

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

Matthew Karp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Karp, Matthew (2017) "Cwbr Author Interview: This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders At The Helm Of American Foreign Policy," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.1.05

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss1/31>

Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THIS VAST SOUTHERN EMPIRE: SLAVEHOLDERS AT THE HELM OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Karp, Matthew

Winter 2017

Interview with Matthew Karp, author of *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* Interviewed by Tom Barber

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is happy to speak with Matthew Karp, Assistant Professor of History at Princeton University. Today we get to discuss his new book *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy*.

Matthew Karp (MK): Hi, thanks for interviewing me. I'm happy to be here.

CWBR: Your book focuses heavily on the 1830s, 40s, and 50s. Why did U.S. slaveholders need a foreign policy in the three decades before the Civil War? What was it about this period that placed slaveholding elites at the center of U.S. foreign policy?

MK: It's an interesting question. I think in some ways it's not a distinctive period in terms of slaveholders actually being in power or managing U.S. foreign relations. If you think about the period before, slaveholders predominated as presidents and exercised proportionate control over all sorts of branches of governments including foreign relations. What is different for me and why I concentrate on this period before the Civil War is a couple things, first, internationally the abolition of slavery in the British West-Indies in 1833 is the turning point that gets the boat going. I think that really changes the hemispheric/global balance of power between freedom and slavery. When you have the world's largest naval and economic power that has gone from being a slave holding power up until 1833 to effectively antislavery. And that puts slave

property in the United States in jeopardy in an international/geopolitical way that it hadn't been. So that's the international context that made slaveholders, and maybe we can talk more about this, but makes slaveholders who had been in power before more attentive to the international balance of power between slaveholding societies and antislavery societies. I also think the development of a domestic pro-slavery ideology which evolves at home and really reaches a height in the 1840s and 50s separates that period from the earlier periods. It's not necessarily that slaveholders weren't in power in the era of Jefferson or Madison, but these guys weren't committed to an ideological, defense of slavery, even ideological exuberance about slavery, that I think characterizes the period right before the Civil War.

CWBR: You talk a lot about this pro-slavery hemisphere in the Americas, so why did the global health of slavery prove so critical for its domestic health in the United States?

MK: That's sort of the way slaveholders started to think about it after Britain began the process of emancipation in 1833. These guys, Southern elites and political figures, we tend to think of them sometimes as provincial and inward looking, especially the Antebellum generation before the Civil War. In some ways that reflects the legacy of their defeat in the war and the post war South; which was a much more inward looking place in terms of its politics. It had few claims on national power and was mostly focused on preserving its local power or its regional power. But before the Civil War these slaveholders, from Andrew Jackson to Jefferson Davis, the generation that I study, they were at the helm of the United States national government. So their view of slavery, like their view of pretty much everything, operated with a presumption that the power and national vista of the United States either geopolitically or ideologically was under their command. Or at least they would have decisive roles in directing US foreign policies. So when Britain abolishes slavery or slavery comes under threat in Cuba, Texas or Brazil, it's not just that slaveholders felt allegiance to other slaveholding classes outside of the United States, they felt able through their influence and power within the American state, within the national government to contest that and defend slavery internationally. So it's not just about their desire, but also their capacity being so powerfully placed within the federal government.

CWBR: You mentioned the popular image of slaveholders not really meeting the reality of what they're actually thinking about in Antebellum

America and in the book you call slaveholding elites in the United States cosmopolitans so can you go into that? What do you mean by you have these slaveholders that are cosmopolitan? What are their ideas? Where are they getting them from? And what makes them cosmopolitan?

MK: There are a number of ways, on one level somebody like the story of Michael O'Brien is written as a two volume, thousand-page history on intellectual life in the Antebellum South focusing on novelist like William Gilmore Sims or a pro-slavery, legal theorists like Abel Upshur or Nathaniel Beverly Tucker. And a lot of the same characters reoccur in my book and yeah they read European thinkers from the Enlightenment and the early modern classics from Lock to Voltaire. I think what separates the way that I handle this cosmopolitanism in the book is that these guys were also wielding political power. It's not just that the figures that I've named for instance like Abel Upshur could speak foreign languages, and would cite an international lawyer like Grotius, in a treatise on the Constitution, but that he was also Secretary of State who organized the early critical stages of the annexation of Texas. So there is a marriage between an intellectual system that I think intellectual historians of the South have started to dig up that these guys weren't illiterate, the elite upper stratum in any case. Where I go with it is that they had real political power. And so, in the 1850s especially, that means they're looking abroad actively at current events and world politics and even some intellectual trends like the rise of racial science in Europe and in the North and seeing these international intellectual currents as vindication for their own slave system.

