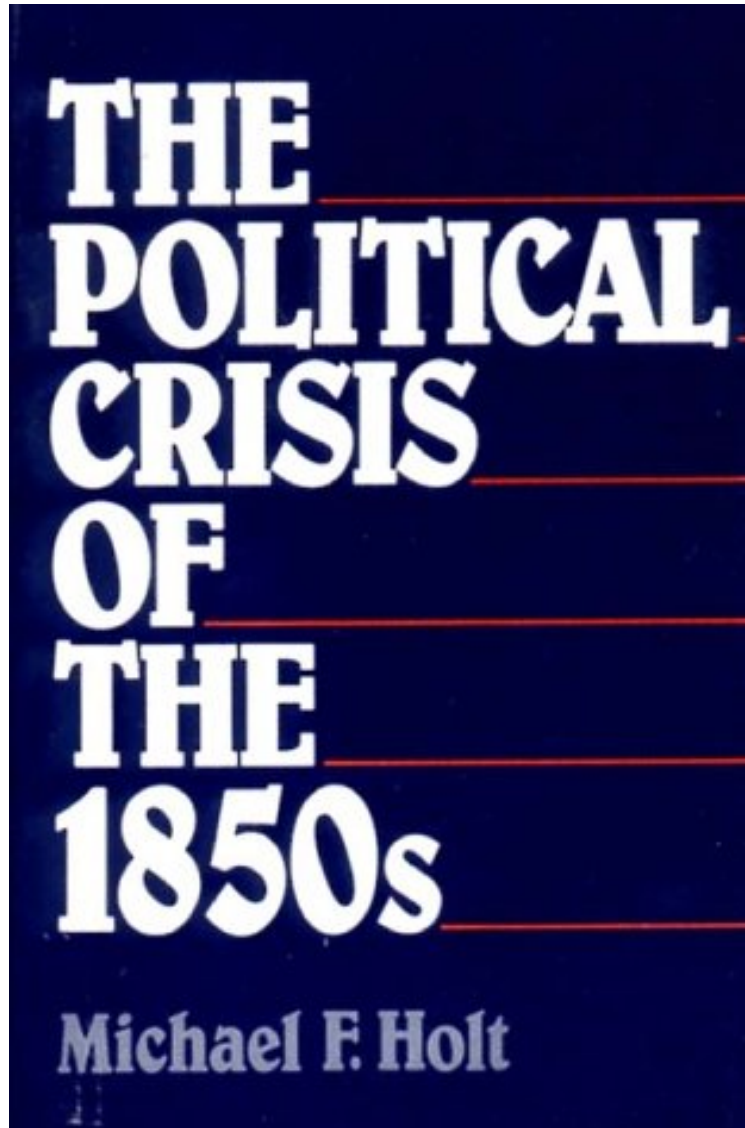


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The Political Crisis of the 1850s

Michael F. Holt

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Michael F. Holt : The Political Crisis of the 1850s before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Political Crisis of the 1850s:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. "It reads as if the author published his first draft"By ggrantOy gevalt!!! [Yiddish expression meaning both "oh my God" and "enough already."]This book is poorly written--even for an ACADEMIC book. And that's really saying something, because academics generally write poorly.The prose is uninspired and workmanlike. It doesn't scintillate or excite. Paragraph structure is confusing and arbitrary, often with

