abolition and mercantilism.” (133). Seemingly secure from foreign threats, in the early 1850s southern elites began to systematically analyze the South’s place in the emerging global order, producing their own vision of modern political economy with slavery as its foundation. Though they might have been on the defensive at home, they saw for themselves a very bright future in the emerging global political-economic order.
Industrial capitalism in Europe and the Northern United States was spun on slave-produced cotton, while the working and consumer classes spawned by industrialization kept themselves abuzz with sugar, coffee, and tobacco. The emergence of free trade policies in the late 1840s in Western Europe furthered demand for slave-produced cash-crops. At the same time, European imperialism in Africa and Asia confirmed southern elite beliefs in white supremacy while potentially producing new allies in the struggle for white supremacy over non-white peoples across the globe. Finally, leading British and French industrialists, merchants, and economists increasingly agreed that Caribbean abolition was a stark failure. In the 1850s, both Britain and France used bound labor as a substitute for enslaved African labor in the Caribbean, confirming southern white claims that only bound, non-white labor could produce cash-crops on a scale needed to supply the demands of the mid-century economic order. Southern elites and intellectuals now claimed for themselves an exalted place in the world of free trade, cash-crops produced by unfree labor, and racialized empires.

After mid-century, southern elites convinced themselves that the civilized world needed the South and its systems of racialized, plantation slave labor, even if the world still refused to recognize as much. Southern elites might have been losing power and influence within the Union, but by all appearances, they were growing stronger and more significant—indeed, indispensable—in the global economy and in the onward march of civilization. Hardly defensive, slaveholders were supremely confident that the rest of the world would soon recognize the wisdom of southern ways and the South’s necessary place in the global economic order. Rather than understanding themselves as the defenders of an archaic social, political, and economic system, they saw themselves to be the champions of a society on which modern civilization and the global economy rested. Free labor was an undisputed failure in cash crop production and in industrial capitalism. As proslavery polemicist George Fitzhugh had it, free society itself was a failure. By the late 1850s, it seemed that the ‘civilized’ world increasingly accepted this truth in both principle and practice, as evidenced by the use of unfree racialized labor in the East and West Indies, and the budding science of racial classification. By the late 1850s, American slaveholders celebrated “a vision of worldwide white supremacy, empire, and commercial exploitation” (159) that encompassed American empires in the United States, Cuba, and Brazil, and European empires in Africa and Asia.

Southern independence, then, was not an act of desperation to save an archaic institution. It was a bold, offensive move borne of confidence. Southern elites sought independence to recreate a powerful, pro-slavery nation state that would allow them to claim their rightful place in the emerging global order. As Karp provocatively argues, secessionists understood the main issues leading to the election of Republicans and secession as hemispheric and global, not domestic. The election mattered because a Republican victory would signal the end of southern control over the powers of the nation-state. Southern elites could no longer use state power to expand and protect slavery abroad. They needed a new state to do that. Had a disastrous war not intervened, the Confederate future looked bright. Antislavery sentiment might have been growing in the North, but by all accounts it was waning abroad.

Ranging far beyond foreign policy, this work is of immense value to historians in numerous historical fields, along with political scientists, and scholars of international relations and foreign policy. Karp challenges historians and other scholars to rethink entirely what we think we know about the political-economy, politics, foreign policy, and geo-politics of slavery in the mid-century United States and in the emerging global order. For one, Karp shifts historians’ focus from the minutiae of domestic and sectional politics to the broader Americas. Southern elites claimed for themselves the mantle of defenders of racialized, plantation slavery in the western hemisphere. As such, their attention was more frequently drawn to alleged British plots to abolish slavery in Cuba than to the doings of abolitionists in Boston. Karp also indirectly challenges at every turn the
standard narrative that leads from the Kansas-Nebraska Act to November 1860. His chapters on the 1850s will force professors to thoroughly rewrite their lectures on that crucial decade. Likewise, his analysis provides a fresh reading of old documents such as Alexander Hamilton Stephens’ “Cornerstone Speech.” Historians have long read Stephens’ speech as a rejection of liberal democracy and the founding principles of the United States, alongside a retreat into an archaic and isolated slave society. But as Karp shows, it was a clarion call to forge a global order based on a new set of scientific, moral, and political principles surrounding slavery and racial subordination. The Confederacy might have been the first nation founded on the principles of racial subordination and slavery, it would not be the last. Karp also dispenses with whatever remains of the romantic interpretations of antebellum politics; his analysis focuses on sober-minded statesmen practicing realpolitik. Though valuable as a work of diplomatic history, it implicitly challenges what has become conventional antebellum southern historiography while pulling together much of the best scholarship produced over the past decade.

Like any valuable monograph, this one raises far more questions than it addresses. Karp frequently assumes points that could be subjected to monograph-length inquiries in their own right. *This Vast Southern Empire* also invites its share of quibbles and challenges, as does any good monograph of such breadth and scope. But that’s exactly what makes this such a valuable book. If you are going to read one monograph on pre-Civil America this year, make it this one.
In his provocative and important book, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy*, Matthew Karp argues that the British government’s 1833 decision to emancipate the 800,000 slaves in its Caribbean possessions marked a turning point in history of antebellum U.S. foreign policy. British emancipation, he declares, “would transform the way southern elites thought about foreign affairs more forcefully than any other global event between the American Revolution and the Civil War” (12). The embrace of abolition by the globe’s most powerful nation-state sent chills down the spines of U.S. slaveholders and their political leaders in Washington. After London adopted a policy of “imperial abolitionism,” a small group of powerful southern politicians fought to expand the power of the U.S. military and seize control of the foreign policy apparatus of U.S. federal government (31). (This latter goal was made possible by the South’s tight grip on the U.S. Presidency before 1861). The Southern domination of Washington’s military and foreign policy establishments in the decades before the Civil War proved to have important implications for the future of slavery both in the slaveholding region of the United States and, just as importantly, throughout the Western Hemisphere.

*This Vast Southern Empire* persuasively demonstrates the ability of influential southern politicians in Washington to appropriate the federal funds necessary to modernize the weapons systems and expand the size of the U.S. Army and Navy in the two decades before the Civil War. The success of southern leaders in growing the power the U.S. Navy is central to Karp’s story, as this was the branch of the military that allowed Washington to project its power overseas. The growth in the American Navy allowed southern politicians and diplomats to create what Karp calls a “foreign policy of slavery” based upon the premise of a powerful U.S. “outward state” with the military strength necessary to protect the institution of chattel slavery both within its territorial borders as well as in the regions of hemisphere in which slavery still thrived: Brazil, Cuba, and, until its 1845 annexation into the United States, the Republic of Texas (7, 5). In a bitter irony for southerners, secession transformed the U.S. state, which had become far stronger militarily due to the work of this region’s political leaders during the previous two decades, from the great protector of hemispheric slavery into the institution’s most deadly foe.

