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## R E V I E W S

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### *Slavery in the American Republic: Developing the Federal Government, 1791–1861*

by David F. Ericson

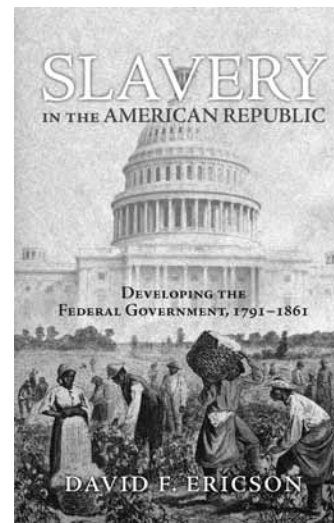
ix + 298 pages, appendixes, notes, index.

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*Slavery in the American Republic* challenges the conventional view that slavery stymied American state development before the Civil War. Looking at five key policy areas—fugitive slave rendition, slave trade interdiction, African colonization, the slavery-related use of military force, and federal employment of slave labor—political scientist David F. Ericson traces the pathways by which the institution of slavery contributed to the development of the federal government.

Federal regulation of fugitive slave renditions furnishes the clearest instance of slavery positively affecting the development of the federal government. Congress coopted state and private resources to apprehend and secure fugitive slaves against rescue, extend national legal processes to displace state liberty laws, and provide criminal sanctions to restrain state and local officials who violated the “rights” of slaveholders. These were very similar to the enforcement provisions Congress consciously and conspicuously built into the Civil Rights Act of 1866 sixteen years later. There is considerable irony in the fact that the institutional structure eventually employed to protect freedmen from their former masters was first framed by their masters to keep them in bondage.

Ericson finds significant, if less impressive, effects in the other four policy areas. Federal efforts to interdict illegal slave trading occasioned a measure of growth in the naval power of the United States and constituted an early national effort at immigration control. Ericson concedes that the federal commitment to block the slave trade was minimal until 1858, when President James Buchanan’s administration finally equipped the Africa Squadron with adequate resources. But he points out that the belated development bore fruit when the squadron was called home three years later to interdict smugglers running the Union blockade of Confederate ports. Federal involvement in African colonization rendered even less show-stopping effects. In budgetary terms, the commitment of federal resources was sparse and largely borrowed from the already scant appropriations for slave trade interdiction. Institutionally, however, federal support of the African Colonization Society involved the government in an early form of public–private partnership that has since proliferated. Slavery also accounted for at least some significant expansion of the nation’s war-making powers, involving the federal government in military actions that not only entailed the exercise of raw coercive power but also served to establish the independence of the army from local constituencies (as in Bleeding Kansas) and vindicate the competence of the regular army vis-à-vis the state militias (as in the Second Seminole War). Finally, the federal government’s



use of slave laborers contributed to the development of federal management practices and to bureaucratic autonomy. Because slave and free laborers frequently worked side by side, management practices appropriate to slaves spilled over. Thus, Ericson writes, the “illiberal nature of the institution of slavery followed slaves into the federal workplace” (p. 161). At the same time, the desire of federal policy makers to keep federal employment of slave labor “on the periphery” resulted in a high level of autonomy for mid-level bureaucrats making day-to-day employment decisions (p. 160).

Whether the book succeeds in establishing its thesis is contingent on the burden of proof it faces. Insofar as Ericson seeks to establish the counterfactual claim that the federal government would not have developed these capacities to the same extent in the absence of slavery, his success is dubious. But the counterfactual test sets the bar unnecessarily high. Ericson’s argument clearly does succeed insofar as he seeks to “enrich” the narrative of early American state development by dispensing with oversimplified generalizations about slavery stifling the growth of the federal government. Ericson consistently demonstrates that in several key policy areas, the American state frequently grew on account of the institution of slavery and often at the behest of slaveholders. And though Ericson’s thesis is not altogether novel—he professedly owes a great deal to the work of the late historian Don Fehrenbacher, whose posthumously published opus Ericson calls “magisterial” (p. viii)—he makes an important contribution by going beyond the “public face” of federal policy to examine the “subterranean processes of policy formation, implementation, and legitimation that undergird state development” (p. 15). *Slavery in the American Republic* thus fills a significant lacuna in the literature and furnishes scholars of politics and history with an insightful guide to oft-neglected documentary evidence.

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