

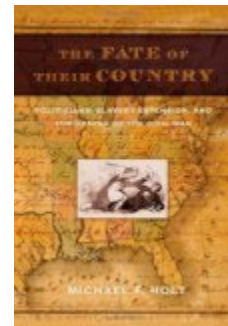
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael F. Holt. *The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2005. xiv + 168 pp. \$12.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-4439-9.

Reviewed by Graham Peck (Department of History and Political Science, Saint Xavier University)

Published on H-CivWar (January, 2007)



The Blundering Generation Revisited

Michael F. Holt needs no introduction to historians of the United States. He has been the scholar probably most responsible for the emergence of what some critics call a neo-revisionist interpretation of the origins of the Civil War. The historians who write in this vein echo a central theme of the work of revisionist historians Avery Crandall and J. G. Randall: they emphasize the degree to which the Civil War could have and perhaps should have been averted. Vigorously defending this position, Holt has long criticized historians who contend “that sectional conflict over slavery and slavery extension caused the Civil War.”[1] Instead, he has argued in a series of influential books and articles that contingent political factors played the predominant role in stimulating disunion.

Holt’s latest book, retracing much the same ground in greatly abbreviated fashion, does not break from the mold. “To locate the most direct causes of the American Civil War,” he contends in the preface, “one must look at the actions of governmental officeholders in the decades before that horrific conflict” (p. xiii). His purpose, therefore, in writing *The Fate of Their Country* was not to “recant” his prior interpretations, but rather to attract new, non-specialist readers (p. xiii). If so, the book already rates as a magnificent success. It comes in at a breezy 127 pages, and also includes a 30-page appendix of 8 valuable primary source political documents (7 excerpted), ranging from Lewis Cass’ 1847 “Nicholson letter” to William Seward’s “Irrepressible Conflict” speech in October 1858. In conjunction with the primary source documents, Holt’s brevity makes the book ideal

for course adoption, and moreover will be no small relief to those who have read his small-print, 1,248-page magnum opus on the American Whig Party. One can only imagine the gratitude of his editors.

The book is structured very simply, with an opening chapter titled “Pandora’s Box,” and three subsequent chapters titled “The Wilmot Proviso,” “The Compromise of 1850,” and “The Kansas-Nebraska Act.” The book’s structure, length, and subject of study are reminiscent of Don E. Fehrenbacher’s *The South and Three Sectional Crises* (1980), although Holt provides a stronger historical narrative, linking his chapters together and presents an altogether contrasting argument. Whereas Fehrenbacher emphasized the long-standing resistance of Southerners to antislavery politics and hence the core problem of slavery in antebellum politics, including secession, Holt contends that political decisions made from 1846 to 1858 played a critical role in intensifying sectional hostility prior to secession and the Civil War. The “long-accumulated mistrust, fear, and loathing” that led Southerners and Northerners to massive bloodletting sprang neither from “whole cloth,” nor were they “simply products of the undeniable differences between the social systems of the North and the South and the contrasting value systems those different societies spawned.” Rather, Holt maintains, those hatreds “had intensified” in response to politicians’ actions on slavery-related issues (p. 126).

Holt’s argument is notably similar to Craven and Randall in two respects. First, he observes that “attempts

to resolve the secession crisis foundered on the question of slavery's future expansion into southwestern territories, where it did not exist, rather than on its guaranteed perpetuity in the southern states, where it already did" (p. 4). By this logic, the Civil War was precipitated by an abstraction rather than by a tangible problem. Although he does not explicitly say so, one cannot help feeling that he does not consider this largely abstract and apparently "intractable" issue as sufficient justification for a great Civil War (p. 4). Hence his criticism of politicians who broached the issue of slavery's extension into the West; it was they who opened the Pandora's Box.

Holt's censuring of the reckless politicians who repeatedly brought abstract arguments about slavery's expansion into public debate is the second way in which his work echoes the revisionists. He perhaps could forgive the politicians had their actions followed from constituent demands, but he believes that all too frequently the politicians were just working the angles. As he put it, party politicians often made "shortsighted calculations of partisan advantage" rather than considering the broader national interest, a problem that was especially pronounced in regards to slavery extension (p. 9). Undeniably, the consequences of public debate over slavery were portentous.

