

*Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic.* By MATTHEW MASON. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 351 pages. \$45.00 (cloth).

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It seems that Thomas Jefferson should at least have smelled smoke before the Missouri Crisis struck “like a fire bell in the night.”<sup>1</sup> Matthew Mason’s new book offers extensive and persuasive evidence that slavery had played an important role in national and sectional discourse well before 1819. Focusing on the second decade of the nineteenth century and especially on the changes brought by the War of 1812, Mason argues that “antebellum strife over slavery took the shape it did in large part because of developments and lessons learned in that crucial decade” (237) before Missouri applied for statehood.

To argue for the importance of the years 1808–19 in creating a sectional politics of slavery, the book must downplay the salience of slavery in the earlier period, a departure from many recent works that have located slavery centrally in revolutionary-era debates and events. Mason points out, however, that in the late eighteenth century proliberty, antislavery views were widely disseminated. Partisans of the era consequently found the subject of slavery could serve as a political tool in the national power struggles that arose as soon as there was any national power over which to struggle. Mason’s argument here, repeated throughout the book, is that employing slavery as a tool in political exercises “exposed slavery to scrutiny and raised the stakes surrounding it” (31).

After the ending of the foreign slave trade in 1808, New England Federalists who hated Republicans’ policies toward England, hated the embargo, and hated the War of 1812 showed just how useful slavery could be as a tactical weapon against one’s political opponents. Federalists attacked Virginia Republican leaders where they seemed weakest: as slave-holding aristocrats (positioning themselves, then, as antiaristocrats) whose power arose from an unfair representation of slave property through the three-fifths provision of the Constitution. There had been some ominous sectional rumblings even before 1808—in the wake of the Louisiana Purchase, some Federalists began to talk of secession—but Mason down-plays these concerns to focus on widespread anti-southern hostility during the war years. That hostility culminated in the Hartford Convention’s proposed constitutional amendments, which would have redistributed sectional power partly by repealing the three-fifths provision.

We know that feelings in the subsequent Era of Good Feelings actually were not so good, so it makes sense that northern attacks on slavery and slaveholders continued even after the “debacle of the Hartford Convention” (75). Interestingly, the center of sectionalist gravity moved southward, into the mid-Atlantic states where residents felt increasingly anxious as they watched slavery expand around them and read horrific reports of free blacks being kidnapped from their homes and sold as slaves in the Southwest. Antislavery northwesterners faced a more immediate threat from those who wished to legalize slavery in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, and they too began to attack slavery and slaveholders in newspaper essays and pamphlets. Southerners responded to these antislavery writings; a few began to assert a states-rights philosophy and make tentative arguments that slavery was a positive good and a greater number denounced what they perceived as misguided northern philanthropy.

Those who spoke and wrote about slavery during the Missouri Crisis, then, had plenty of precedent and ill feeling to draw on. Yet the event marked a break as the depth of the crisis forced both pro- and antislavery writers to stake out more consistent and extreme positions. The legacies of the period 1808–21 reverberated through the antebellum era and are carefully traced in the book’s final chapter.

Reflecting current historiographical concerns with the Atlantic world and with African American agency, Mason also includes chapters on how Anglo-American relationships and African American rebelliousness helped propel the issue of slavery into political discussions. It is not clear, however, that British criticisms of American hypocrisy actually increased sectionalism. And fugitive slaves and slave insurrections were neither new nor unique to the early nineteenth century. Oddly, the book largely ignores African Americans where they were

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, Apr. 22, 1820, in Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress, [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson\\_papers/mtjser1.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson_papers/mtjser1.html).

self-consciously entering the political sphere: in pamphlets, in the streets, and, where they could, at the ballot boxes.

Indeed traditional politics—voting and legislating—play only a small role in this book, which focuses more on the uses of slavery in politics than on the politics of slavery. Mason's argument springs mainly from an analysis of political writing and of the rhetorical uses of slavery in sectional debates generated primarily by other concerns. This analysis of the uses of slavery in politics adds rich and valuable texture to our understanding of early national politics and the Missouri Crisis. But perhaps because it proceeds in the absence of a theoretical framework—for instance, one concerned with the nature of political discourse or its closely related cousin, the public sphere—the book's argument tends to elide the differences between political essays that addressed slavery peripherally and the heated language of the Missouri Crisis, in which slavery's expansion was the main topic. Mason writes that “the Missouri Crisis had ushered in a new clarity in the sectional politics of the United States . . . not . . . because of the novelty of the issue of slavery” but because of the “length and intensity of the controversy” (211). It remains, however, that the politics of slavery (that is, battles over the crucial question of slavery's future in the United States) differed significantly from the sectionalism brought on by Jefferson's and Madison's foreign policies or by northerners' pre-1819 discomfort about slavery's geographic expansion into southwestern lands.

Familiar as we are with the cynical politics of our own age in which professional operatives use sophisticated polling and marketing techniques to identify and appeal to small subsections of the electorate, we are not surprised that the partisans of the early national period would employ whatever issues, including slavery, they predicted might motivate their audiences. One of the great contributions *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* makes is to distinguish between underlying attitudes, such as New Englanders' general celebration of freedom and of their region as free, and the political mobilization of those attitudes. New England's leaders succeeded better in mobilizing antislavery, anti-southern sentiment when their region's interests seemed precariously at stake during the War of 1812 than when the threat of slavery appeared more distant during the Missouri Crisis (hence the doughfaces who voted with the South in the crisis). But viewing the politics of the early nineteenth century as the strategic deployment of latent and perhaps not-deeply-held attitudes in both North and South leaves us wondering whether the political speech of the era ever really meant anything or was just so much blather. This reader, for one, would like to know more about the inner worlds, symbolic meanings, and ideologies that drove individual Americans to action, especially on the crucial subject of slavery.