Karp complicates the historical understanding of well-known southern leaders such as John Tyler and James K. Polk, John C. Calhoun, and Jefferson Davis, and lesser known, but still important, figures such as Abel P. Upshur, John Tyler’s secretary of the navy and, until his untimely death in 1844, his secretary of state, and Senator R.M.T. Hunter of Virginia. These men were anything but small-government absolutists. They were instead representatives of a region that desperately needed the support of a powerful central state for the survival and growth of its most important social and economic institution, chattel slavery. Far from inward-looking provincials, these men “kept the international politics of slavery under constant surveillance, tracking threats to slave property across the hemisphere and monitoring oscillations in global attitudes toward emancipation” (3). Far from being defensive about the future of slavery and its place in a rapidly modernizing world, Karp maintains that the southern elites he discusses confidently viewed the rapidly increasing productive power of slave labor, especially in the cultivation and exportation of high-demand commodities such as cotton, sugar, and coffee, as “a vital element of global progress” (256). Southern political leaders, he argues, were “ambitious and cosmopolitan, not defensive and provincial,” and “explicit rather than implicit about the importance of slave labor both at home and abroad” (12). Karp argues that southerners left the Union in 1861 confident in the belief that “Slavery was . . . the political and economic fulcrum of that larger world.” “In that sense,” he argues at the end of this book, “the Confederate project was not designed to escape ‘modern civilization’ but to command it” (239).
Karp clearly and in great detail describes the ability of slaveholders to enlarge and modernize the U.S. military in the decades before the Civil War. Between 1847 and 1861, for instance, southerners, many of whom later served in the Confederate government, served as Secretary of War for eleven years and Secretary of the Navy for nine, and dominated the Military and Naval Affairs Committees of Congress (199). During the 1850s, James C. Dobbin, the North Carolinian who served as Secretary of the Navy from 1853-1857, commissioned the building of 11 modern steamships and expanded the size of the navy by 1,000 sailors (215). Under the leadership of southern officials, the “U.S. Navy expanded its squadrons and moved decisively out of the age of sail and into the age of steam” (201). In that same decade Jefferson Davis, the Mississippian who served as Secretary of War, administered the growth of the U.S. Army from 11,000 to nearly 16,000 troops (215).

As Karp makes clear, the efforts of Southern politicians to grow the military power of the U.S. state and dominate Washington’s foreign policy establishment were both part of an interconnected and highly conscious geopolitical strategy designed to assure the continuation of slavery in the Western Hemisphere. By extending “the power of the United States on an international stage” in the decades after British abolition, he concludes, the “master theorists of the master class did not demand a rigid or slavish obedience to the principle of local sovereignty. Rather, they sought to consolidate proslavery forces for a larger struggle that spanned the Atlantic world” (6). In the early 1840s, for instance, President John Tyler, a Virginian who strongly supported a stronger U.S. military, deployed the American Navy to Cuba to assist Spanish authorities in suppressing a rumored slave revolt on that Caribbean island.

The South’s determination to protect slavery in Spanish Cuba looms large in Karp’s book. After British emancipation, the Pearl of the Antilles was a slaveholding domino that Southerners could not afford to have fall. “For reasons not completely reducible to racist hysteria or expansionist hunger,” Karp argues, “leading slaveholders sought to turn American power into a shield for Cuban slavery” (67). Much the same was true of Brazil, although Karp has surprisingly little to say about the role of the beefed-up American navy in undermining the British claim to the “right of search” of vessels, many of them flying American flags, suspected of illegally carrying African captives to Brazil during the 1840s and 1850s.1 As Rafael Marquese has recently noted, during the 1871 debate in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies over legislation freeing the children of slave mothers, a Brazilian Senator proclaimed that while slavery existed in the United States, “we were shielded.”2 The effort on the part of Southern navalists to shield New-World slavery from British abolitionist efforts proved highly successful. As Karp notes, in 1861 the population of hemispheric slaves was greater than at any other time in history, and between 1820 and 1860 the total value of goods produced by slave labor almost doubled (1).

The shielding of hemispheric slavery, however, is a far different matter than the creation of a hemispheric slave empire dominated by the U.S. South. Karp’s title is somewhat misleading, as the evidence presented in his book demonstrates that the primary goal of the South’s “foreign policy of slavery” was, with the exception of the U.S. annexation of Texas, designed less to establish a unified slave empire in the Western Hemisphere.

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than it was to protect slavery within the discrete national boundaries in which this institution already existed. As Karp notes, “A careful eye on international slavery, not a blind instinct toward expansion,” drove the policies of the slave South before and during the Civil War (193). “Southern elites,” he notes, “showed special concern for their fellow slaveholding societies in the hemisphere, especially Cuba, Brazil, and the independent Republic of Texas. Sometimes, as with Texas in 1845, protecting slavery required annexing new territory. On other occasions, as in Cuba in 1843 or 1854, it involved a more restrained policy of proslavery solidarity and cooperation.” Karp concludes, “In virtually every situation . . . the preservation of slave institutions took priority over the acquisition of new land” (7).

The U.S. annexation of the Republic of Texas in 1845 was the great exception to the South’s generally cautious geopolitical position on territorial expansion. By the early 1840s southerners believed that British “antislavery activism” seemed to pose an imminent danger to the future of slavery in Texas (127). In the face of an abolitionist threat on the continent of North America itself, southerners in the U.S. government—most notably President Tyler and Secretary of State John C. Calhoun—labored in Washington to incorporate Texas into the United States. For Karp, the U.S. annexation of Texas was the “quintessential achievement in the foreign policy of slavery” (100). Yet, despite the South’s undeniable success in securing Texas as a slave state, this was an event driven by a number of unique historical contingencies that could not be replicated elsewhere in the hemisphere. As Andrew Torget has recently demonstrated, by 1845 the weak Republic of Texas was a de facto satellite of the U.S. South. Geographically, Texas was separated from the United States only by the narrow waters of the Sabine River, while economically Texas was deeply intertwined with the neighboring slave region of the U.S. Gulf Coast. The 1845 annexation of Texas into the United States was a peaceful event welcomed by that region’s majority population of southern-born Anglo Texans.3 None of these historical variables were true of Cuba or Brazil and thus the case of Texas failed to offer Southerners a model for territorial expansion into the other slaveholding areas of the New World. Far less fearful about the threat posed by British abolitionism after the U.S. annexation of Texas, southern elites instead gravitated away from a foreign policy designed to expand their slaveholding region by the seizure of overseas territory and toward a foreign policy designed to utilize U.S. power to create a defensive umbrella protecting the institution of slavery in Cuba and Brazil.

It is important to note that the greatest example of U.S. wartime expansion in the nineteenth-century, the territory acquired in the Mexican-American War, does not fit into Karp’s interpretative model of a southern foreign policy of slavery. “Unlike Tyler’s push for Texas,” Karp argues, “[President James K.] Polk’s war with Mexico did not spring directly from proslavery politics.” Unlike his predecessor, Polk was forced during his presidency to balance the sectional interests of both Northern and Southern politicians. As a result, Karp argues that while the war with Mexico “was not precisely a war for slavery, it was nevertheless a war sanctioned by and acceptable to slaveholders” (110-111). Ultimately, of course, the territory captured from Mexico remained free of slavery. The conflict with Mexico, however, offers important historical insight into the thinking of southern political elites such as John C. Calhoun who famously opposed the conflict with Mexico and was deeply concerned about the dangerous consequences of warfare for the future of slavery in southern states.

