

## Politics and Power in a Slave Society

*J. Mills Thornton*

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**J. Mills Thornton : Politics and Power in a Slave Society** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Politics and Power in a Slave Society:

27 of 27 people found the following review helpful. The politics of secession in antebellum AlabamaBy Sandra Parke TopolskiFor those wishing to understand how the choice to secede came about in a state where elitist planters did not dominate the political process (as in South Carolina) this is an excellent book. Thornton clearly shows that secession was a product of populist Jacksonian democracy in Alabama, providing an alternative to the view that only slaveholders supported disunion. Alabama's politics were marked from the beginning by class conflict between the yeomanry and planter class, and politicians learned early to exploit these tensions for political gain. Parties fought to outdo each other in labeling the other side as "elitist" aristocrats who would subvert the rights of freemen for their own selfish interests. This line of argument set the stage for the development of state's rights theory in Alabama, as promoters of internal improvements, banks, and social reform were often portrayed as elitist cabals. However, state's rights arguments were often little more than sophisticated versions of the election demagoguery that characterized debate over all the state's political issues.Lack of policy-making expertise and the necessity of courting public approval often led the state's legislators to enact laws that hurt Alabama's long-term development. Forged in the Jacksonian era however, the electorate did not accept the Jeffersonian ideal of deferring to their betters in matters of policy, and regularly removed legislators who did not hew to the voters' instructions. Prior to the 1850s, most Alabama voters were not directly involved with the market economy, and were thus less likely to be affected by national economic and political policies, as well as less aware of the character of Northern opinion regarding slavery.

Secessionist fire-eaters therefore enjoyed little support during the nullification and secession of 1850 crises, but their arguments gained respect during the 1850s as phenomenal economic growth drew more people into the market and its attendant insecurities, as well as making them more aware of the power of the federal government and the strength of the abolitionists. Prosperous times and the marginalization of the Whig Party decreased the number of significant issues of disagreement among Alabama's politicians, leaving them in search of an issue to demagogue for political gain. The fight over Kansas allowed them to portray northerners as elitists who would deny southern men of their rights and reduce them to the status of slaves. Such an argument gained credence even among non-slaveholders because of the state's long populist rhetorical tradition, which had convinced the yeomanry that elitist villains seeking to reduce their rights were always afoot, and could be defeated only by political supermen fighting for the rights and values of the electorate. The southern rights argument clearly resonated among the yeomanry, particularly among those most affected by new economic uncertainties. In both the Presidential election of 1860 and the subsequent election of delegates to the state's secession convention, voters overwhelmingly chose candidates who supported secession or who would do so as long as Alabama would be joined in secession by other states. While Thornton's argument could be more thoroughly reinforced by exploring social factors that led the yeomanry to support secession, his argument for a hyper-democratic political tradition abetted by demagoguery and voter ignorance as a cause of Alabama's decision to quit the Union is quite persuasive.

Book by Thornton, J. Mills