CWBR: Right! You have a great part in the book where you talk about how slaveholders, and this slaveholding ideology in the United States, didn't see itself as antithetical to the modern world. If you could explain this phrase that I thought was both great but unnerving. You call one particular character a pro-slavery futurist. Could you talk about that and this nature of pro-slavery futurism?

MK: A lot of these guys had visions of slavery's future. I think I might have been talking about James D.B. De Bow, editor of *Debow's Review*, which was the largest and most influential periodical in the South, and he routinely includes statistical charts that would project the slave population into 1900. At one point I think they had an estimate of X million amount of slaves in 1950. There was certainly enormous confidence in the future not just existence of slavery but its growth and its ongoing dynamism. And I think that's connected to the last

question. I think it is informed by this belief, that if you think about the 19th century world, even though antislavery politics has been gaining power--especially in the north with the rise of the Republican Party and even in Europe to a certain extent after British abolition and with some continental European emancipations in the wake of the 1848 Revolutions. Politics was moving in an antislavery direction but a lot of the intellectual vanguard self-identified by the South is moving toward the racial science that would dominate not really southern circles but North American and European universities for the next 50-75 years. This was just beginning in the 1850s. Southerners like Alexander Stevens, Vice President of the Confederacy, really leapt on this and cited figures like the French thinkers Gobineau or Harvard anthropologist Louis Agassiz Harvard anthropologist etc. as unbiased. These guys weren't defenders of slavery, these northerners and Europeans, but they were committed to racial inequality and they believe that it had a scientific warrant. Slaveholding politicians really pounced on that and it infused them with confidence that as much as antislavery politics had some momentum, ultimately there was a countercurrent. George Fitzhugh, the Virginian intellectual, described it as a countercurrent, that in intellectual life and in the deeper understanding of human cultures and biological capacities that was evolving in this period was pointing towards a form of racial inequality and even hierarchy and domination that characterized the slave system and would sustain it into the future. And in some creepy senses that I find disturbing, they're right in that racial science does flourish and grow long after the destruction of slavery and if slavery hadn't been destroyed in the course of this war, I think it is possible to imagine an ideological congruence between slavery and more fully developed racial sciences of late 19th and early 20th centuries, which is disturbing to contemplate.

CWBR: Since you've talked about the intellectual motivations and what's going on with slaveholders can you talk about geographically what did this vast empire look like and what tools did these southerners in power in the U.S. national government use to fortify their control of U.S. foreign policy and expand it?

MK: That's a good observation that the book really has two sides. Sometimes I think about it that way, in that one chunk of it or two ways of thinking about slaveholders in power, the first is the more intellectual ideological view of situations of slavery's place in an evolving and contested 19th century world politics and the second scene which maybe gets even more space in the

book is actually what they were doing and not just their ideas, but their practices. One thing that I'll talk about now is the way that slaveholders were committed to the peace time reform of expansion of the U.S. Military and the U.S. Navy that I think informed by an international and ideological calculus in which led them to see the United States as the hemispheric chief defender of slave property and slave systems. That intellectual calculus, or ideological calculus, helped fortify southern belief in strengthening U.S. Military power. Even though to some extent it clashed with a traditional commitment to states' rights or a weaker federal government that characterized the politics of someone like John C. Calhoun who was very wary of an empowered national government in domestic affairs, but when it came to foreign policy, and especially the foreign policy of slavery, was a champion of naval expansion. Abel Upshur who I mentioned earlier, a constitutional theorist who ends up as Secretary of the Navy in the early 1840s proposes and partially achieves a massive and unprecedented naval expansion and reorganization intended in his mind and in the mind of people like Calhoun to contest British power on the American Coast, Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. This was to help protect potentially vulnerable slaveholding society in Cuba and also certainly Texas. So those are basically the two main geopolitical themes, expansion and reform of U.S. military and the navy. Jefferson Davis does this similar thing to the US army in the 1850s. And also diplomatic links and connections and shared geopolitical objectives with the other major slaveholding societies in the hemisphere which really are Brazil, Cuba and the republic of Texas.

