

## The Slave Owners' Foreign Policy

Essay and book review by [David S. Reynolds](#), published in *New York Review of Books*, [June 22, 2017 Issue](#)

**Reviewing:** *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy*, by Matthew Karp, Harvard University Press, Sept 2016, 360 pp

The U.S. Civil War was once commonly interpreted as a conflict between a progressive North, industrially strong and committed to a powerful central government, and a backward South that clung to states' rights and agrarianism in its effort to preserve slavery. In this reading, proposed most influentially by the late Eugene D. Genovese, the South was distanced from modern society and the world scene.

Recent historians increasingly have recognized the inadequacy of this explanation. As the producer of America's leading export, cotton, the South in the first half of the nineteenth century was a major participant in the global economy. Its rate of urbanization relative to population, while not as rapid as the North's, exceeded that of England, France, or the American Midwest. Politically, the South was dominant. Slave owners occupied the presidency for about three quarters of the nation's first sixty-four years. A slave owner, John Marshall, served as the chief justice of the Supreme Court for over three decades and was succeeded by another one, Roger Taney, who headed the Court for almost as long. For much of this time, southerners had a grip on the cabinet and lower government positions as well.

The expansion of slavery was one of the South's main goals. The immediate trigger of the Civil War was the election of Abraham Lincoln, whose aim of halting the westward spread of slavery led to the South's secession and the outbreak of war. Matthew Karp's illuminating book *This Vast Southern Empire* shows that the South was interested not only in gaining new slave territory but also in promoting slavery throughout the Western Hemisphere. Far from insular, proslavery leaders had a far-reaching awareness of the international status of human bondage, which they regarded as essential to progress and prosperity. Holding the reins of political power, slave owners largely determined American foreign policy from the 1830s through the 1850s. As Karp reveals, they were well positioned to use the resources of the federal government to push their agenda around the world.

This reliance on the national government, manifested in robust military spending and an aggressive policy abroad, was at odds with the states' rights position that southerners took on other issues. Then as now, politicians were at ease with inconsistencies as long as their goals were served. The South opportunistically appealed both to states' rights (as in its resistance to federal tampering with slavery) and to a strong national government (as in its support of the Fugitive Slave Act or the gag rule on the discussion of slavery in Congress). In foreign policy, Karp demonstrates, proslavery elites favored a powerful central government. The historian Henry Adams later recalled, "Whenever a question arose of extending or protecting slavery, the slave-holders became friends of centralized power, and used that dangerous weapon with a kind of frenzy."

The program of defending slavery internationally, Karp demonstrates, was driven by a growing concern over the encroachments of abolitionism abroad. In August 1833, Great Britain announced the abolition of slavery in its Caribbean colonies. While the emancipation of the British West Indies is widely recognized as a significant event in the history of abolition, no one has described its effect on U.S. international relations as fully or persuasively as Karp does. The liberation of some 800,000 blacks in the West Indies alarmed southern leaders. Alarm turned to outrage when British officials in Bermuda freed enslaved blacks on three American ships stranded or wrecked there in the 1830s and subsequently liberated slave rebels who had taken over the U.S. brig *Creole* in 1841.

Fearing that British-led abolitionism would spread to slaveholding powers like Brazil, Cuba, and the Republic of Texas, the administrations of John Tyler and James K. Polk strengthened the U.S. military. The Virginian Abel Parker Upshur, who served under Tyler as secretary of the navy and then as secretary of state, appealed to Congress for funds that he hoped would create a maritime force half the size of England's navy, the largest in the world. Upshur's successor in the State Department, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, continued the push for a mighty navy. Other government officials, almost all of them champions of slavery, spearheaded the establishment of a standing army and the modernization of ships and weapons.

This governmental muscle-flexing was widely seen as anticipating an international war over slavery. Georgia congressman Thomas Butler King, denouncing England for freeing its slaves in the West Indies, declared that "we might expect war—war to the knife—war with all her thunder." James Henry Hammond of South Carolina wanted to "send a strong squadron" to police the British navy. Abel Upshur considered war inevitable and said that the only question was "where and by whom shall these battles be fought"—whether by the navy at sea or by the army on land. The naval officer and engineer of southern forts William Henry Chase predicted "a great naval battle in the Gulf of Mexico or the Caribbean Sea" to combat "the policy of England and the abolitionists" who were dead set on emancipation in Cuba and the rest of "the slave islands of West Indies."

As Karp makes clear, such prophecies of war had strong elements of racial paranoia. Robert Monroe Harrison, the Virginia-born U.S. consul in Jamaica, feared that British forces in the Caribbean might send "upwards of 200,000 blacks" from the West Indies to invade the American South. Thomas Butler King called for stronger coastal defenses to ward off a possible effort by what he called "fleets of armed steamers, loaded with black troops from the West Indies, to annoy and plunder the country." The aging ex-president Andrew Jackson, observing his nation from his Tennessee plantation, warned that an alliance between England and the Republic of Texas could lead to an invasion of the American South by up to 30,000 troops. Such an invasion, he thought, would spur slave insurrections that would rage "all over the southern and western country."

