

THIS VAST
SOUTHERN EMPIRE

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*Slaveholders at the Helm
of American Foreign Policy*

Matthew Karp



Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

2016

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Printed in the United States of America

First printing

Names: Karp, Matthew, 1981– author.

Title: This vast southern empire : slaveholders at the helm of
American foreign policy / Matthew Karp.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 2016. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016009232 | ISBN 9780674737259 (alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Slavery—Government policy—United States—History. |
Slavery—Political aspects—United States—History. | United States—Foreign
relations—1783–1865. | United States—Politics and government—1783–1865. |
Power (Social sciences)—United States—History.

Classification: LCC E183.7 .K345 2016 | DDC 306.3 / 62097309033—dc23
LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2016009232>

For my mother, Freddi Karp

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In the foreign, as in the domestic,
policy of the United States,
the interest of the slaveholders
served as the guiding star.

—Karl Marx, 1861

Introduction

The World the Slaveholders Craved

THE STRUGGLE OVER THE FUTURE OF SLAVERY spanned the nineteenth-century world. For centuries the toil of enslaved African workers had formed the backbone of a colonial economy that stretched across the Atlantic Ocean. Then the great revolutions at the close of the eighteenth century—American, French, Haitian—unleashed social forces and political ideas that offered a sweeping challenge to slave labor. Over the next several decades, slavery’s wide-ranging opponents—republican lawmakers, liberal reformers, rebellious bondspeople themselves—achieved a number of major victories. Some New World states and provinces, from Chile to Vermont, abolished slavery altogether; others, like Pennsylvania and Peru, took measures that aimed at gradual emancipation. In 1833 abolitionists claimed a further triumph when the greatest power in the world, Great Britain, passed a law that announced the end of slavery in its remaining American colonies.¹

Yet for all the momentum of antislavery politics, the three largest slaveholding societies in the world—the Spanish colony of Cuba, the Empire of Brazil, and the United States of America—remained firmly committed to black servitude. At the midpoint of the nineteenth century all three flourished as never before, exporting unprecedented quantities of cotton, sugar, and coffee to the industrializing economies of the North Atlantic. British emancipation notwithstanding, the total value of trade in slave-produced goods nearly doubled between 1820 and 1860. By the start of the American Civil War, six million men, women, and children toiled in bondage, the largest number in the history of the Western Hemisphere.²

Although the transatlantic abolitionist movement declared with increasing vehemence that human bondage had no rightful place in modern life, the planters and politicians who presided over slavery's boom saw no reason to abandon the field. On the contrary, slaveholders grew increasingly confident about the strength of their position within the mid-nineteenth-century world order. In an era marked by global economic expansion and fierce political collision, the fate of chattel slavery remained very much undecided. As both proslavery and antislavery forces scrambled for advantage, the shock waves of their struggle spread far beyond the traditional nodes of the Atlantic basin. Farmers, migrants, merchants, and soldiers from Ottoman Turkey, Qing China, British India, and Mexican California found their worlds affected by the international contest over slavery.

No wonder American abolitionists believed that national arguments about bondage had global consequences. "This question of Slavery does not concern America alone," proclaimed the Massachusetts minister Theodore Parker in 1856. "[A]ll Christendom is likewise party to the contest."³ American slaveholders agreed. By the middle of the century southern masters ruled over the wealthiest and most dynamic slave society the world had ever known. If slave labor had an international future, they would certainly command it. Far from isolated reactionaries, crying out against the transformations of the age, proslavery leaders warmly embraced the global dimensions of their struggle. A chief instrument in their endeavors was the foreign policy of the United States. Throughout the antebellum decades, it was through the operation of U.S. foreign policy that southern statesmen mounted some of their most daring efforts to advance the international cause of slavery. The partial success and ultimate failure of these ventures—including the boldest foreign policy project of all, the founding of the Confederate States of America—played no small part in determining the future of the nineteenth-century world.⁴

Not so long ago, it seemed self-evident that human bondage could not survive the mid-nineteenth century. "Of course slave societies, including that of the South, were doomed," sighed Eric Hobsbawm as he settled in to consider the subject in *The Age of Capital*. By the 1850s, slavery as a factor in world history was "patently on the decline," its economic muscle amputated by the spread of free labor, its social logic repudiated by bourgeois values.⁵ Twenty-first century scholarship, however, has turned this verdict

almost upside down. Slavery's massive midcentury expansion, its dynamic integration into the world market, and its brutal assimilation of modern economic practices have all received new and powerful emphasis.⁶ Older assumptions about the provincialism of the antebellum South have been demolished as historians have rediscovered the intellectual sophistication of the slaveholding elite.⁷

Few mid-nineteenth-century Americans were more deeply engaged with international politics than southern slaveholders. A class whose main source of income derived from the global marketplace could not afford to isolate itself from the rest of the world. Compared with Maine dairy farmers, Michigan lumber dealers, or Pennsylvania iron makers, whose goods were consumed within national borders, cotton planters from Georgia to Texas were almost inescapably cosmopolitan in outlook.⁸ Yet the most powerful American slaveholders paid close attention to developments all around the globe in ways that went far beyond a desire to market their plantation exports.