CWBR: So what you're saying is basically by the mid-19th century the world seems on a tipping point between these two ideologies. Between free labor, that is represented in and upheld by Britain, an imperial abolition as you call it and a slaveholding, bounded regime of labor. Could you talk a little bit about how slaveholders in the United States looked at colonialism throughout Europe? And as it begins to develop in the 40s and 50s, how did they integrate Europe becoming more colonial especially Britain?

MK: Yeah that's another parallel with their excitement about the direction of this racist science. Their more ambivalent about this, but ultimately I think they see it as a phenomenon that will strengthen their view of culture and politics and society, which is the advance of European imperialism in Africa, Asia, and all around the world. Southerners are often very critical of the abuses of British imperial power, in particular. Yet at the same time someone like Edmund Ruffin who's pro-slavery and really skeptical of antislavery Great Britain still cheers on

the British suppression of the Indian mutiny of 1857 which is the most notable anti-imperial struggle of this period. He's very excited about it because he thinks ultimately the interest of civilization require that this master race or the white race be dominate. That means suppressing anti colonial resistance. I think the way that they conceive of European Imperialism is very much in terms of linked ideas of race and coerced labor. This informs their attitude towards what people in the period referred to as coolie labor. The importation of Asian apprentice workers to serve on sugar plantations and work on railroads in the United States. Southerners are really attuned to the abuses of the system in the way that it is unlike their paternalistic system of slavery and yet at the same time they interpret the European powers embrace of "coolie labor" as an admission that free labor, unbounded, non-coercive wage labor is doomed in competition with coerced labor. Especially when it comes to producing really critical, tropical staples or doing jobs that free labor just doesn't do as well (cotton, sugar, tobacco). All over the world there is a tropical agriculture that's necessary to sustain and to fuel the Industrial Revolution. They don't believe free labor can accomplish that, especially white free labor. And it's absolutely necessary as they fear the Europeans are beginning to become aware of this with their use of bonded coercive, racially organized labor in a way that parallels slavery and I think they think ultimately we'll revert to slavery or something indistinguishable to slavery.

CWBR: A couple of questions, so how do you explain, because in the book you have this great part about how many of these slaveholders even though they were against free labor they were very much for free trade, how did this work? How did they reconcile being free trade and against free labor, why weren't those synonymous?

MK: That's a confusion that sometimes crops into historical thinking about the 19th century because if you think about it, I leased it in British terms. People like Richard Cobden or John Bright are great advocates of free trade and opposition to aristocratic protectionism and corn laws and so on and they are also great champions of free labor. Those things naturally in an emerging capitalist economy might seem to go together. But yes, in fact southerners prove very capable of dividing the two and arguing that the demands of this emerging global capitalistic economy did insist on free trade. As they saw it the 19th century a lot of Britain had successfully persuaded and cajoled a lot of other European countries, South American countries, and Asian countries to drop slave protections and tariffs and other restrictions really in the service of a British dominated world economy that served Britain above all other places.

Southerners were fine with that because they believe the free intercourse of goods across borders ultimately will A) enrich a vast majority of southern cotton planters and B) ideologically it was compatible with their sense of a world development. But that did not mean that labor should be free. It's really fascinating. You can say some things about the way southerners understood this distinction and its implications for the insert of capitalism probably and its many permutations because while they embrace this international trade element of the picture they utterly rejected the idea that laborers/workers should be guaranteed any rights or freedoms in producing goods. In fact they understood the production of agricultural staples just simply required coercion. As vidence of that they pointed to the quote on quote failure of emancipation in the British West Indies and other emancipated West Caribbean places where exports really dropped after the emancipation of slaves because former slaves didn't want to work for miserable wages on a sugar plantation when they could cultivate a wider range of goods on their own. Southerners said well the world needs these goods and free labor market won't provide them so in the interest of free trade the good labor needs to be coerced. This is the result they arrived at.