no effective topic sentence acting as an introduction for what follows. The author beats his points to death, restating them several times--and each time is less focused and more rambling. The text contains a great deal of arcane detail. Though its completeness is laudable, there is so much detail that the author's points are often lost in the abundance of data. Perhaps some of the detail could have been put into footnotes? Transitions between paragraph and different sections are awkward and poorly constructed. The book reads as if the author took his first draft, proofread it for typos and punctuation, but submitted it without the essential (for ANY writer) steps of analysis of what's been written; asking how well organized it is and how well it makes the author's point; and then REWRITING to improve the argument. This is sad, because the topic is important and interesting. Holt is clearly a master of his topic. The argument the author is attempting to make is Important to antebellum studies. The depth of his research is amazing. The underlying arguments are sound and convincing. But my god, it's hard to stay focused on the argument. I am reading this for a course in American History; otherwise I would not finish it. Rating for readability: Zero stars. Rating for the underlying argument: 5 stars. Average: 2.5 stars. 54 of 60 people found the following review helpful. Overemphasis on political containment, but otherwise good. By J. Grattan Part of the author's title is indisputable: the Northern-Southern divide over slavery and all of its attendant subtleties and ramifications was a crisis only waiting to happen in the 1850s. But the author places greater importance on what he sees as the political crisis of that era. Regardless, this book is a fine effort in capturing the richness of the party politics in the two decades leading to the Civil War. It is the author's essential point that a robust democratic polity requires political parties that compete on a somewhat equal basis, inspire widespread party loyalty and, in essence, control the more fractious issues or interpretations of the times. That is exactly the role that the author suggests that the Second Party system consisting of the Whigs and Democrats played from Andrew Jackson's presidency to the early 1850s. The expansion of slavery into new territories and states was the most contentious issue of the day. The Northern and Southern wings of both the Democrats and the Whigs adopted particular positions on such controversies as the Wilmot Proviso and the Compromise of 1850 that kept the public looking to the political realm for solutions. The author notes that themes of republican virtue, that is, defense of freedom and independence and opposition to tyranny in its various guises, were the basis of the parties' positions. But that political status quo fell apart as both the slavery issue and nativism could not be contained within the Second Party system. While the author views this development as the beginning of the political crisis of the 1850s, others may see the rise of new political parties as the essence of political responsiveness. The Know Nothing party had a meteoric rise in the mid-1850s but just as quickly the Republicans rose in the late 1850s and elected Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860. The author contends that political elites should be able to manage controversial issues of the day. But the fact is that the adherents of anti-slavery, nativism, and free soil of the 1850s overwhelmed the political alignments formed in the 1830s. The author comes close to suggesting that the Republicans were irresponsible opportunists by forming a party on sectional lines with sectional interests. The essential question that the author asks is why did slavery become an issue in the 1850s. After all, it had existed for the first sixty years of the nation. But his explanation of Second Party system breakdown seems inadequate. In the first place the Whig Party broke up in the South as a result of the Compromise of 1850. Secondly, a series of slavery-related developments in the 1850s exacerbated the situation. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, the entire state constitution fiasco in Kansas, and the Dred Scott decision all convinced Northerners that an oligarchic Slave Power had gained the upper hand in extending slavery. Those reactions drove political realignment along sectional lines. However, a salient point of the author's, and in accordance with his political crisis thesis, is that the lack of political competition in the lower southern states permitted the extremism that led to an extra-political solution, or secession. He points out that the upper south retained vigorous opposition parties to the Democrats and confidence in the political system as an avenue for redress. In the author's view, it is not surprising that South Carolina was the first state to secede because a vigorous two party system had never existed there. The author admits that his book is an "extended dialog" with the earlier work of Eric Foner, author of "Free Soil, Free Labor, ...". Foner emphasizes the essential social and philosophical differences between the South and the North that came to the fore and inevitably led to the Civil War. This author is not entirely dismissive of those sentiments, but chooses to emphasize the possibilities of political containment of those differences and the ramifications of political breakdown. In addition, this book does a far better job of describing the various crises of the era in chronological fashion. Both books are well worth reading. Footnote: this book does not in any way address the constitutional right to secede as one earlier review suggests. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars. By Barbara The book met my expectations and will be a wonderful addition to my AP United States History library.

Professor Holt's book provides a lucid and provocative interpretation of the coming of the Civil War. Holt sees the Civil War as representing a breakdown in America's democratic political process, more specifically the Second Party System of Whigs and Democrats. He demonstrates this system's success, beginning in the 1820s and 1830s, in confining sectional disputes safely within the political arena. With the breakdown of vital two-party competition in the 1850s, sectional issues increasingly took on ideological dimension, causing Americans North and South to see in them dangerous threats to cherished republican institutions. No longer manageable within the arena of politics,

sectional differences had to be resolved with in the arena of battle. The Political Crisis of the 1850s offers a clearly written account of politics (state and federal), sectionalism, race, and slavery from the 1820s through to the Civil War, brilliantly combining the behavioral and ideological approaches to political history.

About the Author Michael F. Holt is Langbourne M. Williams Professor of American History at the University of Virginia and the author, most recently, of *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*.