The southerners, Karp notes, were just "scaring themselves"; their fears were "illusory—or consciously propagandistic." But the fears were strong, and they contributed to the war between the United States and Mexico, which lasted from 1846 to 1848. The Mexican War is customarily associated with the South's greed for new slave lands to the west and with the spirit of "manifest destiny" proclaimed by the Democratic editor John L. O'Sullivan in 1845. Without denying these and other influences, Karp emphasizes another dimension of the war: its alignment with a

foreign policy of solidifying slavery within the hemisphere. Texas, which became a state in 1845, “was above all a slaveholding republic in the Western Hemisphere” that

required U.S. support—and, if necessary, U.S. protection. Threatened by abolitionist forces from both Great Britain and Mexico, the Lone Star Republic represented a key arena in the larger battle over the future of slavery.

The Mexican War provoked ongoing disputes over the settlement of the vast territories won from Mexico, which stretched all the way to the Pacific. Would the territories go for slavery or freedom?

Tensions over the issue escalated during the 1850s. This decade is traditionally viewed as a time when the South became intransigent and revived its conservative traditions as northerners were increasingly attracted to reforms, such as abolitionism. Karp argues that, in fact, the South saw itself as ultra-modern and forward-looking. Slave countries like Brazil and Cuba, proslavery leaders held, were prospering while places where slavery had been abolished, such as Mexico and the West Indies, were faring poorly. Slavery, therefore, appeared to southerners to make excellent economic sense for the modern world. American champions of human bondage noted that even England, despite its official policy of abolition, exploited indigenous peoples in India, China, South Africa, and elsewhere. The necessity of coerced labor was also proved by the widespread use of other types of dark-skinned workers—whether “coolies,” “apprentices,” or “slaves”—to cultivate agricultural staples throughout the Western Hemisphere. The Americans insisted that, in comparison to the destructive imperialism of Great Britain and other nations, slavery in the U.S. was benign and exemplary.

The southern view, Karp reminds us, was bolstered by contemporary scientific ethnology, which identified “inferior” races destined to die off unless they had the protection and security offered by American-style slavery. The political essayist Louisa McCord, an outspoken defender of slavery, echoed the scientific consensus when she wrote in 1851, “God’s will formed the weaker race so that they dwindle and die out by contact with the stronger.... Slavery, then, or extermination, seems to be the fate of the dark races.” Southern masters were presented to the world as models of how to save black people from extinction. A writer for the southern magazine *De Bow’s Review* described the South’s “three hundred thousand masters” as an imperial army “standing guard over a nation of four million negroes, and absolutely preserving their lives from destruction.”

The Georgia agriculturalist Daniel Lee argued, “If civilized man has a right to subdue, tame, teach, and civilize wild men, [then] the plow, the hoe, and the whip are the best known means to accomplish such purposes.” These racial attitudes fed into the ethos behind the Confederate States of America, whose vice-president, Alexander Stephens, boasted in 1861 that the Confederacy was the first society founded on “the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition.”

Convinced that they were advancing a noble cause, many southerners serving in the U.S. government during the 1850s continued to advocate for a military buildup in response to what they regarded as a worldwide threat from abolitionism. Although the proslavery politicians did

not get everything they requested from Congress, by 1857 they had succeeded in nearly doubling the size of the naval fleet, quadrupling the number of guns on the ships, and increasing active troops in the army from 11,000 to nearly 16,000.

Karp points out ironies surrounding this use of federal power to bolster the proslavery cause. Many of the shallow-draft vessels produced as a result of proslavery pressure were put to effective use during the Civil War by the North in its naval blockade of southern ports.

There was irony too in the North's complicity in proslavery policies. Southern leaders gloated that the North, with all its moral posturing against slavery, built many of the ships used in the international slave trade. Henry A. Wise of Virginia declared that the Americans most involved in the slave trade were "all from North of Balt[imore]," and that even abolitionists sometimes participated, as in the case of a notorious ship that landed about six hundred slaves in Brazil and "was owned by a Quaker of Delaware who would not even eat slave sugar," or of another slave ship run by someone who was "the owner of an abolition newspaper in Bangor, Maine." There were many other commercial ties between the North and the South as well. As the Democratic editor Duff Green wrote, slavery "unites the interests of the several states, furnishes the basis of foreign commerce...[and] constitutes an element of their common prosperity."

One of Karp's contributions is to reveal ways in which the South was not isolated, either nationally or internationally. He shows that it appropriated the main structures of federal power. In this sense, through much of the era leading up to the Civil War, the South, effectively, was the United States, at least in its contacts with the rest of the world. As Karp writes:

For nearly the whole antebellum period, southern confidence in slavery was more often synonymous with confidence in the United States, whose government had done so much to nurture slave institutions throughout the hemisphere.

