Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic

The second and concluding volume of Professor Ashworth’s study of American antebellum politics, this book offers an exciting new interpretation of the origins of the Civil War. The volume deals with the politics of the 1850s and with the plunge into civil war.

Professor Ashworth offers a new way of understanding the conflict between North and South and shows how northern free labor increasingly came into conflict with southern slavery as a result of both changes in the northern economy and the structural weaknesses of slavery.

John Ashworth was born in Lancashire, England, and studied at the Universities of Lancaster and Oxford. He is currently Professor of American History in the School of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Nottingham.

To my parents, Eric and Freda Ashworth
## Contents

**Acknowledgments**

Introduction: Explaining the Civil War (1) ........................................... page ix  

### Part I Slavery versus Antislavery

1 Combating the weaknesses of slavery: Southern militants, 1850–1861  
   Introduction: The weaknesses of slavery  ........................................ 13  
   The Compromise of 1850 and its legacy .......................................... 17  
   Triumph of the southern Democrats: The Kansas-Nebraska Act, 1854 .... 45  
   Crisis in Kansas, 1854–1858 ......................................................... 63  
   The weaknesses of slavery (1): Free blacks .................................... 76  
   The weaknesses of slavery (2): Nonslaveholding whites ..................... 82  
   The weaknesses of slavery (3): Slaves .......................................... 96  
   The southern economy .................................................................. 104  
   Crisis in the Democratic party and in the nation, 1857–1860 .......... 111  
   Secession and war: 1860–1861 ...................................................... 128  
   Conclusion .................................................................................... 167

2 The antislavery challenge: The Republicans, 1854–1861  
   Introduction: The Republican party .................................................. 173  
   Democratic antecedents ................................................................ 176  
   Whig antecedents ........................................................................... 205  
   Slavery and morality ..................................................................... 234  
   Republicans and the Slave Power .................................................... 244  
   Republicans and capitalism ............................................................. 265  
   Secession and war, 1860–1861 ....................................................... 303  
   Conclusion ..................................................................................... 329
## Contents

### Part II Polarisation and Collapse

3  The disintegration of Democratic hegemony: Northern Democrats and their southern allies, 1850–1861 339
   Introduction: The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1) 339
   Democracy, the nation, and the Democratic party 344
   A constricted universalism: Race and ethnicity 354
   State’s rights and limited government 369
   Territorial expansion: Extending the area of freedom (and slavery) 384
   Slavery and antislavery 399
   The Kansas-Nebraska Act (2): Popular sovereignty 417
   Democrats and the economy 436
   Secession and war, 1860–1861 457
   Conclusion 466

4  Political realignment: Collapse of the Whigs and neo-Whigs, 1848–1861 471
   Introduction: Whiggery, neo-Whiggery and their discontents 471
   The Whigs, 1848–1852 476
   Temperance 494
   Nativism: The Know Nothings 515
   Collapse of the Whigs and the Know Nothings, 1852–1856 544
   Realignment completed, 1857–1860 579
   The Constitutional Union party 592
   Secession and war, 1860–1861 606
   Conclusion 624
   Conclusion: Explaining the Civil War (2) 628

Appendix: A review of some major works on the reasons for Confederate defeat 651

Index 673
Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the help I have received over the many years I have been engaged upon this volume (and its predecessor). I should like to express my gratitude to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a grant which enabled me to take a much-needed study leave. As far as fellow academics are concerned, Eric Foner has been a constant source of engagement and of constructive criticism and special thanks are due to him. Bruce Levine provided me with an excellent critique of an earlier version of the entire manuscript and the book is far better for his criticisms. Thanks also to James Oakes for many helpful points, to William W. Freehling, with whom I have exchanged many e-mails on the subjects addressed in this volume, and to two other anonymous critics, employed by Cambridge University Press, who offered not only criticism but also encouragement that was most welcome. On this side of the Atlantic, my colleague Richard King at Nottingham made some extremely helpful observations about my treatment of southern militants before the Civil War and Owen Butler, a former graduate student, gave the section on the Whig party a very thorough critical reading. Michael Heale, my teacher many years ago, and a friend now for many decades, read the whole manuscript and his comments and support were of incalculable value. Profound thanks also to my father, Eric Ashworth, who also read the manuscript in its entirety – a time-consuming task – and made many very helpful observations. I should also like to express my gratitude to my children Jackie and Mcash. Mary Paden and her team at Aptara Inc. saw this volume through from manuscript to its final form and I am very grateful to her. Last, but certainly not least, I must thank my editor Frank Smith at Cambridge University Press in New York for the immense amount of support, help, and encouragement he has provided over three books and more than twenty years.