Lincoln Lore

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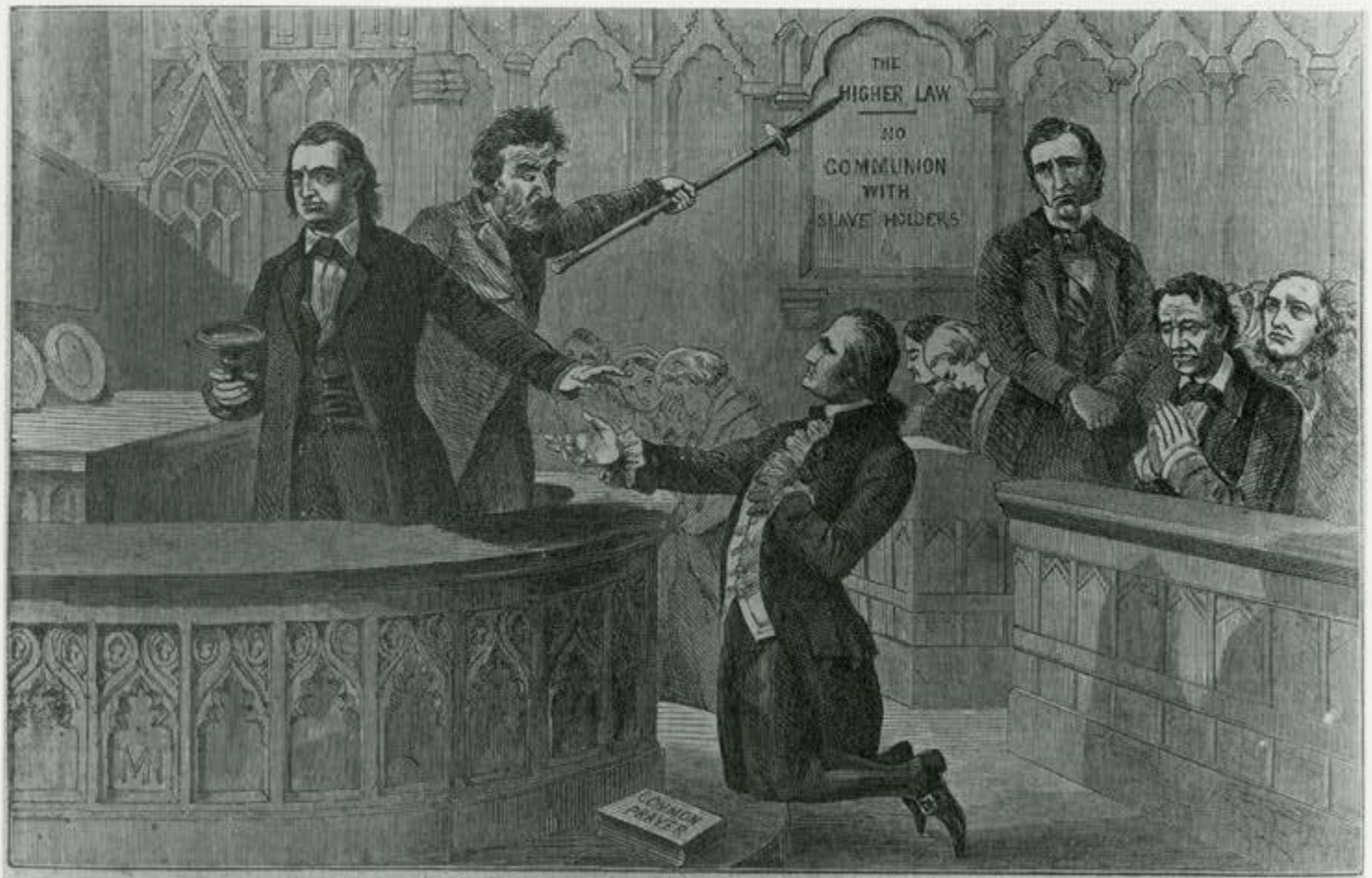
LINCOLN HISTORIOGRAPHY: NEWS AND NOTES

The best news in the field is that more Lincoln books are in the offing. Professor William Hanchett of San Diego State University has written eight chapters of a book on the assassination of President Lincoln. He has perhaps four more to write. He began the project as an extended essay on the historiography of the assassination but quickly discovered that he could not judge the historians without making up his own mind about the nature of the assassination conspiracy itself.