Karp notes that the confidence that southerners felt about the institution of slavery in a rapidly modernizing world was undercut by their realization that “slave society possessed both extraordinary strengths and extraordinary vulnerabilities in wartime” (55). Calhoun worried about the potential for a slave revolt during war, and he consistently argued against the entry of the United States into any major conflicts. “Peace,” he insisted, “is indeed our policy” (248). “A kind Providence,” said Calhoun, “has cast our lot on a portion of the globe sufficiently vast to satisfy the most grasping ambition, and abounding in resources beyond all others, which only require to be fully developed to make us the greatest and most prosperous people on earth” (53).

Calhoun was not alone in worrying about the ominous consequences of war for antebellum southern slaveholders. “For all the vainglorious Confederates who boasted that slavery would prove an asset in wartime,” Karp concludes, “the South’s shrewdest leaders from 1840 to 1860 consistently sought to strengthen slavery while avoiding a major armed conflict” (248). Secession and the subsequent outbreak of armed conflict between the Union and Confederacy would, in due time, fully justify Calhoun’s fears about the consequences of war for the future of slavery in the American South.

Karp’s study clarifies in important ways the distinction between the decision of southern elites to adopt a policy of ‘aggressive diplomacy’ in defense of hemispheric slavery between 1848 and 1860, and their deep aversion to an ‘aggressive war’ designed to expand the slave south beyond the national boundaries of the United States. For southerners, war was “too dangerous and its outcome too uncertain” (59). To be sure, most southerners would have been delighted if Spain had decided to sell Cuba to the United States, but the key point is that this region’s political elites refused to deploy the U.S. military power under their control to wage war for Cuba. These elites also opposed the numerous filibustering expeditions into Cuba and Central America during the 1850s. As Karp makes clear, notable southern politicians such as Jefferson Davis feared that filibusters would drag the United States into an unnecessary conflict that might ultimately serve to undermine U.S. slavery. “Davis, Karp argues, “might demand unprecedented army appropriations and deliver aggressive speeches about American dominance of the Caribbean, but in the key moment of 1854 he refused to stand up for a Cuban filibuster mission that might have involved the United States in a serious international conflict” (217). “The South’s most powerful slaveholders,” he concludes, “put a higher priority on preserving slavery than on acquiring territory and, for much of the decade, placed their trust in the U.S. government rather than private filibusters” (177).

Ever since the 1973 publication of Robert May’s classic *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861*, historians of the Civil-War era have speculated on the nature of southern expansionism.4 Karp’s book has answered this question in new and surprising ways. The southern elites he discusses promoted peace because they feared war would threaten the foundations of slavery. The evidence that Karp presents demonstrates that, with the exception of Texas, the South’s geopolitical strategy hinged upon the growth of the military capacity of the United States, especially its navy, to protect the institution of slavery where it existed in the New World, and not as a means of forcibly expanding the territory of their slaveholding region outside the boundaries of the United States. Utilizing the power of the U.S. navy to safeguard the future of hemispheric slavery within Cuba and Brazil, these political leaders believed, offered the best means of protecting the peculiar institution within the confines of the slaveholding states of the U.S. South.

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Karp’s discussion of the foreign policy of southern elites before the Civil War offers scholars valuable insight into the foreign affairs of the Confederate States of America. During the secession crisis of 1860-1861, the Crittenden Compromise’s “hereafter” clause—which proposed that any land south of the old Missouri Compromise Line “hereafter acquired” would be reserved for slavery—seemed to indicate that the South had switched course and supported territorial expansion into Cuba, Mexico, and Latin America (229). The Crittenden Compromise, however, and its apparent embrace of the South’s acquisition of overseas territory, proved only a brief modification in the geopolitical strategy of the South, and the “hereafter” clause was perhaps far less significant than historians traditionally think. As Karp points out, Confederate leaders quickly jettisoned any notions of overseas territorial growth and instead during the Civil War the “Confederacy’s hemispheric program represented a continuity, not a rupture, with the antebellum era” (247). Confederate diplomats went out of their way to assure governments in Mexico, Spain, London, and Paris that secession had established a “balance of power” between the slave and free regions of the North America, and thus there was no need for the slave South to expand into the territory of its hemispheric neighbors.5 Richmond’s promises that it had renounced overseas expansion were, Karp’s explains, perfectly consistent with the foreign-policy goals of southern political leaders before the Civil War. With the exception of the annexation of the Republic of Texas, the essential foreign policy objective of the southern elites was not hemispheric expansion. Instead, it was the adoption of a geopolitical strategy designed to protect the capacious slave empire that they had already established in North America. Karp’s elucidation of the origins, maintenance, and essential ambitions of the slave South’s “foreign policy of slavery” is an original and significant contribution to the historical understanding of the beliefs and actions of this region’s principal geopolitical strategists in the crucial period between British emancipation in the 1830s and the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865.

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On page 29 of Matthew Karp’s *This Vast Southern Empire* appears a map portraying zones of slavery and free labor in the western hemisphere in 1842. Two things immediately stand out. First, the fact that slavery continued to be a robust presence across the Americas, with notable strength in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States. And second, the fact that the northern part of the United States is identified as slaveholding rather than free territory. This is a little jarring for many of those who research and teach the American Civil War era. We are accustomed to seeing maps where the slaveholding southern states appear in different colors or shades than the ‘free’ northern states. But here, the United States is a monochromatic unit—a slaveholding unit.

The map’s shading reflects one of *This Vast Southern Empire*’s basic insights: that the great conflict over slavery within the United States assumes a different form when we examine it within an international rather than a national framework. Positioned internationally, the entire United States comes into focus as a slaveholding power—the most powerful slaveholding power, as a matter of fact, in the mid-nineteenth-century world. Karp joins a growing group of historians who have sought to internationalize the study of the American Civil War in all kinds of ways, from military practices to ideas about nationalism, from the cotton economy to wartime diplomacy.¹ Karp’s special contribution to this burgeoning subfield is to uncover, in some detail, the efforts of a small yet significant group of slaveholders to realize their international vision by controlling the apparatus of United States foreign policy during the 1840s and 1850s.

“Neither flaming hotheads nor desiccated reactionaries,” as Karp puts it, “America’s most powerful slaveholders were earthbound and waterbound men of the world” (3). And as they looked around the world, surveying both opportunities and hazards, one event stood out as being exceptionally significant: Great Britain’s abolition of slavery in its Caribbean colonies in the 1830s. Building on earlier research by Edward Rugemer,² Karp persuasively shows that British emancipation not only sent a long-lasting shiver down the spine of slaveholders in the American South, but also galvanized a burning southern interest in foreign policy. Domestically, according to Karp, abolitionism was not much of a threat. Much more serious was the combination of challenges to the institution from inside and outside the United States. In response, some slaveholders stepped up their participation in foreign policy, actively seeking out opportunities to expand U.S. power outside the United States, particularly in naval affairs. Karp builds up a detailed narrative of how a fairly small group of men like Abel P. Upshur, John Tyler’s Secretary of the Navy, and Matthew Fontaine Maury, a naval officer and an accomplished oceanographer, infused U.S. foreign policy with a new imperative to protect slavery. It was not only their own ‘peculiar institution’ U.S. slaveholders were anxious to protect. Recognizing safety in numbers, they also sought to defend other slaveholding regimes in Brazil, Cuba, and


(before it became part of their own country) Texas. As Karp reveals, “The spirit of proslavery fraternity suffused the whole of American diplomacy in the 1840s” (69).