Southern elites kept the international politics of slavery under constant surveillance, tracking threats to slave property across the hemisphere and monitoring oscillations in global attitudes toward emancipation. They carefully followed the course of world affairs—not only the storms of revolution and reaction in Europe, but also the steady growth of imperial influence in Africa and Asia. They stayed abreast of the latest developments in military technology and administration, from British naval armaments to French infantry deployments in Algeria. Above all, slaveholding leaders sought to keep pace with the constant strivings of the mid-nineteenth-century world—the expansion of commerce, the march of empire, the advance of science, and the reshaping of state power.⁹

Neither flaming hotheads nor desiccated reactionaries, America's most powerful slaveholders were earthbound and waterbound men of the world—practical visionaries who, in Hobsbawm's phrase, "thought in continents and in oceans." This does not mean that antebellum southerners were no different from the other bourgeois elites whose ambition and imagination gave shape to the Age of Capital. Unlike London financiers or New York railway executives, the leading men of the South could not envision a global future without the fundamental institution of African slavery. Their continents were to be civilized with the enforced toil of dark-skinned workers, and their oceans were to be opened as highways to the rich produce of bound labor.¹⁰

But in the evolving world of the mid-nineteenth century, the South's commitment to bondage made it distinctive, not irrelevant or obsolete. If there was little that was "domestic" about southern slave institutions, there was less that was "peculiar." Enslaved Cuba and Brazil were also booming, and by 1850 even antislavery European powers had begun to experiment with new systems of racialized and coerced labor, from Dutch Java to the British West Indies. For the southern masters who celebrated it, slavery could claim a distinguished history, a flourishing present, and a glorious future. In both the American world they made and the global order they craved, southern elites understood the growth of slavery as no more and no less than "the true progress of civilization."¹¹

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, southern statesmen not only imagined an alternative slaveholding "history of the future": they worked actively to construct it.¹² The ideological confidence and worldly sophistication of American slaveholders cannot be separated from their control of American state power. The name Hegel was first pronounced in the U.S. Congress by a Mississippi representative who quoted the *Philosophy of History* on the benefits of slavery to the African race. One of the earliest congressional citations of Auguste Comte came from a Texan as part of an argument that slave labor was a necessary feature of global development.¹³ Slaveholding statesmen in Washington reached for these transatlantic intellectual authorities not merely to show off their learning—although that was surely a consideration—but because they intended to advance their theoretical reflections with the material power of the U.S. government. To fathom their intentions and to take an accurate measure of their strength, we need not only an ideological but also an institutional account of proslavery internationalism.¹⁴

That account must begin with the blunt fact of southern power within the American state. In the two decades before the Civil War, proslavery elites and their largely compliant northern allies maintained a vise-like grip on the executive branch of the U.S. national government, including the presidency, the cabinet, and important lower levels of federal administration. This much we know both from abolitionist litanies about the scope of the "Slave Power" and from careful modern scholarship on the proslavery bias of the early American republic.¹⁵ Nevertheless, those old antislavery invocations may still have new things left to teach us. "Since the slavery agitation," Iowa congressman Josiah Grinnell observed in 1865, slaveholders "have had the Secretaryship of State for two thirds of the time; and . . . for

four fifths of the time have the Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Navy been from the South.” W. E. B. Du Bois later calculated that before the Civil War 80 out of 134 U.S. ministers abroad hailed from the slaveholding states.¹⁶ Relative to its free population, the South held disproportionate influence in virtually every branch of the antebellum U.S. government. But slaveholders maintained especially firm control over what might be called the “outward state”—the sector of the federal government responsible for foreign relations, military policy, and the larger role that American power assumed outside American borders.¹⁷

Looking back after years of brutal civil war, Grinnell saw a whiff of separatist menace surrounding the South’s domination of antebellum military affairs. But in the 1840s and 1850s slaveholding leaders did not assume cabinet posts to prepare for a coming conflict of arms, or even to augment their sectional strength in a divided union. Instead they sought with terrific ambition to command the power of the entire United States—and then, crucially, to use that power in world politics. International in aspiration, slaveholding leaders were profoundly national in operation.