CWBR: Our typical narrative of going to Civil War in the beginning of the American Civil War usually begins with the Crisis of the 1850s or that's where many historians point to and I'm talking here about Kansas-Nebraska, Bleeding Kansas, fugitive slave law, and the Compromise of 1850. Now how did the notion, and desire for, hemispheric slavery exacerbate the sectional crises of the 1850s and take us to the Civil War, more specifically the Compromise?

MK: The book doesn't really go into the war itself but I do have a chapter on succession and certainly the politics of the 1850s play a really important role in the second half of the book. I think, yeah domestic narrative is really critical. I certainly wouldn't want to be seen as arguing that really it was fundamentally about foreign policy, and that the extension of slavery into the territories was very well just as important because I still think that is the most important issue in the rise of the Republican Party and the ultimate secession. That still leaves us with a problem. The problem with succession, which can be over explained because it ends up being such a catastrophic decision for the slaveholders the ruin, the destruction of their independent nation, the ruin of their social system, their demotion from national power which last about one hundred years. It's so catastrophic and saw so clearly foreseen to have been catastrophic by a lot of people at the time. So why did they do it? There are a lot of explanations to that but the book argues that there were both push and pull factors that were really

critical in fundamentally involved foreign policy. They were pushed out of the Union, when we think about the long history of slaveholder's domination of not just the presidency and Supreme Court but also the offices in the executive branch devoted to foreign affairs. When we think about how the new Republican administration in the 1860s just wipes out the entire apparatus of this pro-slavery state that they had built, it deepens our sense of how rapidly they lose a key plank of their power, and how terrified they are of the prospect of the Republicans, not just potentially undermining slavery where it exist or restricting it from expansion, but by turning this whole outward apparatus of the state against slavery all over the world and further constricting southern slaveholders in the Union. What I think is even more important than that is the pull factor, this sort of lore of an independent nation. Even though these guys were fundamentally, the book argues nationalist rather than sectionalist. Once they lose any stake in the national government they're confident, confident about the future of slavery and that slavery is ideologically congruent and compatible with the directions of world history as we talked about science, colonialism, the global market place all mean that slavery has a seat at the table. And slavery as an effect will be protected by these global trends and the slaveholding republic also will. I think what ultimately proves to be a really bad miscalculation geopolitically in terms of they don't secure European assistance, their slave society isn't flexible and strong enough to withstand 4 years of crippling war. But I think that confidence can only be understood in its international dimensions. Since you mentioned it, the key moment in the negotiations before the South ultimately secedes is a debate about the extended line between freedom and slavery at 36' 30 all the way across the west free slaves up north, slave states in the south. Southerners are willing to accept this because it would of been ultimately a continuation of the antebellum republic. Republicans would of been the ones who would have to overhaul the planks of their entire platform to accept it. Where southerners ultimately bail is when Republicans reject the whole Compromise but the key point of contention all territory here after required potential new slave territories in the Caribbean and in Latin America. Southerners even if they aren't keen on acquiring those territories right away, and many are, but even the ones that aren't because a lot of the Virginians weren't keen on that they still saw the possibility of future slave expansion as something that was fundamental to their power and to sort of accept the ultimate restriction of that forever is really accepting slavery and slaveholders as occupying a secondary place in the republic. Which is not where it had been the previous 80 years and not something they were willing to do. They really did need to rule or

risk ruin and that's the decision they made in '61.

CWBR: James Oakes said that they saw the “Cordon of Freedom” wrapping around them to maintain the ability to expand even if they didn't want it initially.

MK: Right exactly, I think we can absolutely think about that cordon in international terms too. Not just, would they get Cuba but what Oakes talked about in terms of what Lincoln does during the 1860s. In terms of outlawing slavery in the forts and SC and opening the relations with Haiti all that kind of foreign policy dimension too that kind of cordon of freedom politics is something slaveholders was very aware of in '60/'61 and saw as essentially this whole powerful state they built was being turned against them.

CWBR: I appreciate you taking the time to chat with us about your most recent work: *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy*.

MK: Thank you for having me.