Proslavery foreign policy reached its peak with the John Tyler administration and the annexation of Texas. But throughout the 1840s and 1850s southern politicians continued to exert considerable influence in this area. Witness, for example, Jefferson Davis’ ambitious tenure as Secretary of War under Franklin Pierce. More broadly, southern slaveholders engaged intellectually with the modern world. Inspired by Michael O’Brien’s magisterial *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860*, and related scholarship, Karp fortifies the argument that far from being the archetypal opponents of modernity, many slaveholding southerners were forward-looking, engaged with the nineteenth-century world both economically and intellectually.3 They were forging their own, slaveholding version of modernity. As these forward-thinking slaveholders recognized, the emerging power of scientific racism, along with the growing use of non-white and unfree ‘coolie’ labor, gave the South strong connections with the latest global trends.

Some readers will note that most of the thinkers in this section of the book happen to hail from South Carolina, raising interesting questions—largely unaddressed by Karp—about variations in the nature of international engagement in different parts of the South. In other parts of the book, a mere handful of politicians are used to build an argument about an entire class. As so many of us do, Karp tends to treat slaveholders as a monolithic class with one mindset and one unified agenda; ‘which slaveholders’ is a question worth asking of this book, as of so many others.

Regardless, Karp’s thoughtful analysis illuminates the long-term road toward secession. More specifically, it illuminates southern slaveholders’ responses to the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. It was not just that Lincoln jeopardized slavery’s westward expansion. It was not just that the rise of the Republican Party attenuated slaveholders’ power in the federal government. It was also the fact that Lincoln was sure to overturn southerners’ ability to dictate U.S. foreign policy; it was the fact that “under President Lincoln, the United States suddenly assumed the shape of an antislavery world power” (227). Karp brings forth compelling evidence, including Mississippi’s declaration of secession, to show that even in 1860-1861 southern slaveholders continued to respond to apparently internal crises with foreign affairs—and the hemispheric fate of slavery—very much in mind.

Throughout, *This Vast Southern Empire* rests on the distinction between domestic and foreign policy. The message running through the book is that if we pay more attention to foreign policy, instead of seeing the anxious states’-rights-defending slaveholders of stereotype, we see a confident ruling class with a clear and ambitious international agenda. And it certainly is illuminating to look at southern slaveholders’ attitudes toward political power in foreign as well as domestic policy. But I am not sure how well reinforcing the distinction between the two areas of political activity serves a deep understanding of the coming of the Civil War. For one thing, drawing a sharp contrast risks minimizing the many ways in which slaveholders were

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perfectly happy to embrace strong federal authority at home. Think the Fugitive Slave Law. Think *Dred Scott*. As Robert Bonner skillfully showed in *Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood*, southern politicians worked hard to craft a muscular ‘proslavery nationalism’ in domestic affairs just as (in Karp’s telling) they did in foreign policy. Karp is aware of this, of course, and occasionally invokes the similarities or the interplay between the domestic and foreign policies of southern slaveholders. Pushing this even further, to more fully reintegrate the two spheres, would surely be a fruitful next step.

Matthew Karp is to be lauded for paving the way toward a richer understanding of the slaveholders’ agenda in the 1840s and 1850s, by reminding us that they were keenly invested in foreign as well as domestic affairs. Tying together recent trends of internationalizing the Civil War era and reinterpreting the South’s relationship to modernity, *This Vast Southern Empire* makes an important contribution to the scholarship on the antebellum South, the coming of the American Civil War, and U.S. foreign policy.

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Matthew Karp’s study of the influence of Southern elites in antebellum American foreign policy reflects, and in a way culminates, recent scholarship emphasizing the centrality of slavery to the country’s early economic development and foreign relations. Edward Baptist argued that slavery’s expansion was the focus of most American economic innovation and the engine of its industrial power.¹ Walter Johnson and Sven Beckert showed American agricultural slavery to be a key to the emergence and first global integration of capitalism.²

Karp’s argument, drawing principally on American government documents, Southern periodicals, materials in the Southern Historical Collection, and the published papers of Jefferson Davis and John C. Calhoun, is that proslavery leaders, beyond acting economically to maximize profits from generally exploitable slave labor and abundant land, were hardly on the margins of American foreign-policy making. Much less were they interested in secession or even the shibboleth of states’ rights. They were, instead, ambitious and accomplished nationalists, chief advocates and architects of American national security interests, and dominant in diplomatic and military posts of the federal government from the Missouri Compromise of 1820 until the Secessionist Impulse of 1860-1861. Led by chief architects Calhoun, John Tyler, James K. Polk, and Davis, and their operators Robert M. T. Hunter, Henry Wise, Duff Green, and William Henry Trescot, proslavery statesmen shared a sense that abolitionism amounted to an astonishing error of judgment by the British Empire, which was so hypocritically committed to preserving, not destroying, laws of civilization. Yet Britain was no mere liberal novelty; its naval power was real. Thus, suggests Karp, this Anglo-Old South conflict became not merely philosophical but a “cold war” (94). To vindicate this opposition, as well as American national identity, slavery exponents sought to lead the United States in carving out a western hemispheric sphere, from Virginia to Brazil, Cuba to Mexico, where slavery’s profitability and guarantee of social order could be illustrated, and unaligned slave-free areas circumscribed. Proslavery statesmen shrewdly couched their agenda in nationalistic, not sectional or economic language. Thus, for example, even the often blunt Calhoun helped to secure the annexation of Texas, a huge slave state, in 1845 by emphasizing the threat to the American border there of a Comanche empire.

Texas paved the way to all of Northern Mexico, whose annexation, really a conquest, meant that the United States had become a “vast empire,” in the enthusiastic opinion of a Southern periodical (124). Slaveholding hardly shied away from Thomas Jefferson’s vision for the republic as an “empire of liberty,” first expressed when he was Governor of Virginia in 1780, except that its bureaucrats replaced his term “liberty” with its opposite.³


Karp’s discussion of Southern leaders’ relinquishment of federal power upon Abraham Lincoln’s election comprises a mere ten pages. He offers a dual explanation of secession, at least among its orchestrators. One is that secession was a reasonable attempt, from Southern elites’ perspective, to keep the South a player in the world’s system of exploitable labor and markets; Republican domestic fanaticism was obviously more threatening than even British antislavery imperialism. The other is that secession was an act of self-destructive hubris, revealing their surprising ignorance not only of Britain’s independence from American cotton supply but also of Northerners’ commitment to the Union and ability to project force. Earlier Karp had described how a leading figure such as Trescot—secretary of the U.S. legation in London, Assistant Secretary of State under President James Buchanan, and realpolitik author—oddly imagined “an Anglo-southern alliance” to organize the world’s resources and balance its power (181). Still, his characterization of secession partly as a reflection of Southern elites’ “swollen self-regard” seems inconsistent with the thrust of his argument of their primary commitment to the nation’s power (250).