Thus began a long period of research in original sources, still under way. It took the efforts of his Congressman and other Washington friends to gain him access to the famed John Wilkes Booth diary, and, says Professor Hanchett, it took practically a half hour to free the little book from the Ford's Theatre Museum security system. He has done extensive research in manuscript collections, and his book promises to be a balanced and sane corrective to the recent surfeit of sensationalist theorizing about America's first Presidential assassination.

Though we tend to think of it as primarily a European phenomenon, there is a long tradition of American politicians who have written books that were something other than memoirs of their terms in office. No one has combined



NO COMMUNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS.

"Stand aside, you Old Sinner! WE are Holier than thou!"

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 1. *Harper's Weekly* **published this view of the secession crisis on March 2, 1861, just before President Lincoln delivered his inaugural address. The cartoon suggests that Northern self-righteousness rather than Southern intransigence was the cause of secession. Henry Ward Beecher refuses to give George Washington communion as Seward, Lincoln, and Greeley sit in the congregation in various attitudes of exaggerated piety. This was essentially the Democratic view of secession — that it was unnecessarily provoked by the sectional self-righteousness of the Republican party. To hold, as William Appleman Williams does, that Lincoln was an "imperialist" requires the same assumption that this cartoon had behind it, namely, that the South was taking the humble attitude of the supplicant like George Washington in the cartoon.**

Thomas Jefferson's feat of contributing significantly to American letters with a work like *Notes on the State of Virginia*, on the one hand, and reaching the highest political office in the land, on the other. Still, Theodore Roosevelt's contributions to the history of Westering America and Woodrow Wilson's scholarly contributions to political science and history should not be ignored.

The Lincoln field seems to be the last still to attract politicians as readily as historians. This tradition began with the recollections of politicians who knew Lincoln and reached great heights in the work of Indiana's Senator Albert Beveridge. This tradition is still alive. Congressman Paul Simon of Illinois, for example, wrote a book, *Lincoln's Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), which changed our thinking on many of the points of Lincoln's early political career and improved upon the work of Beveridge. Now Representative Paul Findley of Illinois's Twentieth Congressional District is at work on a book on Lincoln's single term in the United States Congress. Lincoln's appeal, incidentally, is broad; Simon is a Democrat and Findley is a Republican.

James R. Mellon, III, moves from the field of anthropology to Lincolniana and photographic history with a promise of a work on the best photographs of Lincoln. He hopes that the book will serve a sort of "archival" purpose by presenting with the latest methods of photographic reproduction the very best print available of all the famous photographs of the Sixteenth President before they deteriorate any further. Viking Press, which recently published a book on Georgia O'Keefe much praised for the quality of its color plates, is to be the publisher.

There has not been a motion picture about Abraham Lincoln in years. The movie industry has changed, and so has the nature of popular interest in Lincoln's career. Just now, it is probably the assassination which provokes the widest curiousity. Sunn Classic Productions, Inc., is filming "Conspiracy to Kill President Lincoln" in Savannah, Georgia, where the famed program of historic restoration has produced a city which is an ideal backdrop for a film about nineteenth-century America. The film is scheduled for release this summer. Although it does not promise to be of the sane and balanced school I championed in the first paragraph, the film will use actors of established reputation. John Anderson, who played Lincoln in a television special which preceded Hal Holbrook's lengthier portrayal, is supposed to play the Sixteenth President again. Richard Basehart, who has had a hand in a couple of television specials about Lincoln, will portray John Wilkes Booth. Sunn Classic's specialty is promotion, and they promise to give the film a big advertising campaign after this spring.

Winfred Harbison, who contributed substantial work on Lincoln and the Republican party in Indiana in the 1930s, has urged me to deal with the portrayal of Lincoln in Peter J. Parish's new one-volume synthesis, *The American Civil War* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1975). It was good advice. Professor David Donald of Harvard University has said of Parish's book that "It would be hard to find a better one-volume history of the conflict," and he should know, for Donald himself is coauthor of the best one-volume work on the period by far—at least before the appearance of Parish's work.