This plausible argument illustrates how fresh insights can emerge from the recent emphasis in historical and other studies on global perspectives and views that follow developments across hemispheres. The hemispheric approach also helps Karp explain certain anomalies in the proslavery position. For instance, previous historians have wondered why such fervent slavery promoters as John Calhoun and Henry Wise at times denounced the international slave trade, which was being carried on by nations like Brazil and Cuba. Karp's answer: some proslavery leaders wanted slavery to be established in the Western Hemisphere as a permanent, self-regenerating institution, not one that had to be fed constantly by Africa. They and other southerners were convinced that this could happen. As South Carolina senator James Chesnut declared, slavery "is not a dead body, but one full of life, vigor, and pliability; capable of self-creating power and preservation."

One difficulty with emphasizing the South's position within the hemisphere is that doing so minimizes the profound sectional differences, real or perceived, that led to the Civil War. Karp is right in saying that some northerners participated in or profited from slavery and that the South sought to align its goals with national policy. But it is important to note that passionate antislavery fervor gathered in the North around some of the same international activities that aroused proslavery sentiment in the South.

Take a centerpiece of Karp's book: the emancipation of the British West Indies. This was met with hostility in the South but also intense joy in the North. William Lloyd Garrison declared that "the abolition of West India slavery was, perhaps, the most remarkable, certainly the most affecting event in the history of human emancipation." Ralph Waldo Emerson went further, calling abolition in the West Indies "an event singular in the history of civilization." For over three decades after 1833, American antislavery groups celebrated West Indies Emancipation Day on August 1—so often, in fact, that the reformer Samuel May could assert in 1865 that the day had been honored in the North "more uniformly and generally than in England itself."

If there was something like unity in the national government on foreign policy, there were bitter cultural divisions between the North and the South. Extensive analysis of cultural differences is frequently missing from political or economic histories such as Karp's that seek to analyze events in a global perspective. Although Mark Twain exaggerated when he remarked that the Civil War was caused by "the Sir Walter [Scott] disease" that infected the South, he had a point. The South's dedication to ideals then associated with Walter Scott's immensely popular novels—chivalry, honor, and the like—shaped its identity as much as the transatlantic concerns about race that Karp discusses. If the South championed slavery before the world, as Karp shows us, it also built a euphemistic defense of its society by fabricating cultural myths about its alleged superiority to the North, which it represented as fanatical, base, and full of anarchic tendencies.

The perceived cultural divide was so great that some leading southerners said that the war was not about slavery but about radically different peoples. A southern correspondent for the *New York Herald*, the nation's most widely read newspaper, put it this way: "The people of the North and those of the South are distinct and separate. They think differently; they spring from a different stock; they are different every way; they cannot coalesce." Mississippian J. Quitman Moore wrote in *De Bow's Review*, "No civil strife is this;...but a war of alien races, distinct nationalities, and opposite, hostile and eternally antagonistic Governments." A Tennessee-born army officer wrote that "the bed rock cause of our political wrangling and disputations" was a "dissimilarity of human nature" between northerners and southerners.

Such extreme statements of difference reflected the South's evasion of the hard facts of slavery just as surely as did its claims to foreign nations that it had an exemplary history of slaveholding. Cultural myths and political lies were part of the South's effort to take the moral high road. Since Karp's goal is to describe and analyze the claims many southern statesmen made, it's understandable that he is sparing in his account of the harsh realities of slavery—the physical suffering and shattered families that we find in the slave narratives and abolitionist literature of the period. One of the few times Karp gives voice to an African-American in his book speaks to the heartless complacency of southern slaveholding. He quotes Frederick Douglass as remarking on "the cool and thoughtful conclusions of the leading minds of the slaveholding States. They let us into the sources of Southern repose, the tranquility of tyrants."

Douglass's words were apt. The frigid callousness engendered by the slave system was appalling. Herein lies a real advantage in Karp's transnational approach. By taking a global perspective, Karp successfully reenacts the removed attitude of the slaveholders themselves. He cites a number of proslavery commentators who boasted of the sleek efficiency of slavery. One spoke of it as "a well-finished piece of machinery"; another held that it made the worker a

“better wealth machine”; even an antislavery British politician compared it to “a steam-engine,” far more powerful than the “race horse” of emancipated labor.

Reading *This Vast Southern Empire* is like riding a huge vehicle that moves inexorably over plains filled with wretched, chained human beings. Blue skies are above, and we are perched so high that we are shielded from the sights and sounds of slavery—the lacerated backs and cropped ears, the sweat and blood, the groaning and the sorrowful songs.

Shielded but, perhaps, all the more aware of the misery than we would otherwise be. One thinks of the minimalist way Thoreau treats the Middle Passage in his classic antislavery speech “A Plea for Captain John Brown”: “The slave-ship is on her way, crowded with its dying victim.... What is that that I hear cast overboard? The bodies of the dead that have found deliverance. That is the way we are ‘diffusing’ humanity, and its sentiments with it.” Thoreau’s ship is a synecdoche for slavery—the system of cruelty cloaked by benevolence that is presented in Karp’s suggestive book.

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