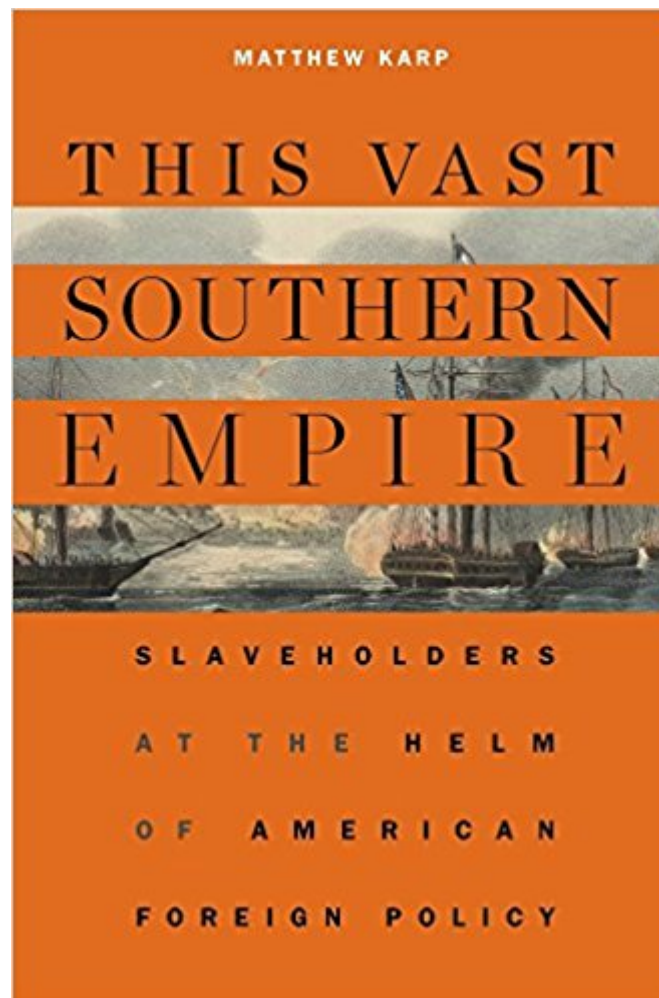




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This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders At The Helm Of American Foreign Policy



Synopsis

When the United States emerged as a world power in the years before the Civil War, the men who presided over the nation's triumphant territorial and economic expansion were largely southern slaveholders. As presidents, cabinet officers, and diplomats, slaveholding leaders controlled the main levers of foreign policy inside an increasingly powerful American state. This *Vast Southern Empire* explores the international vision and strategic operations of these southerners at the commanding heights of American politics. For proslavery leaders like John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis, the nineteenth-century world was torn between two hostile forces: a rising movement against bondage, and an Atlantic plantation system that was larger and more productive than ever before. In this great struggle, southern statesmen saw the United States as slavery's most powerful champion. Overcoming traditional qualms about a strong central government, slaveholding leaders harnessed the power of the state to defend slavery abroad. During the antebellum years, they worked energetically to modernize the U.S. military, while steering American diplomacy to protect slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the Republic of Texas. As Matthew Karp demonstrates, these leaders were nationalists, not separatists. Their "vast southern empire" was not an independent South but the entire United States, and only the election of Abraham Lincoln broke their grip on national power. Fortified by years at the helm of U.S. foreign affairs, slaveholding elites formed their own Confederacy—not only as a desperate effort to preserve their property but as a confident bid to shape the future of the Atlantic world.

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Customer Reviews

"Combining immense erudition with an engaging style, Karp sheds light on an important but poorly understood era in American foreign policy." -- Walter Russell Mead, *Foreign Affairs* An essential and compelling account of the slaveholding elite's grip on national and foreign policy in antebellum America. Provocative, engaging, and beautifully written, this book will endure. (Stephanie McCurry, author of *Confederate Reckoning*) Matthew Karp demonstrates vividly how Southern control of the national government in the antebellum generation resulted in a foreign policy designed to protect slavery from threats both outside and inside the United States. Full of new information and original insights, this book expands our understanding of the ways in which Southern domination of the federal government provoked increasing sectional tensions that brought on the Civil War. (James M. McPherson, author of *The War That Forged a Nation*) A pathbreaking work • extremely polished, imaginatively conceptualized, shrewdly organized, engagingly written, and exhaustively researched. (Robert E. May, author of *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics*) Adept and detailed • Karp's thorough and polished study will be eagerly welcomed by scholars. (Publishers Weekly 2016-07-25) At the close of the Civil War, more than Southern independence and the bones of the dead lay amid the smoking ruins of the Confederacy. Also lost was the memory of the prewar decades, when Southern politicians and pro-slavery ambitions shaped the foreign policy of the United States in order to protect slavery at home and advance its interests abroad. With *This Vast Southern Empire*, Matthew Karp recovers that forgotten history and presents it in fascinating and often surprising detail • Karp makes a persuasive case that we cannot grasp our country's history without taking account of slavery's dreams and ambitions. (Fergus Bordewich *Wall Street Journal* 2016-12-11) Karp has written a comprehensive history of the Davisonians that shows how a pro-slavery foreign policy dominated the executive branch from the presidency of John Tyler (1841–45) through the Buchanan administration, which ended in 1861 • Combining immense erudition with an engaging style, Karp sheds light on an important but poorly understood era in American foreign policy and provides much food for thought about the ways in which the Davisonian legacy continued to influence the United States long after slavery died. (Walter Russell Mead *Foreign Affairs* 2017-01-01) The book is essential, if unsettling, reading. (Ibrahim Sundiata *Public Books* 2017-03-01) Matthew Karp's illuminating book *This Vast Southern Empire* shows that the South was interested not only in gaining new slave territory but also in promoting slavery throughout the Western Hemisphere. Far from insular, proslavery leaders had a far-reaching awareness of the international status of human bondage, which they regarded as essential to progress and prosperity. Holding the reins of political power, slave owners largely