Parish's is certainly the most elegantly written textbook imaginable, and it is full of quotable and pithy statements about Abraham Lincoln. Parish begins his treatment of the Emancipation Proclamation by suggesting that "a man may show political skill and shun sentimentality, without necessarily being either shamelessly opportunist or morally insensitive." He calls Lincoln "the arch exponent of the indirect approach to the slavery issue, the strategy of the 'soft sell.'" Parish has a particular gift for using the evidence of witnesses of Lincoln's career to great effect, and it is important to his appreciation of Lincoln that one understand the context: "Even Horace Greeley admitted that Lincoln was well ahead of the bulk of Northern opinion, and that there was probably a majority in the North against emancipation until mid-1863." Given this state of public opinion, "He took the low road to emancipation rather than the high. It was slower and more circuitous, but it was safer and it led to the same place." Again, the well-selected witness's quotation, this time from Boston businessman John Murray Forbes in a letter to Charles Sumner, makes Lincoln's course seem shrewd:

> It seems to me very important that the ground of "military necessity" should be even more squarely taken than it was on 22d September. Many of our strongest Republicans, some even of our Lincoln electors, have constitutional scruples in regard to emancipation upon any other ground. . . .
>
> I know that you and many others would like to have it done upon higher ground, but the main thing is to have it done strongly, and to have it so backed up by public opinion that it will strike the telling blow, at the rebellion and at slavery together, which we so much need.
>
> I buy and eat my bread made from the flour raised by the hard-working farmer; it is certainly satisfactory that in so doing I am helping the farmer clothe his children, but my motive is self-preservation, not philanthropy or justice. Let the President free the slaves upon the same principle, and so state it that the masses of our people can easily understand it.
>
> He will thus remove constitutional scruples from some, and will draw to himself the support of a very large class who do not want to expend their brothers and sons and money for the benefit of the negro, but who will be very glad to see Northern life and treasure saved by any practical measure, even if it does incidentally an act of justice and benevolence.
>
> Now I would not by any means disclaim the higher motives, but where so much prejudice exists, I would eat my bread to sustain my life; I would take the one short, sure method of preserving the national life, — and say little about any other motive.

Parish clinches his argument by quoting Lincoln's explanation of his policy to British antislavery leader George Thompson, as reported by Francis B. Carpenter:

> Many of my strongest supporters urged *Emancipation* before I thought it indispensable, and, I may say, before I thought the country ready for it. It is my conviction that, had the proclamation been issued even six months earlier than it was, the public sentiment would not have sustained it. . . . We have seen this great revolution in public sentiment slowly but surely progressing, so that, when final action came, the opposition was not strong enough to defeat the purpose.

Parish interprets Lincoln's early policies of gradual emancipation for the Border States and his lingering interest in colonization as having an "invaluable political and propaganda purpose":

> If the gradual plan failed, it might still serve to assure conservatives that all else had been tried before the resort to more drastic measures, and to persuade radicals that the administration was moving in the right direction. If the colonisation schemes failed, as they surely would, they would still serve to show the president's awareness of the fears of a Negro influx into the North, and his concern with the consequences of emancipation. Many Republicans, some more radical than Lincoln, had spoken in favour of colonisation; a correspondent of Ben Wade had applauded his support for the idea: "I believe practically it is a damn humbug. But it will take with the people."

"Lincoln," says Parish in another memorable passage, "was at his best when appearing to bow to the inevitable while doing very much what he himself wished."

