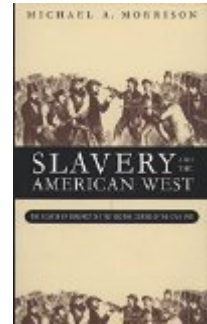


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael A. Morrison. *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xii + 396 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2319-4.

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## The Causes of the Civil War, Reconsidered

Prodigious amounts of labor have been invested in this account of territorial issues in American politics during the 1840s and 1850s. Michael Morrison has ransacked collections at several dozen manuscript repositories, the mere listing of which covers ten printed pages. Five comparably dense pages attest that he consulted a mountainous pile of microfilmed newspapers, surely sufficient to cause failing eyesight. Likewise notable is the truly national scope of this undertaking. Most of his fellow professionals focus on an individual, or a closely-defined episode, or the experience of a single state. Only a few brave souls in recent decades have ventured to assess something as complex as one of the antebellum political parties. Morrison, however, has no narrow "home turf." He paints a heroically broad canvas, covering the hottest issue during the most critical two decades of American political history. One therefore approaches his book with high hopes.

In part, these hopes are fulfilled. Morrison writes with authority about both North and South. He has an eye for apt quotations, illustrating, for example, how anxieties about enslavement always lurked close to the surface in antebellum America. Arraigning the "slave oligarchy" for tyrannizing over "four fifths of the people of the South," Northern spokesmen insisted that an "aristocratic minority" of "lordly masters" should not be allowed to dictate national territorial policy (pp. 166, 168, 243). Southern politicians, furious about perceived Northern attempts to "enslave us," vowed never to be placed "in shackles" (p. 117-18).

In other ways, however, this book does not fully live up to expectations. Two problems stand out. First, Morrison has turned political history into a type of intellectual history. He is not interested in the ways politicians schemed to assemble majorities, or about how election winners attempted to govern or to legislate. He makes little effort to pinpoint who voted or how they might have voted before. Focusing instead almost exclusively on what politicians and opinion-forming elites wrote and said, Morrison leaves it to others to explain what they did (or what they thought they were doing). This division of labor leads to this book's second major flaw. It never fully engages the principal scholarship in the field. Aside from a slim bibliographical introduction and occasional barbs aimed at unspecified historians, Morrison writes in an historiographical vacuum. Let us consider each of these points in turn.

First, as intellectual history, Morrison's volume highlights one principal thread of interpretation. Jacksonian Democrats and Whigs disagreed about territorial expansion, but the disagreement lacked sectional overtones. After the mid-1840s, however, "the struggle over westward expansion" fragmented both national parties and created explosive new "sectional alignments" (p. 4). The territorial issue thus created irreconcilably conflicting North-South disagreements about a heretofore shared ideological heritage.

Such an interpretation is not without merit. Morrison's exhaustive research substantiates an influential

perspective which was first advanced over two decades ago—one that has since become conventional wisdom. All now agree that North-South debates about the future of the territories attached sharply divergent meanings to concepts such as freedom, liberty, and equality. While Northerners insisted that free labor required free territories, Southerners circled the wagons to protect the liberty and equality of slaveholders. As James McPherson wrote in 1988, “Yankees and Southrons spoke the same language, to be sure, but they increasingly used these words to revile each other” (*Battle Cry of Freedom*, p. 40).

The question becomes, why undertake so much work simply to reemphasize what Eric Foner, J. Mills Thornton III, Bertram Wyatt-Brown and a host of others have already established? Couldn't Morrison have gleaned something more original from his sources? The task, or so it appears to this reviewer, is to explain why many politicians North and South thought ideological polarization consistent with the practical business of assembling coalitions to win elections. It is easy enough with hindsight to see that danger lurked, but precious few architects of the political impasse that led to war understood the future consequences of their actions.

Morrison's nearly exclusive emphasis on political rhetoric can work at cross purposes to understanding political substance. For example, Morrison's chapter on the 1850 crisis depicts a clash between Northern free-soilers and Southern Rights absolutists, concluding that “extremists, North and South, together constituted a majority in Congress” (p. 125). One finds, however, in Mark Stegmaier's *Texas, New Mexico, and the Compromise of 1850: Boundary Dispute and Sectional Crisis* that a genuinely bisectional and bipartisan coalition united to pass the crucial “Little Omnibus,” which adjusted the Texas-New Mexico border and made possible enactment of the entire compromise package. As of 1850, Stegmaier notes, the territorial issue could still be finessed.

Morrison's second shortcoming relates to the first. *Slavery and the American West* appears ready to strike a blow for what might be called a “fundamentalist” interpretation of Civil War origins. Taking aim at 1930s-era revisionists and hinting at disagreements with neorevisionist “ethnoculturalists,” Morrison insists that the debate over the territories “sectionalized American politics” and that the issue was no “abstraction” (p. 10, 276). Yet he pulls his punches. He declines to grapple directly with neorevisionist Michael Holt, who concluded *The Political*

*Crisis of the 1850s* with two electrifying chapters on the linkages between the territorial issue and the course of Northern and Southern politics between 1856 and 1861.

Holt contended that a majority of Republicans confidently expected a peaceful sequel to the 1860 presidential election because they had no plan to attack slavery; their goal was simply to undercut the political power slaveholders had amassed in the Southern-dominated Democratic party. The territorial issue merely provided Republicans with a convenient weapon to secure their larger objective. Holt likewise downplayed Southern interest in establishing slavery in the territories. What Southerners most resented, he argued, was the effort by free-soilers to deny equal rights to Southerners—that is, the theoretical right of slaveholders to settle in the territories. For secessionists as for Republicans, slavery extension had more salience as a symbolic issue rather than a substantive one. Holt in some ways anticipates Morrison; the latter would have done better to pinpoint where he and Holt part company.

Morrison's book would have gained interpretative force had he advanced a more systematic anti-revisionist interpretation of the national polarization that came to a head in 1860-61, while taking direct issue with those who stand outside the fundamentalist paradigm. He also might better have defined the common ground he plainly shares with Foner, Thornton, Wyatt-Brown, the late Don Fehrenbacher, and numerous others. From the perspective of the cataclysm that followed, such a view may seem no more than common sense. Nevertheless, certain stubborn facts cannot easily be reconciled with the fundamentalist paradigm. Majorities of Northern voters did not consciously throw down a dangerous gauntlet to the South in 1860; majorities of voters in the slave states likewise opposed secession for existing causes until Lincoln called for troops. Both North and South, the actions of resolute minorities undercut moderate majorities. The middle ground was larger than Morrison allows. He imposes a degree of symmetry and order on the events before 15 April 1861 that can only be sustained with hindsight.

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