



More American than Southern: Kentucky, Slavery, and the War for an American Ideology, 1828-1861

Gary Matthews

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When Fort Sumter fell to Confederate troops in April 1861, most states quickly declared their allegiances to the North or South. Kentucky, however, assumed an antiwar posture that outlasted Fort Sumter by five months, begrudgingly joining the Union cause only when Confederate troops marched into the state and seized the town of Columbus. With its hesitancy to make an immediate commitment and faced with the conflicting sentiments of its people, Kentucky stood as a microcosm of the nation's dilemma. In the first comprehensive examination of Kentucky's secession crisis in nearly ninety years, Gary R. Matthews examines the antebellum social, economic, and political issues that distinguished Kentucky from the rest of the slave and border states, identifying it instead with a national perspective and its own peculiar form of Unionism. On the eve of the Civil War, Kentucky's affinity for the South was based on historical and cultural similarities, including the presence of slavery and a powerful master class. However, the planter class that dominated early Kentucky was supplanted in the 1830s by an urban middle class that challenged both the need for slavery and the authority of the master class. Matthews analyzes the dichotomy of these two groups, examines emancipation efforts in Kentucky, and explores the intricacies of Whig politics to show how Kentucky differed from the southern model in significant ways. He also explains how geographical components, most importantly the southern Appalachian Mountains and the Ohio-Mississippi River system, helped define Kentucky's singular role in antebellum America. As Matthews shows, Kentuckians desired both Union and slavery, and saw secession as a threat to both. The state's unique political and economic identities had been established long before the sectional crisis, and its self-interests could be best served in a national as opposed to a sectional environment. By choosing neutrality and then Unionism, the Kentucky of 1861 proved it was more American than southern.

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