The Slaveholding Crisis: Fear of Insurrection and the Coming of the Civil War. By Carl Lawrence Paulus (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2017) Pp. 328. Cloth, $49.95.

To fully understand the coming of the Civil War, Carl Paulus contends that historians need to examine the fears of slaveholders in regards to slave insurrection. From the 1790s to the 1860s, the *Slaveholding Crisis* argues, the planter elite pointed to the Haitian Revolution as a constant image of a successful slave uprising. Shaped by these fears, Southerners regarded territorial expansion as the key to preventing revolts. In response to this fear, the South forged its "own version of American exceptionalism—one that placed the perpetuation of slavery at the forefront of the nation's purpose."[1] The planter elite used the power of the federal government— a major theme throughout the book—to combat their antislavery opponents and shape a nation willing to safeguard slavery. During the 1840s, slaveholders lost power and stopped regarding America as exceptional. With the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s, they imagined that those devoted to free-soil would support slaves in deserting their masters, if not provoke wide-scale insurrection. To make matters worse, the planter elite feared that a Republican president, acting as commander in chief, would refuse to send troops to suppress slave uprisings, effectively turning the South "into a North American version of Haiti."[2] In the end, the South decided that it was safer to form a nation with the centralized powers to defend the cause of slavery even in the face of risking war with the North.

As the news of Saint-Domingue's brutal violence found its way to the United States, American politicians focused on subverting, containing, and propping up domestic security in the slave states to prevent Haiti's instability from creeping northward. According to Paulus, the fears of the planter elite were legitimate. Influenced by the Haitian Revolution, Gabriel, a Virginia slave owned by Thomas Prosser, and Denmark Vesey of South Carolina conspired against the planter class to strike a blow at the shackles of slavery. As a way of preventing uprisings, slaveholders looked to maintain a white majority and expand their territory further west. Together the Louisiana Purchase, a move that granted the expansion of slavery westward, and the end of the slave trade strengthened Southern national security by preventing the overpopulation of bondspeople. Many southern slaveholders also found comfort in the idea that they were different from their neighbors in Saint-Domingue, trusting that the white population in the free-labor North would provide resources to extinguish any insurrection. The slaveholders' belief in the North's willingness to defend the South was what made "American slavery and the Union exceptional."[3]

The following three chapters of *The Slaveholding Crisis* focus on the abolitionist movement at home and abroad as well as the planter elite's response to their antislavery critics. During the 1820s and 1830s, slaveholders believed that abolitionist "fanaticism," as exemplified by David Walker's *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, saw the North drifting away from the South and provoking slave insurrections, like Nat Turner's revolt in Virginia in 1831. To counter the North's growing antislavery sentiment, the planter elite adopted Thomas Dew's

---

[1] Carl Lawrence Paulus, *The Slaveholding Crisis: Fear of Insurrection and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 6.

[2] Paulus, *The Slaveholding Crisis*, 3.

[3] Paulus, *The Slaveholding Crisis*, 48.

proslavery argument, which defended the institution as a positive good and cast emancipation in a negative light for both whites and blacks. With British emancipation in the West Indies, Southerners increasingly felt squeezed by a world gravitating toward universal liberty and hostile to slavery. Following the passage of Britain's Abolition Act in 1833, "in an extraordinary transition from their earlier arguments based upon states' rights, the proslavery movement claimed that the founding documents did not have the capability to protect slaveholders from a persistent majority in favor of the abolition."[4] Slaveholders turned toward the national government to check the growing antislavery movement in the Atlantic. While in Congress, planters, for example, took aim at abolitionist literature and blamed it for inciting slave revolts. With President Andrew Jackson's blessing, they attempted to wield the power of the federal government to regulate the Post Office to censor antislavery tracks entering the South. Although the slaveholders' plot to limit free speech failed on the national stage, proslavery congressmen passed an antislavery gag rule. The South's use of federal power did not stop there, however. Following historian Matthew Karp's work on the South's push for a stronger navy as a way to safeguard slavery, Paulus details how planters, in response to growing abolitionism in Britain and the Caribbean, used their weight to focus Congress on strengthening the South's naval defenses around the Gulf of Mexico.[5]

Connected to the ideas of stability and national security, slaveholders identified territorial expansion as key to preserving their peculiar institution, leading many Southerners to advocate for the extension of slavery to the Pacific. Recognizing the toxic environment that led to the Haitian Revolution—an outnumbered white population locked within a fixed landmass unable to expand the institution of bound labor—slaveholders believed that America was different. Not only did they have a white population in the free states to protect them, but many believed that westward expansion provided an area in which they could take "excess" slaves to prevent overpopulation. For these same planters, Texas came to represent that very land in which they could take their surplus slaves. Many understood the importance of that area as a natural buffer to protect the southwestern slave states from outside antislavery interference, notably the British. Although favoring the annexation of Texas, David Wilmot unveiled a plan in the House restricting slavery's westward expansion to any new territory acquired from the Mexican War, with the exception of Texas. Southerners protested his measure loudly, highlighting their need to expand slavery. Reflecting the North's unwillingness to grant the South's demands to increase slave territory, the Wilmot Proviso, Paulus argues, "became a crucial turning point in American political history."[6] During the 1850s, planters believed that the Union, as evidenced by John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry and Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, would not protect them from slave insurrection and therefore came to no longer regard America as exceptional. Forced to defend against slave uprisings without northern assistance, slaveholders, even in the face of war with the free states, concluded that it would be safer to form their own nation.

---

[4] Paulus, *The Slaveholding Crisis*, 89.

[5] Matthew J. Karp, "Slavery and American Sea Power: The Navalist Impulse in the Antebellum South," *JSH* 77, no. 2 (May 2011): 283-324.

[6] Paulus, *The Slaveholding Crisis,* 195.

In sum, Paulus's work offers much value in explaining the South's need to expand slavery, an idea that proved just as critical as safeguarding the institution where it already existed. Paulus convincingly argues that this desire by large explains the coming of the Civil War. Indicating a strong historical current, both *The Slaveholding Crisis* and Matthew Karp's *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (2016) highlight the importance of territorial expansion to slaveholders. Together with James Oakes's explanation of how the Republican Party aimed to deal with the slavery question in *The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War* (2014), Paulus's work combines to create a clear narrative in detailing the Civil War's genesis. Due to its excellent research and chronological outline of American political history from the 1790s to the dawn of the Civil War, this elegantly-written work will serve as an invaluable source in undergraduate and graduate classrooms, especially as it pertains to Southern history and the Civil War.

Shawn B. Devaney
Texas Christian University