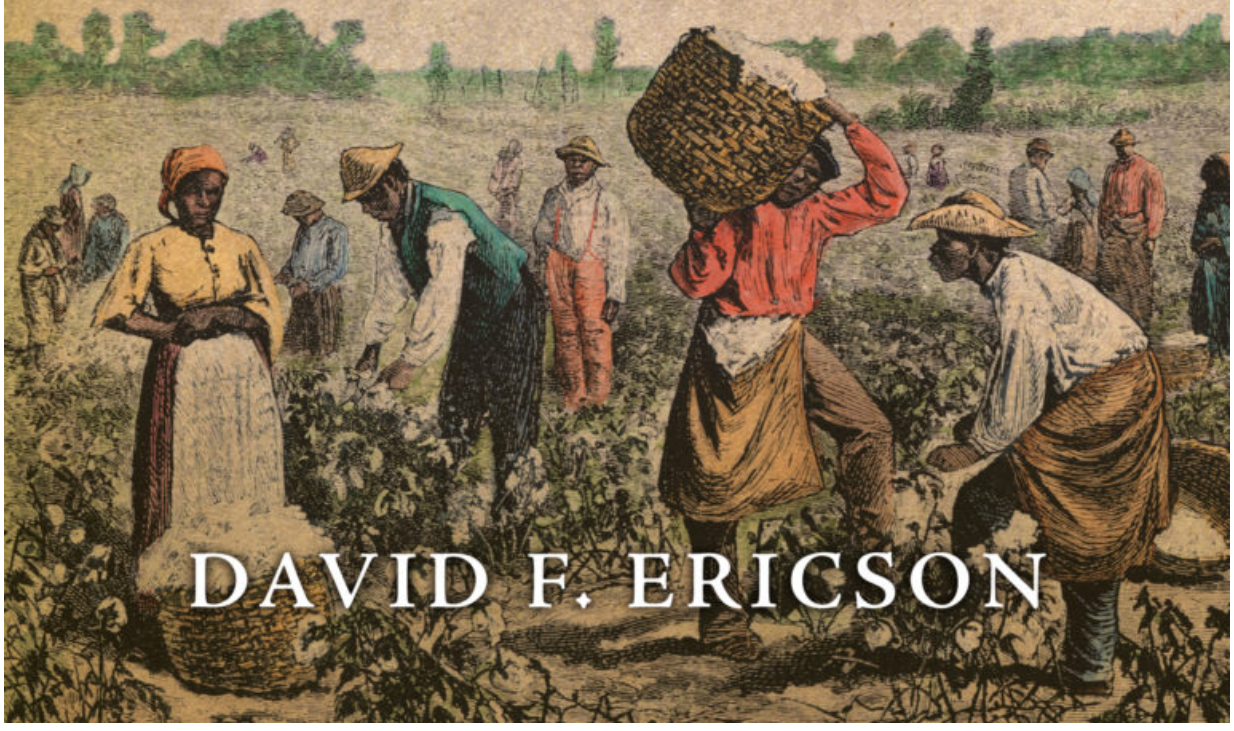
Slavery and the State

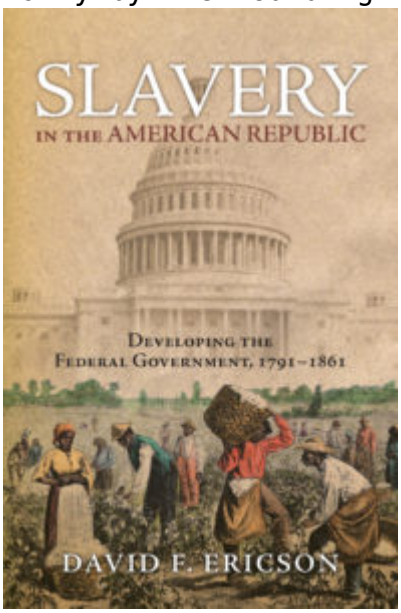
SLAVERY
IN THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC

DEVELOPING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, 1791–1861



DAVID F. ERICSON

Just over a decade ago, Donald Fehrenbacher's posthumously published *Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*made a signal contribution to the study of the relationship between slavery and the early American republic. Through an examination of key public policy from the late eighteenth century through the Civil War, he described the steady and increasing influence of southern slaveowners on the federal government. At the same time, he traced the evolution of the United States Constitution from a neutral text regarding slavery to what many came to see as a radically pro-slavery document. In this retelling of the early American republic, the drift of the federal government into the pro-slavery camp was inevitable, given slaveowner's near monopoly on the White House and the deep-seated racism of the American people in both sections. Consequently, when Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party threatened to reverse public policy in the direction intended originally by the founding fathers, secession and Civil War were a natural response.