For this reason, probably the single greatest villain in Holt's story is President James K. Polk, an unrepentant nationalist and expansionist. According to Holt, Polk unscrupulously circumvented northern Democrats' opposition to proslavery aspects of the joint resolution that authorized the annexation of Texas in 1845. Having acquired the votes of northern Democratic senators for the resolution by promising that he would renegotiate the terms of annexation after its passage, he promptly broke his word. To make matters worse, he then unilaterally endorsed Texas's inflated claims to Mexican territory and sent U.S. troops into the disputed territory in order to provoke Mexico into a war. After Mexican troops attacked the invading Americans, Polk deliberately deceived Congress and the public by claiming that Mexico had precipitated war by shedding American blood on American soil. It was a bravura performance from the standpoint of unrestrained national expansion, yielding a bountiful crop of approximately half of Mexico, but Holt is utterly condemnatory. Polk "used his power as commander in chief to deploy troops to pursue his personal agenda," never seeking "the prior approval of Congress." In the process he created a "nightmare" for northern Democrats like New York's Martin Van Buren, beginning a war that northern Whigs "could 'charge with

plausibility if not truth' that Democrats 'waged for the extension of slavery'" (p. 18). In the end, the nightmare would be a national one, not merely a northern Democratic one, because there was no easy way for politicians to resolve the slavery extension problem once the United States had acquired vast tracts of Mexican land. Hence, from Holt's perspective, this was a selfish, mendacious, and breathtakingly foolhardy beginning to what would become a remorseless sectional struggle over slavery's expansion.

In like manner Holt is critical of many other politicians or political groups whose actions contributed to sectional strife over slavery extension. For instance, in his chapter on the Wilmot Proviso, he observes that the 1848 effort of Free Soilers to oppose slavery's expansion, "regardless of attempts to settle that issue, is one reason why that vexatious and increasingly dangerous question defied permanent settlement" (p. 44). Meanwhile, in his chapter on the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he criticizes New York's Hardshell Hunker Democrats for exploiting the slavery extension issue in order to punish intra-party rivals. The Hards demanded that all Democratic Party appointees seeking confirmation by the Senate in 1854 acknowledge that the popular sovereignty provisions of the Compromise of 1850 "applied to all federal territories" and not just to land taken from Mexico. Appointees who did not endorse this novel, proslavery reading of the 1850 compromise measures would be denied confirmation and replaced by trusty Hards (p. 98). Holt is equally critical of the F Street Mess, a handful of powerful southern senators who refused to support the organization of Nebraska Territory unless Congress explicitly repealed the antislavery provisions of the Missouri Compromise. Their obduracy doubtless influenced Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas's fateful decision in 1854 to cooperate in the repeal of the provisions, which enraged antislavery northerners and precipitated the organization of the Republican Party. Yet Douglas also comes in for blame. Holt maintains that Douglas's desire to rekindle partisan rivalries through the Kansas-Nebraska Act sacrificed the nation's interest to that of the Democratic Party (pp. 99-100). Last, but not least, Holt does not spare the freesoil activists who condemned Douglas's Nebraska bill in the incendiary January 1854 "Appeal of the Independent Democrats." Holt claims that their ill-conceived assault pre-empted more moderate objections from northern and southern Whigs, the latter of whom especially might have prevented passage of the bill. As he put it, the freesoil protesters, like Douglas, pursued "their own partisan purposes," which in this case was to

“perpetuate their party and their own political careers” in the face of declining northern interest in the slavery issue after the Compromise of 1850 (p. 107). One can only imagine the withering rebuke Holt would have administered to the secessionists had his narrative culminated with the outbreak of war. There is clearly much blame to go around.