The book’s epilogue highlights a speech in 1890 by W.E.B. Du Bois in which the famous black nationalist ironically commemorated the role of former Confederate president Jefferson Davis in birthing the late nineteenth-century world of American and European imperial development, which was erected on global practices of coerced labor. Karp acknowledges that former antislavery policy-makers were more at the helm of post-Civil War American government and business than were proslavery veterans. Thus the American role in the colonial exploitation of Asian, African, and African-American workers was not an exclusive Old South legacy. But in using Du Bois’s address to show Davis as a pioneer of turn-of-the-twentieth-century race-based, capitalist empires, Karp dramatizes how the South’s slavery regime, rationalized as a way to civilize people of color by compelling them to work, was hardly exceptional or archaic. This is a conclusion that has previously been more diversely developed. But Karp’s demonstration of the antebellum South’s modernity and cosmopolitanism, measured through its leaders’ wielding of federal power, militarism, and expansion of national territory and markets, goes further. Its argument is a milestone in revising our view of the stark premises of early American state-building and foreign relations.

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Matthew Karp has written a landmark book that transforms our view of the role of slaveholders in antebellum U.S. history. The author is a perceptive guide to an extensive collection of sources, and his judgments about them, in general, are well reasoned and properly couched. Karp concludes his ambitious work with an epilogue that uses W.E.B. DuBois’s 1890 Harvard Commencement Address—“Jefferson Davis as a Representative of Civilization”—to suggest that while the Southern slaveholders were defeated, their vision in no small measure continued to inform the world of late-nineteenth century imperialism. Yet by 1890, DuBois’s view of the slaveholders as dynamic entities in both the pre- and post-bellum eras was in the minority. The image of the slaveholder as provincial, pre-modern, and doomed to extinction had already become predominant. Karp observes, “If one read all antebellum history backward from the perspective of Appomattox, it became easy to see the South as weak, defensive and archaic” (256). This book, in the tradition of DuBois, is dedicated to shattering that view of the antebellum South and the slaveholders who ruled it.

“This Vast Southern Empire” is a marvelous example of the historian’s craft and would be a worthy capstone on a distinguished career, making it all the more impressive that it is the debut book of a young scholar. As someone who, since 1981, has spent his entire academic career in the mostly-neglected field of antebellum U.S. foreign relations, I can state that this emerging new view of the period is both exciting and long overdue. My entry into the field was prompted by the dawning realization as a graduate student that the dominant view of the antebellum U.S. as an inward looking small republic mostly minding its own business was rendered absurd by the pervasive expansionism that to me was at the core of early U.S. history. While most historians treated expansionism as peripheral to what they presumed to be the more important realm of domestic affairs, I perceived a need for a theory of American nationalism and American unionism—and ultimately, of American Empire—that accounted for this dynamic expansionism. Several generations of scholars had, intentionally or not, obfuscated and mystified much of the history of the period. It was not just the role of slavery and slaveholders that needed excavation and revision, but all of U.S. antebellum history.

I want to comment a bit about what is right about *This Vast Southern Empire* before engaging in a couple of criticisms.

Karp succeeds brilliantly in showing that slavery, far from declining in the 1850s, was in fact thriving and appeared to have a bright future in both the U.S. and the emerging world economy. He dramatizes the fact that slaveholders were not a backward looking, marginalized group inevitably destined to depart the world stage in the face of modernization. Rather, they were a cosmopolitan, self-aware, well-organized, and well-informed interest group, functioning as key facilitators of the modernization process with a stake in the emerging global economy greater than that of almost any other American business sector. This political and ideological juggernaut controlled most of the levers of federal power (especially in the realm of foreign affairs) between 1840 and 1860 (10). My work on Secretary of State John Quincy Adams taught me that the slaveholding interest was a powerful force in U.S. politics. What I did not understand and what Karp so well illustrates is the extent to which this interest group acted in the international realm to defend and advance the interest of slavery, and not just in the name of expanding slave territory but—crucially—in defending the principle of property in human beings.

Developing this theme, Karp suggests that slaveholders were engaged in a sort of global Cold War with abolitionists, especially Great Britain, which was seen as “the great apostle of emancipation.” (10) Slaveholders
posited an antebellum domino theory in which the emancipation of slavery in Brazil foreshadowed its end in Texas and/or Cuba. The aim was to contain the spread of emancipation via a Kennedy-esque ambition to pay any price, bear any burden, support any friend and oppose any foe to ensure the survival and success of slavery. The Cold-war analogy is fascinating and parallels an idea of mine that President Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans anticipated President Harry Truman’s strategy vis-à-vis communism by seeking to prevent the spread of slavery into the territories as a means of asphyxiating it.¹ So in addition to the dueling versions of manifest destinies that Karp suggests divided North and South, there, arguably, were dueling policies of containment the two sides employed to advance their respective interests.

In spite of its many virtues, two major flaws in This Vast Southern Empire limit its effectiveness. The first is a significant factual error. Karp writes, “President James Monroe and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams abandoned the shaky American claim to Texas in exchange for certain rights in Florida” (83). This is incorrect. The “shaky” American claim to Texas (actually, it was no shakier than the claim to the Floridas, both of which had been derived from an expansive interpretation of the Louisiana Purchase) in fact was exchanged for a transcontinental boundary demarcating U.S.–Spanish territory to the Pacific Ocean. Spanish Minister Don Luis de Onis had been empowered to concede the Spanish claim to Texas extending to the Rio Colorado, but Adams and Monroe, in one of the great diplomatic sleight of hands in all U.S. history, at the last moment traded the U.S. claim to Texas for a transcontinental boundary line to the Pacific, the acquisition of East Florida having already effectively been guaranteed by Andrew Jackson’s short-lived conquest of it in the First Seminole War.

In letters to Thomas Jefferson and Jackson, Monroe made it clear why he chose to give up the claim to Texas: to Jefferson in May 1820, he explained that the reason Texas was not acquired was “altogether internal, and of the most distressing and dangerous tendency”: slavery. Noting the deeply rooted nature of the controversy and the heated debate happening over the admission of Missouri, Monroe warned “…it is evident, that the further acquisition of territory in the West and South, involves difficulties of an internal nature which menace the Union itself.”² Not long thereafter, Monroe explained to Jackson, “Having long known of the repugnance with which the eastern portions of our Union…have seen its aggrandizement to the west and south, I have been decidedly of [the] opinion that we ought to be content with Florida for the present…until the public opinion in that quarter shall be reconciled to any future change.”³ Monroe and Adams’s deft diplomatic gambit, though little remembered today, perhaps momentarily saved the Union by postponing the contentious Texas Question for a decade or more.