Rented slaves built federal forts, roads, and the United States Capitol. Sometimes they served as soldiers and sailors.

Rarely are scholarly studies written in response to a single historical monograph, even one as important as Fehrenbacher's. In David Ericson's *Slavery in the American Republic*, however, he answers Fehrenbacher's "tour de force" (14) with a systematic appraisal of the role of the institution of slavery in American state development, that is, "the institutional development of the federal government" (6). Readers may not respond well to Ericson's style, which is at times flat and detached. But they will be hard-pressed to dispute his central thesis: that despite the conventional wisdom regarding slaveowners' efforts to thwart the growth and expansion of the federal government in the decades before the Civil War, slavery had an extraordinary bearing on the development of the American state.

Ericson begins with a methodical exploration of the history and literature of the American state. While there is disagreement over whether the Frontier

Thesis, the Market Revolution, or war was the central driver of the American government in the first half of the nineteenth century, Ericson offers an alternative explanation, maintaining that it was slavery above all else that shaped the course of the United States. Fehrenbacher made nearly the same point when he showed the extent to which slavery altered the “public face” of the federal government. Ericson goes even further, insisting, “the presence of slavery permeated the whole regime, including the more subterranean processes of policy formation, implementation, and legitimation that undergird state development” (15).

Following this introductory discussion, the book examines five policy areas that affected American state development. The first was the United States government’s initial efforts at border control, in this case the illegal importation of African slaves after the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1808. The creation of the Africa Squadron in the 1840s marked the emergence of the United States Navy on the international stage and helped push total expenditures for ending the trade in the four decades before the Civil War to nearly $9,000,000. The second was the establishment of Liberia, the first United States colony on a foreign shore. By providing the privately run American Colonization Society some $600,000 (in addition to related naval expenditures), the federal government made the West African settlement for liberated African captives and former African American slaves a reality. It also set an important precedent by establishing the “longest lasting and most well-funded” public-private partnership established by the federal government before the Civil War (53). The third was the capture, extradition, and rendition of runaway slaves. According to Ericson, “The federal government acted as the extended arm of Southern slaveholders in both domestic and international fugitive-slave disputes during the 1791-1861 period as U.S. attorneys, justices, commissioners, marshals, diplomats, soldiers, and Indian agents became increasingly active in recovering fugitive slaves and in ensuring compensation in cases where they were not recovered” (80). Fourth was the employment of the military to protect, secure, and extend the rights of slaveowners by forcibly removing Native Americans from east of the Mississippi River, suppressing slave insurrections, and fighting a series of wars, most significant among them the Second Seminole War. This largely forgotten war destroyed the last remnants of a joint Native American and African American resistance movement against European American expansion, lasted longer than any war prior to the Vietnam War, and cost the American people some $30,000,000.

Public slavery is the fifth and final policy area Ericson considers, and though adding only slightly to his overall argument, it represents his most original historiographical contribution. Though little-known today, the federal government over the course of several decades leased bondspeople from slaveowners and employed them as servants and both skilled and unskilled laborers at army posts, navy yards, and various other federal installations, including the Post Office, where they worked as servants, clerks, and even letter carriers. Among these federally owned people was Dred Scott, who before becoming a household name, served as a personal assistant to U.S. Army surgeon

John Emerson. Rented slaves built federal forts, roads, and the United States Capitol. Sometimes they served as soldiers and sailors. The federal government never owned the black men and women they leased, but military officers and other officials often did, and federal employees routinely acted as masters and overseers. The pervasiveness of public slavery helps explain the popularity of internal improvements among a portion of the South’s population who profited immensely by leasing bondspeople to the federal government. It moreover refutes those who would still suggest the United States government was anything but staunchly supportive of the rights of slaveowners prior to the Civil War.

Ericson’s research is beyond reproach. Indeed, his marshaling of evidence from published and unpublished sources is remarkable, and the calculations and rough estimations of federal expenditures on slavery-related concerns over a seventy-year period are the result of a herculean effort. Historians of slavery and the new republic will rely on this data for years to come. If only Ericson’s style and prose were equally remarkable, the book would compare favorably with some of the best on American slavery. Instead, the overuse of extended metaphors and counterfactual arguments, along with a reliance on academic jargon best reserved for a dissertation or the graduate seminar room, too often distract from the extraordinary erudition that otherwise characterizes this work. The result is an important and convincing study that historians and graduate students will appreciate and praise justifiably, but because of its esoteric nature will unfortunately have a limited appeal for undergraduate students and general readers alike.