Parish's treatment of the election of 1864 is a little less sure handed. As a synthesis, his book can be no better than the best of the existing literature, and this election, unlike Lincoln's racial policies, has yet to receive adequate treatment. Certainly, he is correct in saying that the "1864 election was remarkable first in that it took place at all, and second in that it so much resembled other elections held before and after." The former judgment is getting to be commonplace (which is not to say that it is not true), but the latter lacks convincing proof in *The American Civil War*. He does make at least one original point about Lincoln's opponents within the Republican party: "Those who hoped to replace Lincoln were attracted by the tried and tested formula of nominating a military hero. Their problem was that the available military men in 1864 fell into two categories: generals like Grant who were wreathed in the laurels of victory but who resolutely refused to consider nomination, and those like Fremont or Ben Butler who were willing or anxious to be asked, but whose military record was scarcely untarnished." The "boom" for Salmon P. Chase,

then, was not a response to a popular clamor — the people and the hacks wanted a general — but a drive engineered from the top down. Parish does a nice job in "translation into plain English of the full-blown phrases" of the Republican platform, pointing to the real meaning of this gaseous platitude:

> *Resolved,* That we deem it essential to the general welfare that harmony should prevail in the National Councils, and we regard as worthy of public confidence and official trust those only who cordially indorse the principles proclaimed in these resolutions, and which should characterize the administration of the government.

In other words, translates Parish, Lincoln should behead Montgomery Blair.

Parish is on the high road to contradiction when he begins a paragraph: "The experience of 1864 bears out the view that, in American presidential elections, the struggle within the parties is often at least as important as the struggle between them." He then concludes the same paragraph by saying that "The rivals of 1864 offered the electorate a choice and not an echo." The fact of the matter is that most of the existing literature is written from the former viewpoint, but the latter viewpoint seems more proper in light of the nature of the party conflicts preceding the election of 1864. Attracted to the latter conclusion, Parish is nonetheless limited to the evidence for the former case — hence, his embarrassment. This is, however, an understandable blemish in an otherwise excellent book. Professor Parish lectures on American history at the University of Glasgow and joins that tradition of great British scholars who have on occasion understood American history better than the Americans themselves have.

In the course of studying Lincoln's ideas about expansion in his term as Congressman during the Mexican War, I was led to William Appleman Williams's book, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World: 1776-1976* (New York: William Morrow, 1976). This little volume "celebrates" the Bicentennial from the perspective of the New Left, a term which as the years fly by is becoming inapplicable but which has not yet been retired from use and replaced. Professor Williams, who is primarily a student of American foreign policy, is one of those radicals who hate liberals more than they hate conservatives. In American history, then, Professor Williams dislikes Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt and speaks, on the other hand, with a sort of nostalgic fondness of Herbert Hoover.

Williams hates Lincoln. He does not quite fall into that queer trap into which some American Marxists have fallen of admiration of the slave South because it was pre-captialist and provided one of the very rare examples of a non-capitalist society in the United States. But he does have enough of the radical's tendency to admire people for the enemies they make to argue that the South should have been allowed to leave in peace after — a curious concern for a radical — a convention authorized secession and "pegged" Federal property in the South at a fair price to be paid for over time (John Minor Bott's suggestion). Lincoln thus becomes for Williams what he hates the most, an imperialist and a precursor of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Wilson, says Williams, "would do for the world what Lincoln had done for America." Again, in the case of World War II, "in the narrow military sense, as with Lincoln and Wilson, Roosevelt carried his crusade to a victorious conclusion."

The Lincoln who emerges from Williams's pages, then, is a curious figure drawn as a monolith, though the commonest conclusion of any book on Lincoln these days is that he *grew.* He is terrifyingly ambitious ("Lincoln ultimately achieved his ambition to displace Washington as the Father of the Country"), and he is pictured as "hacking out his trail to the White House." Williams ignores Lincoln's periods of vacillation, doubt, and uncertainty about his career (politics, law, business, surveying), about his marraige (could a "penniless" piece of "floating driftwood" support a high-minded woman in a town where people "flourished" about in carriages?), and about politics (he claimed to have been losing interest in politics between 1849 and 1854). Lincoln is also depicted as "full of missionary zeal to globalize the American solution to life." "Put simply," adds Williams, "the cause of the Civil War was the refusal of Lincoln and other northerners to honor the revolutionary right of self-determination — the touchstone of the American Revolution." The House Divided speech "was the ultimate appeal to the genius of Madison: expand or die. Hence if we keep you from expanding you will die." Lincoln "wanted to transcend the Founding Fathers, free the slaves, and expand America's power throughout the world."