This contributes to a questionable assertion by the author: “The mid-century struggle between bondage and freedom began in earnest with the emancipation of the British West Indies in 1833” (8). I disagree. That struggle began ‘in earnest’ with three interrelated phenomena: the negotiation of the Transcontinental Treaty,


³ Weeks, John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire, 168.
the First Seminole War, which was critical to the Treaty’s successful negotiation, and the Missouri Crisis that began in February 1819, a week before the treaty’s initial completion. The suppressed tensions underlying the Treaty negotiations regarding the expansion of slave territory came out in the open during the Missouri debates in Congress. It proved a tumultuous exchange, introducing virtually all of the arguments made over slavery for the next 40 years, and which shook the Republic to the core.4

The Missouri Crisis signified the breakdown of the expansionist consensus; in turn, the breakdown of the expansionist consensus signified the impending breakdown of the Unionist consensus. The intensity of the Missouri Crisis prompted Americans across the political spectrum in the 1820s to contain (to use that analogy again) their opinions on slavery out of fear of its explosive divisiveness. Even John Quincy Adams kept his well-developed anti-slavery convictions quiet during his presidency. Yet in a diary entry in early 1820, he had described the Missouri Controversy as a “flaming sword” that threatened the union and presciently observed, “I did take it for granted that the present question [Missouri] is a mere preamble—a title page to a great tragic volume.”5 Yes, a “title page.”

The second criticism concerns a conceptual weakness in the text regarding the nature of the antebellum American empire. Karp, following DuBois on this point, pledges to treat the slaveholders with a “contemptuous fairness” (256) in assessing them and their actions. However, on at least one point—the slaveholders’ advocacy of a vigorous federal role in external affairs even as they defended the preeminence of the power of the states internally—he is conspicuously unfair. Early on, the author urges the reader to resist the temptation “to see this embrace of federal power as a clear proof that all southern ideas were no more than hypocritical justifications for slave property” (6). Nonetheless, the author proceeds to do just that, making the presumed ideological inconsistencies if not outright hypocrisy of the slaveholders on this point a major theme of the text:

“Understanding the United States to be the chief defender of bound labor in the Western Hemisphere, the most powerful slaveholders in Washington pursued a vigorous strategic program that often overrode whatever states-rights or small government principles they officially espoused. For Tyler, Upshur and Calhoun—and for a broad swath of southern leaders from the dying Andrew Jackson to the youthful Jefferson Davis—the foreign policy of slavery was too important to be governed by the restrictive code of conservative republicanism.” (50-51)

“For the South’s leading politicians, and especially those who fancied themselves states-rights republicans of the old school, it was not always easy to reconcile official principles with actual foreign and military policy preferences” (208).

The problem with the indictments that the author hands down is that they are made from a post-Appomattox nationalist perspective in which the broad internal powers of the federal government are a given. The presumed hypocrisies and ideological inconsistencies of the slaveholders vanish when one sees them from an antebellum imperial perspective in which the locus of federal power is found in the region beyond the domain


5 Weeks, _John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire_, 191.
of the states, that is to say in foreign relations and, crucially, territorial administration. ‘Original intent’ is a controversial term when it comes to constitutional jurisprudence, but from an antebellum imperial perspective there is one overarching foundational original intent at the heart of the American Union: that the power of the central government was to be manifested primarily in foreign affairs and that domestic governance was to be left primarily to the states. This was the essential pre-condition for forming the Union, insisted on not just by southern slaveholders but also by all of the states. A ‘strict construction’ of the meaning of the Constitution does not preclude a powerful federal role in foreign affairs—in fact, it is built on that principle. There was no contradiction whatsoever when slaveholders pushed an activist foreign and military policy while insisting on a vigorous defense of ‘states’ rights.’

Similarly, the embrace of navalism by certain defenders of slavery was not nearly the ideological flip-flop Karp makes it out to be. In his otherwise excellent chapter, “The Strongest Naval Power on Earth,” he critiques Secretary of the Navy Abel Upshur’s ardent efforts to modernize and expand the force:

“Upshur’s blizzard of innovation, along with the crusading, centralizing attitude behind it, would suffice to strike a dissonant note in the context of his career as a states-rights hair-splitter” (33).

He concludes the chapter by leveling a charge of hypocrisy:

“In domestic politics, the ideological commitment to slavery often drove southerners toward a defensive emphasis on states’ rights. In foreign and military policy, the same commitment led to the unapologetic centralism of the southern navalists” (49).

This assessment seems to ignore the fact that the federal government by the original plan had little power over slavery domestically, a fact that Abraham Lincoln candidly recognized. It is true that ‘the ideological commitment to slavery’ at times prompted some southerners to use federal power domestically to defend it in ways that contradicted the principles of limited internal government, but that, for the most part, is not the critique the author makes.

Karp appears to ground his charge of slaveholder hypocrisy in the mantle of time honored wisdom: “As early as 1922 the historian Arthur Schlesinger dismissed the notion that the South’s antebellum commitment to limited government had meaning beyond the necessarily defensive tactics of a political minority” (5). But that is the problem: by 1922, Schlesinger’s Progressive Era-post-Appomattox nationalist perspective had become the conventional wisdom, erasing the antebellum imperialism not just of the slaveholders but of the rest of the nation as well. Indeed, Karp’s emphasizes in the Epilogue that this idea was firmly in place by the time DuBois delivered his Commencement Address in 1890. From the post-Appomattox nationalist perspective, the American Empire begins in 1898, effectively burying the antebellum imperial victories on land and sea under the Godly-ordained mystifications of ‘Manifest Destiny.’ In this manner, the antebellum American empire and its legacy of expansion and conquest are obscured and mostly forgotten, reconstructed in the post-bellum in the much less controversial guise of the American nation.

Karp introduces several pieces of evidence pointing to this antebellum imperial past but their significance remains mostly invisible from a post-Appomattox national perspective. He quotes John C. Calhoun, aptly characterized as one of “the two warmest friends of centralized power in all antebellum foreign affairs” (6), as follows:
“A kind providence has cast our lot on the portion of the globe sufficiently vast to satisfy the most grasping ambition and abounding in resources beyond all others, which only require to be fully developed to make us the greatest and most prosperous people on earth” (53).

This echoed Benjamin Franklin’s central insight in his seminal work, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind,” which is in my view a foundational document of the antebellum American empire.

“For Tyler, Calhoun, and others, the federal government represented the strongest and most reliable weapon for the defense of hemispheric slavery….The founders of the Republic, one pro-Texas essayist argued, took an expansive attitude toward ‘the duties of the federal government in strengthening our frontiers and fortifying the defenses of freedom. [Their] views [were] broad, capacious, and eminently national” (99-100).

This was not merely fodder for Southern slaveholders to use to rationalize the defense of slavery, as the author suggests. It was actually sound Republican empire doctrine, broadly shared across the political spectrum. Along the same lines:

“The domestic cords of Union might be slowly snapping, one by one, but the South's belief in American international power was still, perhaps, the sturdiest remaining bond” (225).

But from an antebellum Republican-imperial perspective, a belief in American international power was, from the start, the primary bond of Union, that is to say the shared interest the states had in their collective security and expansion. The ‘domestic bonds of union’ existed mainly to support the primary bond of security and expansion. Thus, it is not surprising that these ‘domestic bonds’ would be the first to break.

