

This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders At The Helm Of American Foreign Policy

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Review

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Karp, Matthew *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy*. Harvard University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780674737259

An Empire Uncovered

This Vast Southern Empire is a notable book about an important, albeit largely unexplored topic. Professor Matthew Karp investigates both the political role and the strategic outlook of southern cabinet officers and congressional leaders on American foreign and military policy between 1840 and the Civil War. He wants to understand not only the influence of southerners in those two areas but also the relationship between their stance in that sphere with theirs in purely domestic matters. Professor Karp bases his book on wide-ranging research in an impressive variety of primary materials. Joining that base with an exceptional command of secondary sources gives his book distinct authority.

Not surprisingly, he discovers slavery, its protection and defense, as the chief motive for the southerners. He makes clear that he is dealing with men he defines as "the southern elite," those who represented the slave states in the highest levels of both the executive and legislative branches of the federal government. His key actors includes familiar names like Jefferson Davis, United States senator from Mississippi and secretary of war for Franklin Pierce and those much less well known like James Dobbin, United States congressman from North Carolina and secretary of the navy also in Pierce's cabinet. I certainly have no quarrel with that focus, for those are precisely the people who influenced and actually made decisions governing American foreign and military policy from the administrations of John Tyler through James Buchanan. Karp argues persuasively that during those decades American policy in those two critical areas equaled southern policy. While that conclusion will surprise few historians, his discussion of motive and intent offers vigorously fresh insights.

In Karp's view, these southern leaders were sophisticated internationalists, who saw their particular interest, slavery, in an international context. For them the security of slavery in the states had two dimensions. First, the United States must have a military that could protect our shores against any potential foreign enemy. And they especially wanted a strong navy so that if possible any armed clash if one occurred would take place at sea, not in the midst of their slave society. Second, they believed the safety of slavery was bound to the health of other places in the hemisphere where unfree labor dominated, chiefly Brazil and Cuba. Always they riveted attention on Great Britain, the greatest naval power. On the defensive in the 1840s, they feared a Great Britain that had emancipated slaves in her West Indian colonies might mount or assist some kind of abolition crusade against their own slavery. Later, in the 1850s, more confident they wanted to insure that no one interfered with Brazil or particularly Cuba, the colony of a weak Spain.

These men strove for both quantitative and qualitative advance in the American army and navy. They pressed for more men and more ships. While not getting all they wished, they did manage to increase substantially the size of both branches. In addition, they obtained much up-to-date technology, from steam-powered ships for the navy to significant upgrades of large and small arms for the army. By 1860 both sea and land forces had taken giant strides toward modernization.

Conscious that they were constructing a central government with considerable power, these men, according to Karp, did not permit any states-rights theories to hold them back. As Karp convincingly depicts them, they saw themselves making policy for a great power, one whose strength was only increasing, and would do so for the foreseeable future. The future occupies a central place in Karp's narrative. His confident southern elite believed that their slave-based agricultural economy with cotton as its bellwether stood in the forefront of economic development and prosperity not only in their country but in the Atlantic and European world, a confidence they would take with them when they established the Confederate States. Karp envisions these southerners and the socioeconomic environment they both defended and contemplated as preface to the European and even American empires of the late nineteenth century based on compulsory non-white labor.

Karp sides with current scholars who see the southern economy of the 1850s as prosperous and growing wealthier. He goes further, however, for he insists

that based on what they could observe around them southerners had every reason for confidence. The Brazilian and Cuban economies, both slave based, were booming. Even Great Britain was turning to various forms of unfree or partially free labor in her colonies.

Of course, as Karp recognizes, the future turned out quite differently. Free labor and industrialization, not slave labor and agricultural commodities, captured that future. Still, that fact, he maintains, does not gainsay the southerners' outlook in their time.

Professor Karp also, correctly in my opinion, presents these southern architects of American policy as basically conservative men, who rejected adventurism, or what contemporaries termed filibustering. They spurned the filibusters who engaged in extra-legal, foolhardy attempts to expand American control, with slavery, to places like Cuba and Nicaragua. In contrast, they desired the military they had built to back diplomacy aimed at guaranteeing their slave institution in their own country. And they never separated the two. They would consider military confrontation only when they perceived their vital interests at stake.

Karp's analysis adds another element to the politics of secession. Aware of the force now available in the federal government, these southerners saw their entire edifice endangered with the advent of the Republican party. With anti-South, antislavery Republicans controlling the executive branch, the southerners feared they could no longer count on the power of the United States to guard their interests at home or anywhere else. Karp does not claim that the potential danger in this aspect of Republican ascendancy caused secession, but he leaves little doubt that his elite southerners were concerned about losing their preeminence. Thus, he justifiably argues that it must be considered in explaining why men like Davis and his colleagues in the southern leadership quickly turned to secession when serious compromise with Republicans proved impossible.

Of course, all ended in an immense irony for the southerners. The military buildup they had so diligently worked for helped make the United States such a formidable foe when Abraham Lincoln employed it against them.

I trust this review makes clear that Professor Karp merits accolades for *This Vast Southern Empire*.

William J. Cooper is Boyd Professor Emeritus at Louisiana State University. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including Jefferson Davis, American (2000), Jefferson Davis and the Civil War Era(2008), and We Have the War Upon Us: The Onset of the Civil War, November, 1860 – April 1861 (2012). Forthcoming from W.W. Norton is his book on John Quincy Adams.