

Real Causes

by Clyde Wilson

Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War

by Mark Egnal

New York: Hill & Wang; 416 pp., \$30.00



Ask any trendy student of history today and he will tell you that, without question, the cause of the great American bloodletting of 1861- 65 was slavery. Slavery and nothing but slavery. The unstated and usually unconscious assumption is that only people warped by a vicious institution could possibly fight against being part of "the greatest nation on earth." This is an older corollary of the present national dictum that everybody in the world really wants to be an American if they could only be cured of delusions and bad motives – by aerial bombardment, if necessary.

There is an even deeper and less conscious assumption here: malicious, unprovoked hatred of Southern people that is endemic in many American circles. Thus, according to the wisdom of current "scholars," no credit is to be given to anything that Southerners might say about their own reasons and motives. They are all merely repeating "Lost Cause myths" to cover up their evil deeds. (Of course, no one points out that "Father Abraham," the "Glorious Union," and "dying to make men free" might partake of some myth-making, too.)

Set aside that the question of causation in history is a complex one, to say the least. Still, it is true that historians of other generations, of vastly greater breadth of learning than most of today's, ascribed other "causes" to the most critical event in American history: a clash of economic interests and cultures, blundering politicians, irresponsible agitators. There is a bit of sleight of hand along with today's fashionable assumptions. Even if slavery may have in some simplistic and abstract sense "caused" the secession of the first seven Southern states, that does not establish that it "caused" the war. The war was caused by the determination of Lincoln and his party to conquer the Southern states and destroy their legal governments. Caused, one might say, by Northern nationalism -- nationalism being a combination of romantic identification with a centralized state and interest in a unitary economic market. The war, after all, consisted of the invasion and conquest of the South by the U.S. government --a very simple fact that most Americans, it would seem, are unable to process, along with the plain fact that Northern soldiers did not make war for the purpose of freeing black people.

One of Lincoln's many deceptions was the claim that the Founding Fathers had intended to abolish slavery but had not quite got around to it. Thus the Southerners of his time were rebelling against the true founding by insisting on noninterference, while he and his party were upholding the settled understanding of the founders. James McPherson, perhaps the "leading" historian of today in regard to the Great Unpleasantness and no Southern apologist, along with many others points out that it was the North that had changed by 1860, while the South had remained attached to the original concept of the Union. Now one may be glad, as McPherson is, that the North changed and triumphed with a new version of America, but to deny which side was revolutionary is simply dishonest. Historians have devoted vast attention to the South, feeling it was necessary to explain where the South went wrong and find the source of the perversion that led it to a doomed attempt to escape the greatest country on earth. For, after all, "American" is the norm of the universe, and any divergence from it is a pathology. But if it was the North that changed, ought not our primary focus in understanding American history to be on how and why the North changed during the pre-war period?

I pointed out in these pages 20 years ago or more that Northern history was the future cutting edge of American historical study. A large number of solid works have since proved that my prediction had some merit: Susan- Mary Grant, *North Over South*; Harlow W Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism*; Richard F. Bense, *Yankee Leviathan*; Anne Farrow et al., *Complicity*; Richard H. Abbott, *Cotton and Capital*; Leonard P. Curry, *Blueprint for Modern America*; two excellent books on Lincoln by William Marvel; and others. *Clash of Extremes* may be counted among the works on The War that pay serious attention to the North. Writes Egnal:

"In sum, the current emphasis on slavery as the cause of the Civil War is fraught with problems. It does not clarify the sequence of events, the divisions within the sections, or the policies and actions of the Republican Party. It is these problems that a new interpretation must address."

The author does not neglect the sins of the South, real and alleged, but his most original contribution is his description of a truly critical new development of the late antebellum period, which he calls "the Lake Economy." The Midwest was first settled by Southerners farming the north side of the Ohio Valley. In the late antebellum period, the Upper Midwest was settled by New Englanders and Europeans who developed a new economic regime along with a militant agenda of their own self-interest and vision of the national future. It was this culture that Lincoln and his party represented and out of which, by military conquest, they created a new America that superseded the old Union of the fathers and put us on the course that we follow today. It was certainly American, but it was a new version that essentially repudiated the founding.

Clyde Wilson is a former professor of history. He is being rehabilitated and is recovering nicely, thank you.