As early as 1922 Arthur Schlesinger dismissed the notion that the South’s antebellum commitment to limited government had meaning beyond the necessarily defensive tactics of a political minority. Throughout American history, he wrote, “the group advocating state rights at any period have sought its shelter in much the same spirit that a western pioneer seeks his storm-cellar when a tornado is raging.” Plenty of issues in antebellum politics sent southerners rushing to the storm cellar of states’ rights. The power of the central government in domestic affairs, many believed, could threaten the sovereignty of masters over the enslaved people they held as property.¹⁸

But when the question involved the national government’s direct relationship to slavery, southern elites were more tornado than pioneer. In debates over the congressional gag rule on abolitionist petitions, fugitive slave laws, and other issues, slaveholders eagerly embraced the proslavery clout of the federal government.¹⁹ “Between the slave power and states’ rights there was no necessary connection,” argued Henry Adams in 1882. “Whenever a question arose of extending or protecting slavery, the slave-holders became friends of centralized power, and used that dangerous weapon with a kind of frenzy.”²⁰

Nowhere did slaveholders wield their power with more energy or commitment than in the realm of foreign and military policy. As executive

officers, legislators, diplomats, military commanders, and journalists, influential southern elites worked to build a vigorous U.S. government that could pursue significant objectives abroad. The two warmest friends of centralized power in all antebellum foreign affairs were Secretary of State John C. Calhoun of South Carolina and President James K. Polk of Tennessee. The two most ambitious reformers of the antebellum armed forces were Secretary of the Navy Abel Upshur of Virginia and Secretary of War Jefferson Davis of Mississippi.

It may be tempting to regard this embrace of federal power as a clear proof that all southern political ideas were no more than hypocritical justifications for slave property. "Mr. Calhoun," as one Richmond editor wrote of the famous states' rights champion, "was the master and not the slave of theories."²¹ But the proslavery effort to build a strong outward state differed from the South's parallel support for the gag rule or fugitive slave laws. In foreign and military policy slaveholders summoned federal authority not only to secure their immediate property rights, but also to extend the power of the United States on an international stage. This was not hypocrisy; it was ideology, and strategy, too. The master theorists of the master class did not demand a rigid or slavish obedience to the principle of local sovereignty. Rather, they sought to consolidate proslavery forces for a larger struggle that spanned the Atlantic world.

The wealth and power of the United States counted among slavery's most important strategic assets, especially in the Western Hemisphere, where the growing North American union loomed over the younger and smaller republics to its south. Traditionally, historians have tended to assume that slaveholders' chief interest in Latin America lay in gobbling it up. Southern hunger for more slave territory, whether in the Caribbean basin or in the continental southwest, has long figured as the centerpiece of proslavery foreign policy. From the perspective of domestic politics, this makes perfect sense: the Civil War emerged from a conflict over the extension of slavery.²² But as an interpretation of the way slaveholding leaders viewed the world, it leaves something to be desired.

The most pronounced characteristic of proslavery foreign policy was neither a ravenous quest for fresh slave territory nor a desperate search for possible new slave states. Over and above these desires stood the need to protect systems of slave property across the hemisphere. After all, American soil was not the only slave soil; the United States was not the only slave state. Southern elites showed special concern for their fellow slaveholding

societies in the hemisphere, especially Cuba, Brazil, and the independent republic of Texas. Sometimes, as with Texas in 1845, protecting slavery required annexing new territory. On other occasions, as in Cuba in 1843 or 1854, it involved a more restrained policy of proslavery solidarity and cooperation. In virtually every situation, however, the preservation of slave institutions took priority over the acquisition of new land. Territorial expansion was only one tactical option on a larger strategic menu—a more comprehensive foreign policy agenda that contemporary opponents of bondage, including Karl Marx, rightly identified as “armed propaganda for slavery abroad.”²³

The most spectacular examples of this armed propaganda were the filibuster invasions of Latin America. Between 1848 and 1860 a handful of lone commandos in the United States raised private armies to attack Cuba, Mexico, and Nicaragua, often with the stated goal of expanding the domain of slavery.²⁴ These swashbuckling imperialists have claimed a large share of historical attention even though their efforts universally ended in disaster. This book takes a different approach; it concentrates not on private filibusters but on the much more powerful and only occasionally less flamboyant southern elites in charge of the U.S. government. It was these slaveholders, after all—weighty statesmen, not wild-eyed soldiers of fortune—who acquired Texas, protected slavery in Cuba, and oversaw the conquest of Mexico.