Karp’s use of the concept of “the outward state,” defined as “the sector of the federal government responsible for foreign relations, military policy, and the larger role that American power assumed outside American borders” (5) implies that the locus of federal power is internal, a basic principle of the post-Appomattox national perspective. An antebellum imperial perspective, in contrast, locates the core of federal power as constituted in the external realm; the inevitable migration of that imperial power inward, culminating in the fundamentally changed Union of the post-Civil War era, is a major, perhaps the major, theme of U.S. history of this time.

Writing from a post-Appomattox nationalist perspective, Karp uses the dubious twentieth-century concept of ‘isolationism’: “The era of expansion had replaced the era of isolation, both on land and at sea.” (33) Later he observes, “For [William Henry] Trescot, the age-old commitment to republican isolationism had become, in the era of continental empire and transoceanic commerce, little more than an anachronistic taboo” (180). However, the point needing emphasis is that no moment in early American history was “an era of isolation.” Whatever fond musings some Americans may have indulged about remaining aloof or disengaged from foreign affairs, expansionism—territorially, trans-oceanically, commercially, ideologically—was a constant in antebellum U.S. history, interrupted only by internal conflict over the role of slavery. In recent years, scholars have shown that is questionable to use the term “isolationism” to describe U.S. foreign policy in the 1920s and 30s. It is an anachronism to use it to characterize any part of antebellum U.S. foreign relations.
The post-Appomattox nationalist perspective of the book means that it underestimates the actions of the Republican opponents of slavery: “The Republican campaign platform promised only to forbid slavery in the federal territories, without immediately threatening it in the South” (227). But to employ the qualifier “only” reveals that he does not accept the argument that to use federal power prevent the spread of human bondage into the territories and thereby “contain” it to the states where it currently existed was a death sentence for slavery and was understood as such at the time. Non-extension would put slavery back on “a course to its ultimate extinction” as Lincoln so often put it, and in a constitutionally permissible manner. Only a vote of the citizens of the individual states themselves or a constitutional amendment, neither of which were likely, could end slavery domestically. Stopping its further spread into the territories, where federal authority on the question was more clear-cut (though still debated), was the maximum that could be done at the time. Immediatism it was not, but it would start the clock ticking on slavery’s demise. Thus it made perfect sense for secession to begin soon after Lincoln’s election: the gauntlet having been thrown down, better to exit the Union quickly before Lincoln and the Republicans had time to get full control of the power of the governing apparatus.

Ultimately, Karp’s narrative reveals that the logic underlying the launching of the Confederacy was virtually identical to that underlying the American union: that the states united under a strong central government with expansive powers in the foreign and military realm and minimal powers domestically could be a dynamic, prosperous, and even dominant power on the world stage. Secession “was not a pure product of anxiety and weakness” as it has so long been seen, not a desperate attempt that was doomed to failure from the start, but rather “a kind of foreign policy decision” that seemed to have the tide of history on its side and with a bit more luck, might have succeeded (233, 9).

This new vision of a confident, invigorated slaveocracy in control of the apparatus of state in the 1850s and actively seeking to propagate itself in the larger world casts the opposition of both the Republican Party and of Lincoln, in particular, in a new, more laudatory light. Karp admits that the strength of the antebellum slaveholders made them immensely formidable: “Only a political revolution that was unprecedented and unrivaled in American experience drove them from power” (256). It speaks both to Lincoln’s political genius and to his moral courage that he unflinchingly confronted this behemoth as soon he assumed control of the apparatus of state, baiting it into striking first so that he could launch a defensive war for the Union against it. He then purged the military establishment of its less than fully loyal elements and proceeded to unleash the full weight of federal power against the Southerners, who had done so much to build it up, in a war for both Union and freedom. In spite of the thousands of books written about Lincoln, it could be that historians have yet to appreciate the full magnitude of his achievement, and of his greatness.

Matthew Karp has destroyed the myth of Southern slaveholders as “weak, defensive, and archaic” (256), revealing them as major actors in the emerging world economy. In doing so, he has made what likely will become an enduring contribution to antebellum historiography. But, ironically, the post-Appomattox nationalist perspective from which he writes leaves mostly intact the larger antebellum myth of the U.S. as a weak, de-centralized state. This, unintentionally, contributes to the ongoing obfuscation and mystification of what was the great age of empire building in U.S. history, an era of primitive accumulation that would be the foundation of its immense twentieth century power.
Author’s Response by Matthew Karp, Princeton University

I want to begin by thanking Matthew Clavin, John Craig Hammond, Patrick J. Kelly, Paul Quigley, Timothy Roberts, and William E. Weeks for their comments on my book. I admit that it is a slightly intimidating lineup: at my Ph.D. oral exams, I was only faced with a committee of three, but here we have American historians enough to field a complete starting five, with a sixth man, too.

Fortunately, all six scholars are very kind to This Vast Southern Empire. With a few partial exceptions, they seem amenable to the book’s most basic contentions: that the slaveholding leaders of the antebellum South wielded a controlling influence on U.S. foreign policy; that they directed that foreign policy to rebut British abolitionism and enhance the security of slave property, both inside and outside U.S. borders; that these same slaveholders eagerly harnessed the power of the federal government to advance their overseas objectives; and that this entire effort, from 1840 to 1860, was sustained by a confident belief in chattel slavery as a dynamic institution with a bright international future.

Building on these main themes, several scholars actually clarify some of my arguments more sharply than the book itself does. “Karp’s title is somewhat misleading,” writes Kelly, since This Vast Southern Empire actually emphasizes the protection rather than the acquisition of slave territory: “the essential foreign policy objective of the southern elites was not hemispheric expansion,” but “a geopolitical strategy designed to protect the capacious slave empire that they had already established in North America.” (This question has made me somewhat ambivalent about “This Vast Southern Empire,” ever since it was a dissertation proposal. For a brief while, the book’s working title was The World the Slaveholders Craved, until I was convinced not to risk the first fruit of my scholarly career on a Eugene Genovese pun, which in any case made it sound like John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis had a hankering for ice cream.)

In an exceptionally generous review, which I confess to finding rather persuasive, John Craig Hammond offers a range of bold historiographical extrapolations on the arguments in This Vast Southern Empire. Along with Clavin, Quigley, and Roberts, Hammond situates the book amid the recent revolution in interpretations of antebellum slavery and its relationship to modernity, empire, and capitalism.1 Hammond goes further, though, in reading This Vast Southern Empire as a counterpoint to two major emphases within late twentieth-century scholarship: a portrait of politics in the slave South that stresses consensus and commonality, rather than disagreement and difference; and that highlights the extent of proslavery commitment to the United States, rather than sectional separatism. Above all, for Hammond, This Vast Southern Empire represents a

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rejection of “romantic interpretations of antebellum politics”; its analysis “focuses on sober-minded statesmen practicing realpolitik.” I am not sure I quite imagined the book in this way, but that sounds right to me.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of our roundtable game of six-on-one is the opportunity to watch different scholars collide with each other. Quigley questions *This Vast Southern Empire*’s “distinction between domestic and foreign policy,” while Hammond is relieved to see our field of action move “from the minutiae of domestic and sectional politics to the broader Americas.” For Weeks, the book demonstrates that slaveholders were a “cosmopolitan, self-aware, well-organized, and well-informed interest group,” but for Clavin, it only underlines the extent to which southern elites were “not confident men but confidence men,” acting boldly abroad to cover their fear of a rebellion at home. While Kelly finds that the expansionistic politics of the U.S.-Mexico War do not quite “fit into Karp’s interpretative model of a foreign policy of slavery,” Hammond believes that even if various southern leaders “dickered over the details,” the war demonstrated their “fundamental agreement” on the proslavery basis of American diplomacy in the 1840s.