Yet his central argument is undermined by his frequent acknowledgments that many politicians attempted to resolve the slavery extension problem in order to preserve their party, the Union, or both. In 1848, for instance, Whigs, worried about the effect of the slavery extension issue on their party’s prospects to win the presidency, proposed letting the federal judiciary decide the legality of slavery in the territories taken from Mexico. This compromise legislation passed the Senate but was tabled in the House of Representatives. Holt explains that congressmen “from both sections were too uncertain about what might happen” if they left the issue for judges to decide (p. 46). In other words, both sides cared so deeply about a favorable outcome that they refused to take the risk of not getting one. Later that year, Stephen A. Douglas proposed to admit all of the Mexican Cession territory as the state of California to avoid debate and rancor over territorial slavery. However, as Holt recounts, southern senators “buried Douglas’s proposal in a hostile committee” because they feared that California would enter the Union as a free state (p. 53). In 1849, Southern Whigs introduced a similar bill in the House. Concerned that a failure to resolve the slavery extension issue would destroy their party, they presumed northern Whig colleagues would support the bill. Instead, northern Whigs insisted that slavery be barred from the territory prior to the meeting of a state constitutional convention. “In this amended form,” Holt acknowledges, the “bill failed to receive a single favorable vote” (p. 56). In 1850, President Zachary Taylor proposed to admit California and New Mexico as states, skipping the controversial territorial phase. Only northern Whigs strongly supported this initiative, which consequently had no chance of success (pp. 56-67). Nevertheless, despite this string of failures, compromisers led by Henry Clay and Stephen A. Douglas ultimately triumphed in 1850, albeit against some strong resistance. So it can hardly be said that there were not strong, powerful, and persistent politicians vying for the preservation of the Union.

Even more troubling for Holt’s argument is that the line between compromisers and reckless partisans sometimes seems quite blurry. For instance, while Douglas did indeed help push the inflammatory Kansas-Nebraska Act

through Congress, he strongly promoted compromises on slavery prior to 1854 and during the secession crisis. Likewise, Georgia Whig Robert Toombs supported the California statehood bill in February 1849, despite his acknowledgment that it would lead to a free state; yet “within a year [he] would vow to lead a secession movement in the South should Congress itself try to bar slavery from California” (pp. 55, 64-65). Meanwhile, southern Whigs contributed handsomely to the 1850 compromise, yet in 1854 provided critical votes in the House of Representatives for passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. These political shifts do not fit neatly into Holt’s argument, especially considering that these politicians probably did not consider themselves to be inconsistent. For instance, Douglas believed that the Kansas-Nebraska Act would ultimately strengthen the country by permanently ending congressional debate over slavery’s expansion. As he repeatedly declared in 1854, the doctrine of popular sovereignty solved the thorny problem of territorial slavery; after all, if settlers decided the fate of slavery in national territories, it would forever remove that abstract, intractable problem from Congress. Although the historian may be excused for wondering if Douglas later privately regretted sponsoring the Kansas-Nebraska Act, in 1854 he expected to achieve a political triumph that would benefit his party and the Union. Once popular sovereignty was the nation’s settled policy for territorial slavery, the Democratic Party could continue to promote national expansion without fear of disunion. Had he not believed this, he would neither have sponsored the bill nor have modified it to suit the demands of Southerners, no matter what pressures southern congressmen placed upon him.

Hence one question unavoidably arises: if there were at least as many responsible compromisers as there were reckless partisans, and if it is sometimes difficult to discern the difference between them, what explains the Civil War? After all, in his prior scholarship Holt freely acknowledges and indeed celebrates the competitiveness of the Second Party System. Whigs and Democrats battled fairly evenly for almost a decade in the 1840s, leading to a robust party system throughout the nation. Yet none of this robust competition, a product of rampant partisanship, led to civil war. Sometime Democrats won, and sometimes Whigs, but either way the country managed to hold together. Likewise, after the Civil War, rampant partisanship and the two-party system have produced stability rather than war. So what was different about the 1850s?

A very good explanation peeps through the text re-

peatedly. In the course of his narrative, if not in his thesis, Holt often recognizes that politicians did in fact respond to public pressure. A major case in point is the Wilmot Proviso. Since the proviso produced a slavery extension controversy *par excellence*, Holt seeks to explain the behavior of northern Democratic and southern Whig congressmen, whose votes produced a sectional rather than partisan divide. Northern Democrats previously had joined southern Democrats to support the annexation of Texas, while southern Whigs had leagued with northern Whigs to oppose it, yet many northern Democrats strongly and persistently supported the Wilmot Proviso in concert with northern Whigs, while southern Whigs and southern Democrats bitterly opposed it. Holt argues that the northern Democrats “initial support for the proviso” flowed from their anger at Polk’s duplicity over Texas, but that “northern and southern public opinion best explains the continuing sectional polarization over it” (pp. 22-23, 26). As he put it, the “longer and more fractious congressional debate over the Wilmot Proviso became, the more intense sectional animosity in the population at large grew, which in turn unquestionably aggravated politicians’ disagreement over that issue” (p. 26). To be sure, Holt frames “public opinion” adroitly in this instance, locating its origins in congressional debate. Nevertheless, what follows the quote is considerably more significant: eight pages dedicated to explaining why Northerners and Southerners held contrasting opinions on slavery’s expansion. While some scholars may quibble with his explanation of southern proslavery attitudes, the fact is Holt unhesitatingly acknowledges Northerners’ strong opposition to slavery’s expansion and Southerners’ strong support for it, including the incredible emotional vehemence Southerners invested in the issue. Holt’s thesis notwithstanding, the significance of these bedrock sectional attitudes shows repeatedly in the rest of the text.