For nearly two full decades, these men organized U.S. foreign relations around what might fairly be called a foreign policy of slavery. To be sure, slaveholding leaders did not always agree on their objectives abroad; frequently, on questions of national politics, they quarrelled among themselves at home. Yet for all the political fault lines that divided the antebellum southern elite, it would be misleading to view master class foreign policy as a chaos of colliding egos, regional splits, and partisan feuds. In fact, a broad and powerful combination of southern elites, from Andrew Jackson and John Tyler to Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens, insisted on the centrality of slavery in American international relations.²⁵

Equally important, these elites insisted on an essential unity between the slave South and the rest of the nation. Amid the 1844 debates over Texas annexation, the *Richmond Enquirer* published a letter from a particularly hot-tempered central Virginia correspondent. C. R. Fontaine had just organized a pro-Texas public meeting in Buckingham County, and he wrote to denounce the anti-slavery opponents of annexation as “base and villainous” agitators. Former President John Quincy Adams, the most outspoken national critic of

Texas and slavery, provoked Fontaine's special fury: this "Hyena in human shape," he alleged, hoped to trigger a civil war and spread "butchery, murder and rapine" across the land. Yet Fontaine was assured that such "disunionist" fanatics would not succeed in bringing about the ruin of "this vast Southern Empire." To thwart this terrible fate, he predicted, "plenty of Americans, North, South, and West," would leap to defend the nation by rescuing Texas from "the unhallowed hands of England."²⁶

Throughout the antebellum period, the slaveholding statesmen at the helm of U.S. foreign policy generally shared Fontaine's worldview. (Very often, they also shared his opinion of John Quincy Adams.) Their imperial imagination was not narrowly sectional or separatist; their proslavery zeal did not diminish their national patriotism. As leaders like Calhoun and Davis worked to strengthen bondage both at home and abroad, they understood themselves in command not of a mere region or a section, but a mighty world power. From their international perspective, "this vast Southern Empire" was, quite simply, the United States.²⁷

The midcentury struggle between bondage and freedom began in earnest with the emancipation of the British West Indies in 1833. The world's leading economic and naval power, American slaveholding leaders now believed, had determined to wage a global war on servitude. Chapter 1 recounts how slaveholders came to see a vigorous and assertive U.S. foreign policy as necessary to combat Great Britain's imperial abolitionism. Southern-led efforts to reform and expand the U.S. Navy, chronicled in Chapter 2, make sense only when they are viewed in the light of this emerging foreign policy of slavery. And although historians have long understood antebellum expansion in terms of the sectional struggle over the balance of power in Congress, Chapters 3 and 4 explore the ways in which southerners were often equally concerned with the balance of power in the Western Hemisphere. Identifying the United States as the chief hemispheric champion of slavery, southerners sought to defend the security of vulnerable slaveholding regimes across the Americas, from Brazil to Cuba. Their struggle to protect slavery in the Republic of Texas led to the U.S. war with Mexico, which, as Chapter 5 describes, brought about the massive enlargement and consolidation of an effectively proslavery American continental empire.

After the triumphant war with Mexico, slaveholding leaders assumed a confident posture in foreign affairs: the antislavery energies of Great Britain

appeared to be receding, while the proslavery imperialism of the United States grew stronger than ever. Yet in these same years, a surging domestic reaction against possible spread of slavery threatened slaveholders' power in Washington. This contradiction of the 1850s—slaveholders growing more confident abroad but becoming more beleaguered at home—frames the second half of the book. Chapters 6 and 7 explore slaveholders' deep conviction that the world economy depended on slave-grown staple agriculture: not just "King Cotton," as they famously boasted, but the other vassals of Emperor Slavery, including Cuban sugar and Brazilian coffee. European states, slaveholders argued, had become disillusioned by the experience of slave emancipation. The global spread of colonial empires and "coolie" labor systems reflected a general acceptance that racial hierarchy and bound labor were necessary elements of modern civilization. Chapters 8 and 9 examine how this broader proslavery worldview informed the actual workings of American foreign policy in the 1850s, which sought continually to protect slave institutions across the hemisphere. And even as sectional arguments corroded domestic politics, proslavery leaders worked as hard as ever to enhance the power of the U.S. military.

Southern secession itself, Chapter 10 argues, was a kind of foreign policy decision. The election of an antislavery president snapped the last and strongest bonds connecting the South to the Union—access, through the executive branch, to foreign affairs, the army, and the navy. Deprived of any further investment in the United States' international clout, southern elites found the appeal of an independent career irresistible. In the Civil War that followed, their slaveholding Confederacy was utterly defeated. Yet in some ways, as W. E. B. Du Bois argued a full generation later, American slaveholders bequeathed a legacy that outlived even the destruction of slavery, and found echoes far beyond the American South. Selected to give a lecture at Harvard's 1890 commencement ceremonies, Du Bois titled his address "Jefferson Davis as a Representative of Civilization." Davis and the antebellum master class were long gone, but key elements of the global order they envisioned—based on white supremacy, coerced labor, and aggressive state power—continued to shape world politics at the turn of the twentieth century.