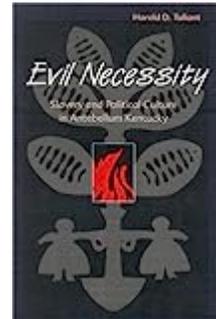




**Harold D. Tallant.** *Evil Necessity: Slavery and Political Culture in Antebellum Kentucky.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003. xiii + 307 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2252-6.



**Reviewed by** Phillip Hamilton (Department of History, Christopher Newport University)

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## Stuck in the Middle with Slavery

Harold D. Tallant has written a well-researched and nuanced study about Kentucky politics and slavery during the antebellum age. He focuses on the attempt by its political leaders to deal with human bondage at a time when the institution nationwide had become a powerful and divisive issue. Tallant asserts that not only did white Kentuckians see themselves as occupying the nation's "moderate" middle ground long before the Civil War, but also that their moderate beliefs actually strengthened and perpetuated slavery inside the state. Tallant's study gets to the heart of the Kentucky paradox—many prominent whites genuinely and publicly proclaimed slavery to be an "evil," but then thwarted effective actions against it. Indeed, issues of property rights, labor needs, and racism always rendered emancipation schemes unfeasible, thus rendering bondage itself a necessary evil that could not yet be ended. Although some issues and ideas need to be developed, this is a valuable book that will help scholars understand the political and economic complexities of American slavery in the decades prior to the Civil War.

Tallant begins *Evil Necessity* with Kentucky's most famous antebellum son, Henry Clay, who initially ar-

ticulated the necessary evil philosophy during the debates of 1799 over the drafting of the state's first constitution. A half century later in 1849, although Kentucky and the nation had profoundly changed, Henry Clay's position "was remarkably similar": slavery remained "an evil" which unfortunately still had "to be tolerated until individual states could devise gradual, cautious plans of emancipation" (pp. 2-3). The static views of "Harry of the West" were shared by many white Kentuckians during the first half of the nineteenth century. Unlike fellow slaveholders in the Deep South, Kentuckians refused to embrace the fantasy of the positive good theory; rather, most of them understood that the institution harmed the state, the South, and the nation. Bondage was, moreover, grossly unfair to African Americans in a land of liberty. On the other hand, Clay and other Kentuckians refused to embrace northern abolitionists who stridently demanded slavery's immediate end. State leaders and owners instead called for emancipation to be gradual and, above all, orderly. Problems concerning property, the labor supply, and the creation of a free black population all had to be confronted and solved before bondage could start down the path toward extinction.

In the 1820s and 1830s, many antislavery Kentuckians believed that African colonization would solve these multiple problems. After fully compensated owners voluntarily freed their slaves, all blacks in the state (both ex-slaves and free African Americans) would be shipped across the Atlantic to return to their ancestral homeland. In 1829, political leaders established the Kentucky Colonization Society (KCS) as an auxiliary of the American Colonization Society to make this plan a reality. Although a failure by any standard (Tallant notes that the KCS sent only 661 blacks to Africa before the Civil War), colonization efforts reveal the complexities of antislavery. As in most southern states, many Kentucky owners saw colonization merely as a way to rid themselves of supposedly troublesome free blacks. However, unlike masters in the Deep South, a number of white Kentuckians insisted that colonization also be a tool to genuinely (albeit slowly) eliminate slavery. They argued, furthermore, that the colony of Liberia could prove the competency of African Americans to survive independently. Indeed, Liberia could even lead to the “redemption of Africa” itself (p. 56), as ex-slaves would establish key elements of American civilization, especially Christianity, which they had learned during their time in bondage.

In the book’s third chapter, “The Dilemma of Conservative Reform,” Tallant provides a fine discussion of the numerous issues antislavery advocates had to keep in mind in their ongoing search for solutions. Although they eventually grasped the impracticalities of colonization, Kentucky emancipationists clearly realized and wrote how bondage socially and economically hurt the state as a whole. Generations inside the system of slavery had certainly debased African Americans morally and intellectually, and created racial enmities that imperiled all residents. Emancipationists insisted, though, that principles of liberty and equality must apply to all, even slaves. Indeed, blacks were “fully human” and definitely not “a different and lower species than the Caucasian[s]” (p. 74). Like whites, they possessed “the gift of reason” (p. 75). Furthermore, reformers argued that bondage crippled the dignity of labor and undermined the desire of lower-class whites to “advance themselves through hard work” (p. 82). Because hard work and progress were whiggishly linked in Kentucky’s emancipationist mind, slavery’s presence in the state ultimately meant a long-term economic decline in which both races would suffer.