An excellent illustration of the power of public opinion on antebellum politicians is the consequential proslavery shift of southern Whigs in 1849. While a number of southern Whigs had supported the prospect of California statehood early in 1849, they were not remotely as conciliatory after leaving Congress and speaking with their constituents. As Robert Toombs wrote later that year to a colleague, “public feeling in the South is much stronger than many of us supposed” and “passage of the Wilmot Proviso would lead to civil war.” He reported that Southerners would respond to the admission of California as a free state with “bitterness of feeling” (pp. 64-65). His fear must have been palpable given the triumphs of

Southern Democrats in the Mississippi and Georgia elections that year, which resulted in stridently proslavery public declarations by Democratic politicians. In Georgia, for instance, the state legislature passed resolutions instructing the governor “to call a secession convention immediately if the new Congress enacted the proviso, admitted California as a free state, or failed to pass a new, more rigorous fugitive-slave act” (p. 65). This was strong medicine for southern Whigs, and they can hardly be blamed thereafter for refusing to support President Taylor’s plan to quickly admit New Mexico and California as states.

All of this suggests the profound significance of the slavery issue after all. Given the underlying proslavery attitudes in the South, conciliatory southern Whigs faced a difficult challenge: either keep slavery out of public debate or face immolation at the polls. After all, like angry hornets, southern voters swarmed out to defend perceived threats to slavery. Yet Southerners were certain to perceive such threats—which were hardly illusory—given public attitudes in the North. After all, antislavery politicians, not southern Democrats, bore primary responsibility for stirring up the hornets. A northern Democrat, for instance, proposed the Wilmot Proviso. Moreover, as Kenneth Stampp argued years ago, historians cannot reasonably consider northern antislavery values as some sort of aberration or the product of misguided agitation. Those values were fundamental to a free society, even if not universally embraced in the North. Hence the southern Whigs’ situation alone suggests that, contra Holt, a crop of selfish and incompetent politicians in 1840s and 1850s was not the critical factor in precipitating civil war. Slavery was the foundation of the southern social system, the basis of its wealth and culture, and threats to it necessarily produced great volatility in American politics. Ironically, given this fact, Holt’s thesis can probably be turned on its head for the period following passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act: after 1854, a political rupture was likely to occur eventually without an unusually skillful conciliation by concerned politicians, which itself was unlikely without an outpouring of conciliatory sentiments from most people in both the North and South. Needless to say, the conciliation never came.

Yet to deny that politicians were the critical factor is not to say that they were insignificant—far from it. In fact, Holt’s book underscores a truth that is worth reiterating. “What politicians do in elective office matters, often profoundly,” he contended, “to the lives of ordinary Americans” (p. xi). There can be no doubt about that, nor about the value of studying politicians, whose decisions have

indeed done so much to shape the country's history. For this reason alone I would willingly assign this book to undergraduates. On the significance of politics to the Civil War, historians who are on the other side of the aisle, so to speak, about the origins of the war should be in complete agreement. And this area of agreement suggests that the contemporary rival schools of Civil War causation might not be as far apart as is sometimes thought. Just as Holt acknowledges, to a degree, the powerful interplay between politicians and public attitudes toward slavery, historians who emphasize the slavery issue must explain how contingent factors, including political ones, influenced the coming of the war. In the end, the real test of historical explanation is showing through creative reconstruction how a wide variety of relevant political, so-

cial, economic, and cultural factors produce change over time. Focusing on high politics, Michael Holt does not attempt a history on that scale. However, he does carefully examine an important historical issue and his argument invites debate over the relative influence of structural and contingent factors in bringing on the Civil War. As for the debate, at the risk of being as shortsighted and reckless as some politicians, I say, "bring it on."

Note

[1]. Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 11.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Graham Peck. Review of Holt, Michael F., *The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12692>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.