These are the slashing strokes of the essayist as quick portrait painter, and they have a surface plausibility rooted in the echoing of familiar phrases. By accident, some of these phrases are quite familiar. For years, I have assigned as a favorite topic for student essays a detailed analysis of Madison's *Federalist* Paper Number 10. And for years, I have been correcting a freshman misreading of that famous document. Madison says, "Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength and to act in unison with each other." He is completing a syllogism not making a statement of foreign policy. He precedes the statement with a description of the consequences of narrower boundaries ("The smaller the society . . . the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party . . . ."). The point of *Federalist* Number 10 is to convince people who think the proposed United States already too large that it is in fact all the better for its great size. Certainly, the savvy Madison was not going to convince the timid and cautious by urging a policy of greater extension of territory. Madison's political hero was Thomas Jefferson, who, though he had a tremendous interest in expansion, in fact thought that some of the possible expanded areas (Oregon, for example) would break off to form separate republics on the American model. This may be expanding the power of the United States, but it is not expanding it at the expense of self-determination. Madison's message was not expansion and imperialism, and neither was Lincoln's.

This is the best example to show the real fault of Williams's work; he reads things out of context. When he describes Seward as "a persistent and by no means wholly defeated rival for supreme power," Williams has smuggled the Imperial Presidency of the twentieth-century United States into the nineteenth century, when the Presidency could be conceived of (as it was by Zachary Taylor and Ulysses S. Grant, for example) as an office which merely enforced the Congressional will, a sort of vice-Congress. The flounderings of a feeble republic protected only by geography and still widely regarded as a dangerous "experiment" are also very different matters from the purposeful policies of a giant power.

A lively writing style on occasion masks historical imprecision, as is the case in Williams's discussion of Texas annexation and the Mexican War:

> . . . the antislavery people, along with the abolitionists, posed the specter of secession — or war — if Texas was acquired. Lincoln was not the only one who read it right. But Calhoun disdained to play Illinois games, and laid it out on the table: "It is easy to see the end . . . . We must become two people."

It is hard because of the imprecise style to tell exactly what "Lincoln . . . read it right" means here. However, not any of the possible meanings in the context can be true. Lincoln did *not* take the view of expansion that abolitionists did. He said bluntly in 1848 that he "did not believe with many of his fellow citizens that this war was originated for the purpose of extending slave territory." He did not even perceive Texas annexation as a national problem, telling Liberty man Williamson Durley that "Liberty men . . . have viewed annexation as a much greater evil than I ever did." In fact he "never was much interested in the Texas question." This points up two things: (1) Lincoln was not a clear-eyed imperialist squinting towards United States power at all times, and (2) imperialism was not the issue in the mid-nineteenth century that it became at and after the end of the century. Lincoln's indifference is thus the most effective answer to Williams; Williams is wrong about which side of the issue Lincoln stood on and unhistorical in his own concern about the issue. Williams's ignorance of this period of Lincoln's life is proven, and we need not, therefore, linger over this idle and sneering speculation:

> . . . given his later maneuver around Fort Sumter, one cannot avoid the thought that he learned from Polk how to act in a way that would start a war while shifting the blame to one's opponent. On the other hand, he may not have needed any instruction in such matters.

In the end, Williams draws a portrait of Lincoln which closely resembles the picture the opposition party drew during the Civil War. Of course, the Democrats' concern was not imperialism, but they drew Lincoln as a "ruthless" and "arrogant" (Williams's terms) potential dictator who rode roughshod over precious civil liberties. They had such disdain for him, however, that they could never respect his personality and drew quite another picture of him as a vague and wishy-washy pettifogger. Williams calls him "a Houdini with words" whose First Inaugural Address was "Hair splitting instead of rail splitting." He was "feeble," and "he lacked the courage to take his chances."

The ultimate conclusion is that President Lincoln "steered a counterrevolutionary course." But, as Peter Parish points out, Karl Marx — who knew a revolution when he saw one — came to quite a different conclusion in a letter to Engels:

> The fury with which Southerners have received Lincoln's Acts proves their importance. All Lincoln's Acts appear like the mean pettifogging conditions which one lawyer puts to his opposing lawyer. But this does not alter their historic content . . . . The events over there are a world upheaval, nevertheless.