Despite their efforts, antislavery leaders realized by the early 1840s that resistance to even modest legislative plans was insurmountable. In addition to ongoing questions about labor and property, emancipationists had to

confront the social reality that slave ownership provided Kentucky masters with “a mark of exalted status” (p. 101)—a mark to which many whites still aspired. The only hope for change, therefore, was to convince the General Assembly to call a constitutional convention. Perhaps such an extralegal body could develop a strategy for gradual emancipation and then write it into the new plan for state government. Throughout the decade, antislavery conservatives like Cassius Clay became leading and vocal supporters of what was known as “the convention movement” (p. 113). Deriving political support from the state’s growing urban population as well as from the eastern mountain counties, emancipationists helped push a convention bill through the General Assembly during the 1845-46 legislative session.

Although Tallant explains that the demand for constitutional change stemmed from “a variety of forces,” “the issue of slavery quickly overshadowed most other issues as the state prepared to select [convention] delegates” (p. 137). Indeed, the possibility of constitutional change with regard to slavery brought out both antislavery advocates as well as proslavery supporters, who furiously “denounce[d] the emancipationists” (p. 137). Thus, by the late-1840s, Kentuckians witnessed and participated in the kinds of emotional debates over the future of slavery that were then occurring throughout the nation. Violence also visited Kentucky. During the election campaign for delegates, for instance, Cassius Clay was stabbed by a supporter of bondage. In another incident, a proslavery candidate from Paducah pulled out a revolver in the middle of a debate and shot his emancipationist opponent dead.

The convention held in the fall of 1849 proved a disaster for the emancipation cause. Only 9.7 percent of the state’s voters selected antislavery delegates. By contrast, “[a]t least a third of the delegates elected to the convention had run as proslavery candidates” (p. 151). This ensured that nothing would be done to advance an emancipation agenda. On the contrary, proslavery delegates insisted that additional protections for bondage be written into the new plan for government. In particular, slave owners’ property rights were to be scrupulously secured in the possible event that Kentuckians later passed a *post nati* emancipation plan. In the final summary of the convention’s work, moreover, proslavery delegates successfully inserted a passage declaring the institution to be not an evil, but a positive good for all; it was, they wrote, a source of “great wealth, and social and political power” (p. 158). In essence, the delegates had drafted, according to Tallant, “the most strongly proslavery state

constitution yet written in the United States” (p. 158), leaving the antislavery forces defeated and demoralized.

Despite this unmistakable drift toward proslavery sentiments, Tallant argues that Kentuckians did not entirely abandon their toleration for emancipation supporters. He illustrates this fact in the book’s final two chapters, which examine the Kentucky abolitionist John G. Fee and his activities in the 1850s as leader of the American Missionary Association (AMA). In some respects, these are the book’s best chapters, in part because Fee is such a compelling and heroic figure. In terms of Tallant’s overall argument, however, the chapters add little to our understanding of either Kentucky slavery or the politics of bondage during the most crucial antebellum decade. Tallant asserts that Fee’s abolitionist efforts “tested the limits of his state’s toleration” (p. 217). Fee was indeed very active and he did avoid death despite his work. However, while proslavery supporters in Kentucky were not like their counterparts from the Deep South, they hardly “paid little attention” to the AMA’s efforts (p. 216). As the author discusses in great detail, Fee and his fellow AMA members met repeated threats and violence. And Fee himself was expelled from the state sixteen months prior to the Civil War. Moreover, by focusing on a single individual at the book’s end, we lose sight of the bigger picture Tallant had so carefully drawn in the previous chapters. I am curious about what was going on politically throughout the state and also how leaders reacted to the escalating sectional crisis across the nation.

Still, *Evil Necessity* remains an impressive book. It joins a growing number of deeply researched state studies that illuminate the complex political and economic world that antebellum Americans occupied.[1] Several things, though, could be developed or provided in order to make the book even stronger. First, Tallant needs to elaborate more fully on geographic regionalism within

Kentucky. He does mention the eastern mountain counties, the Bluegrass region, and the growing urban cities of Lexington and Louisville in some of his analysis. But, as a historian of Virginia myself, I know how crucial regionalism can be in terms of understanding the contours and evolution of hot-button issues such as slavery. Therefore, a sustained discussion toward the book’s beginning about how regional differences shaped slavery and other questions (along with a map of the state) would provide context and insight, especially for the generalist reader.

Kentucky’s economic development also requires more discussion. Tallant mentions that the state possessed a diversified economy, producing hemp, grain crops, and livestock. But what about Kentucky’s overall role within the national economy throughout the antebellum age? Furthermore, given that the economic and political trends of the period were so tightly linked, how did the economics of slavery play out? Tallant does discuss how slave imports were blocked by the General Assembly in 1833 (later repealed in 1849), but nothing is said about how actively Kentucky owners participated in the export of their bondspople. Indeed, the export of surplus slaves and the national slave trade are not mentioned throughout the book. Discussion of this issue is especially important because, as in Virginia, this commerce boosted slave prices and further curbed what little enthusiasm there was for emancipation in the Upper South. Nevertheless, *Evil Necessity* is a solid and intelligent book that clearly makes the point that Kentucky’s “moderation” in reality did little to help the nation move beyond this tragic institution.

#### Note

[1]. See, for instance, William D. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

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