Amid this rich tangle of questions and disagreements, I will limit my response to three broader issues. First, I think Quigley is right that *This Vast Southern Empire* tends to “treat slaveholders as a monolithic class,” rather than a constellation of subgroups divided by region, party, and personality. Certainly I do not mean to deny the existence of these internal fault lines within the antebellum South. Geography, as Quigley suggests, surely shaped the book’s cast of slaveholding leaders: Virginia, South Carolina, and Louisiana, for instance, make far more appearances than North Carolina, Alabama, or Missouri.

Nevertheless, like Hammond—and, in a different sense, Genovese—I think we must also acknowledge that slaveholders, in a crucially important respect, were a monolithic class: they were defined by the holding of slaves. It is on the basis of this common property, and the worldview it generated, that I understand the shared commitment to a proslavery foreign policy that linked such otherwise disparate figures as the Tennessee Democrat Andrew Jackson, the Georgia Whig Alexander Stephens, and the Virginia southern rights man Abel Upshur. That is not to say that this “mere handful of politicians” can be used to speak for an entire class. But *This Vast Southern Empire* is less interested in seeking the representative slaveholder than the powerful and influential slaveholder—politicians like Calhoun and Davis, journalists like Duff Green and James D.B. DeBow, intellectuals like Matthew Maury and William Trescot. Whether or not this small group of elites embodied the “mindset” of all or most southern slaveholders is, for me, a less urgent question than whether or not they dominated the foreign policy of the United States—and I believe they did.

Weeks, meanwhile, makes an important intervention regarding the nature of that foreign policy. I agree with him that slaveholders who supported a strong central government abroad, while singing the praises of states’ rights at home, were not in any sense “hypocrites.” They were simply faithful to a theory of politics, and an interpretation of the Constitution, that put an absolute premium on the protection of slave property. This was not hypocrisy; it was ideology—and it was reflected in both domestic and foreign affairs before 1860. Now, to be sure, this ideology often required creative gymnastics to make it appear that a ‘republican’ view of the Constitution, rather than slavery itself, anchored proslavery policy. But I am sorry that Weeks read *This Vast Southern Empire* as highlighting actual “ideological inconsistencies” rather than political dilemmas induced by dyed-in-the-wool belief.

Weeks argues that slaveholding assumptions about the Constitution were “broadly shared across the political spectrum” before the Civil War, and only appear conspicuous to historians who adopt an anachronistic “post-Appomattox nationalist perspective.” Yet in fact, the opponents of proslavery foreign policy objected to it all
the time. Take, for example, the Tyler administration’s attempt to annex Texas by a joint resolution of Congress (98-100), which many Northerners in Congress viewed as rankly unconstitutional. “No man, woman, or child in this Union,” declared Rufus Choate of Massachusetts, “wise or foolish, drunk or sober, was ever heard to breathe one syllable about this power in the constitution.” George Rathbun of New York found it “not a little surprising” that John C. Calhoun, “considered as the bearer of strict construction,” should favor such an aggressive view of federal power in external affairs. The charge of inconsistency is Rathbun’s, not mine. I agree with Weeks that the slaveholding annexationists in Congress who enumerated their theory of the Constitution—“liberal construction” abroad and “strict construction” at home, as Virginia’s Thomas Bayly put it—were sincere ideologues, not dissembling hypocrites.² But either way, this particular proslavery view of state power was often challenged, whether by opponents of Texas annexation, Whig critics of the war with Mexico, or Republicans seeking to block Jefferson Davis’s Army buildup in the 1850s.

Certainly, I did not mean for This Vast Southern Empire to extend what Weeks calls the “larger antebellum myth of the U.S. as a weak, de-centralized state.” If anything, my intention was closer to the reverse: to shatter the myths of weakness and isolation, and see the antebellum United States for what it was—in Quigley’s words, “the most powerful slaveholding power… in the mid-nineteenth-century world.”

Finally, both Roberts and Clavin raise critical questions about southern secession. Given the South’s “primary commitment” to the power of the United States, Roberts wonders, why did southerners give in to the hubris of secession and Confederate independence? In 1861 their self-serving view of world politics, contra Hammond, savored more of romanticism than realpolitik: so what prompted the sudden swerve?

Roberts is probably right that the critical months of secession would merit more detailed attention than I gave them in This Vast Southern Empire. Part of the problem is that the book concentrates on the South’s national leadership in Washington: Davis, Stephens, R.M.T. Hunter, Judah Benjamin, John Slidell. While these men quickly assumed control of the new Confederacy, they were not generally the most decisive figures in the battle for secession, which unfolded at the state level. This, as much as anything else, contributed to what Roberts calls the “dual” quality of southern politics, all across secession winter. Alexander Stephens is a representative case: a cautious Unionist in December 1860, he was the leading tribune of Confederate power by March 1861.

Clavin’s critique offers an alternative explanation, arguing that slaveholders’ cool confidence had always been a put-on, unconvincing tough talk from “a paranoid people full of fear and insecurity.” Secession, in his view, was no more than a desperate bluff—the moment when a doomed ruling elite was forced to stake all they had on a last-chance power drive.

² Congressional Globe, 28 Cong., 2 Sess., 303-305 (18 February 1845); Congressional Globe, 28 Cong., 2 Sess., Appx. 132 (22 January 1845); Congressional Globe Appendix, 28th Cong., 2nd Sess., 122–28 (7 January 1845). See also Frederick Merk, Slavery and the Annexation of Texas (New York: Knopf, 1972), 139-147.
This interpretation of the master class has a distinguished heritage, running from Allan Nevins to Genovese and beyond, but I cannot accept it.\(^3\) Slavery in the Western Hemisphere, as Hammond notes, was at its world-historical peak in 1860. With their $3 billion in human property, and their palpable sense that the Atlantic world was moving closer to, not farther from, racialized systems of unfree labor, it is difficult to believe that slaveholders truly feared “slavery’s days were numbered at home.” What caused the swerve of 1861 was not the specter of another Haiti, but the triumph of an anti-slavery political party in national politics. Neither John Brown nor the slave rebellion scares of 1860 would have produced secession if Stephen Douglas had been elected president. The Republicans, on the other hand—as Weeks notes and James Oakes has recently demonstrated—meant to contain slavery in order to kill it altogether.\(^4\) Deprived of federal power in Washington, slaveholding elites faced a choice between a strictly defensive, sectional opposition within the Union, or a bold, independent career on the world stage. That they opted for the latter does not vindicate their judgment as practitioners of realpolitik, but it does testify to their enormous ideological self-confidence.

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