determined American foreign policy from the 1830s through the 1850s. As Karp reveals, they were well positioned to use the resources of the federal government to push their agenda around the world. While the emancipation of the British West Indies is widely recognized as a significant event in the history of abolition, no one has described its effect on U.S. international relations as fully or persuasively as Karp does. One of Karp's contributions is to reveal ways in which the South was not isolated, either nationally or internationally. He shows that it appropriated the main structures of federal power. In this sense, through much of the era leading up to the Civil War, the South, effectively, was the United States, at least in its contacts with the rest of the world. (David S. Reynolds New York Review of Books 2017-06-22)

Matthew Karp is Assistant Professor of History at Princeton University.

This *Vast Southern Empire* is a highly intelligent, illuminating study of slave holders and American foreign policy. While slave holding was abhorrent to many before the Civil War, Karp's study is not a polemic on behalf of abolitionists. Instead it traces the marked influence and ambition of prominent, slave holding southerners at the Federal level on behalf of slave holding and the expansion of same. State's rights were not on their minds as they sought to direct American foreign policy.

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Matthew Karp has written a book of tremendous historiographic importance. Examining the means by which slaveholders held firm control over what he calls the federal government's "outward state"--the sector responsible for foreign policy, the military, and the role the United States assumed beyond its borders--he argues that these slaveholders waged a "hemispheric battle between freedom and slavery" (p. 70) during the 1840s and 1850s (what he refers to as the "long 1850s"). He highlights the roles men such as John Tyler, Abel P. Upshur, John C. Calhoun, Duff Green, and Henry Wise played in this battle, and offers succinct character sketches of each of them. Ultimately Karp persuasively demonstrates the necessity of viewing southern control of American foreign policy in the two decades leading up to the Civil War, as well as the secession of the South in 1860-61, within a global context, a view that comports with recent work by Don Doyle and other scholars. In my opinion, Karp's work offers two original insights that seem destined to re-shape our understanding of the coming of the Civil War. First, he maintains that slaveholders tended to make a (self-serving) distinction between federal power in the domestic realm of politics and federal power

in foreign affairs. That is, they railed against what they saw as the federal government overstepping its bounds on matters like the tariff and--most importantly--on interfering with slavery, but championed the power of the federal government when it came to advancing their agenda in the hemispheric battle between slavery and freedom. The irony, as he points out, is that vaunted states'-righters like Calhoun were the most aggressive advocates for centralized state power when it came to foreign policy, because that foreign policy was designed to maintain slavery's primacy of place. Second, Karp points out that, in domestic terms, secession is rightly viewed as "defensive." Slaveholders recognized the overt threat the election of Abraham Lincoln posed to the institution of slavery. In international terms, however, slaveholders were willing to take a high-stakes gamble and dissolve the Union because they believed the global necessity of slavery (mostly, though not exclusively for cotton) meant they stood a high likelihood of success. As Karp puts it, "...the Confederate project was not designed to escape 'modern civilization' but to command it." (p. 239) There are other attributes of this book I like. Karp engages the scholarly literature with a great deal of skill, sometimes within the text of the book; more often in the endnotes. I found myself predicting which books and articles he would cite in the endnotes based on how he dealt with the arguments in the text. His command of the secondary literature is evident. He also utilizes rather obscure nineteenth-century writings to great effect. His research in primary sources is equally well-displayed. Finally, the book is engaging, well organized, cogently argued, and a pleasure to read. You will learn a great deal, and question a lot of previously-held assumptions about the significance of slaveholders and their worldview, if you give this terrific book your time.

A new standard in the writing of popular history; concise and exquisitely researched and cross referenced, but more importantly, to me at least, is the immediacy of style and the intimate and palpable sense of understanding and comprehension, and also of revelations concerning personal associations and discernment of motivations all combine to make sense of a people and a period of time that would otherwise be too culturally and legally remote to be readily understood by readers in 2017. A detailed snapshot of pressures exerted on American foreign policy by Americans with an urgent, consuming and entirely commercial mind set after the two early wars and into the Civil War era. Should probably add another star to the rating firmament for this book.

Before this I had a dim image in my mind regarding southern politicians in the antebellum era. This book illuminates an area of American history easily forgotten in our national obsession with everything that followed after. I'll write a more detail review later once I've digested it, but for now I'll

just say that it's well worth your time if you're at all interested in the build-up to the Civil War, why it happened the way that it did, and why the United States remains fundamentally divided.

The premise of this book was a new consideration and study for me of the causes of the civil war. The book was well researched and was a meaningful addition to my reading about the civil war.

Still fresh in my mind, having just finished it today, this is an outstanding book. It is a history of how powerful Southerners, through their control of the US government largely since its inception, worked to protect and enlarge in the institution of slavery in the face of a tide of abolitionism sweeping Europe in the 1830's and onward. It taught me that, contrary to assumptions, southerners were not merely clinging to a relic of a fading past in the face of a modernizing world economy, but rather, their vision of coercive labor and white supremacy was to be the very foundation of the United States' emergence as a world power. The effect of this book upon me was to greatly enlarge my field of vision, as it were, around the sectional crisis and Civil War, and give me an informed perspective as to why the dissolution of the Union occurred and why the South reacted so drastically to the loss of governmental control in the 1860 presidential election. It was essentially the loss of their vision of the world, everything they had worked for turned upside down. This book is a keeper.

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