In a very different kind of book, C. Peter Ripley makes some interesting observations about Lincoln's reconstruction policies. *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977) is a scholarly monograph based on extensive research in unpublished manuscripts. It is not easy reading, but it does present an interesting picture of politics and social life in a state about which President Lincoln came to care a great deal. Ripley argues that Lincoln's policies were on the whole and, especially in the end, conservative. When General Benjamin F. Butler failed to help escaped slaves even to the extent Congress allowed before the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln endorsed his policies by tolerating them. General Butler, often pictured as a ruthless radical, emerges from Ripley's book as a rather cautious man who feared emancipation. To Salmon Chase on July 10, 1862, he wrote, "I shall treat the negro with as much tenderness as possible, but I assure you it is quite impossible to free them here and now without a San Domingo. There is no doubt that an insurrection is only prevented by our bayonets." This was no political ploy; he wrote his wife just fifteen days later, "We shall have a negro insurrection here I fancy." The man who invented the idea of "contraband" as a cloak for escaping slavery came to discourage runaways from entering his lines. He welcomed only fugitives who could work; he paid these rations but no wages, even though Congress had authorized payment of wages. He did not give rations to runaways outside his lines, though that also was legal. He allowed masters who took the loyalty oath to retrieve their escaped property.

Later, in late 1863, Lincoln pulled the rug from under the state's radical movement and supported a moderate-conservative faction, even though he had given the radicals support earlier in the year. Finding the reason for Lincoln's actions is complicated by the identification of the radical faction with the Treasury Department and Salmon P. Chase, who was emerging as a rival for the Presidential nomination in the fall of 1863. Ripley avoids speculaton about Lincoln's motives and usually opts for describing the effects of Lincoln's action or inaction on Louisiana politics. This is a bit disappointing from the perspective of the Lincoln field and makes it unfair to draw a conclusion about his motive after all (that he was conservative). Still, the Louisiana side of the administration's problems is interesting and enriches our understanding of the context in which President Lincoln operated.

Another interesting look at the context of Lincoln's actions from the perspective of a single state and, in this case, a single party is Eric J. Cardinal's article, "The Ohio Democray and the Crisis of Disunion, 1860-1861," *Ohio History*, LXXXVI (Winter, 1977), 19-40. Cardinal attempts to resurrect the reputation of the Democratic party. The party "lost" the war as much as the South did, for its ideal was the restoration of the Union, "the Federal Union as it was forty years ago," in the words of Clement Vallandigham. Lincoln's historical reputation has been good enough to hurt that of anyone who opposed him, and the Democrats did. And, "the racism inherent in the Democratic ideology has made it morally unattractive to modern scholars."

Cardinal argues that the Democrats should be awarded at least the virtue of consistency. As "the shattering events which accompanied the election of Lincoln pushed the United States over the precipice of sectional bitterness into civil war, the northern Democracy — more than any other political group — stood unwaveringly for the preservation of the Union . . . . They recognized neither the right of secession nor that of coercion, and this remained the heart of their problem throughout the war. Moreover, northern Democrats first articulated positions concerning secession and civil war during this early period which, with few modifications, they maintained throughout the conflict."

Posing as the only true and steady advocates of Union, the Democracy claimed no responsibility for war and blamed Southern disunionists and Northern Republicans — not in that order. In fact, their persistence in blaming the Republicans in wartime for the war came to look a lot like treason to Republicans. Partisanship fed their belief that agitation of the slavery question rather than the peculiar institution itself caused the country's problems. Their answer to the crisis was compromise rather than coercion. Despite strong identification with and support of Douglas before the election, the Democracy united quickly on the idea of compromise with a South which had walked out on Douglas at the recent Charleston convention. The party's cohesion, as seen in votes in the Ohio legislature on key roll calls dealing with the national crisis, was much higher than that of the Republicans. Sumter brought immediate support for the Northern war effort, but "Democrats quickly made it clear that they supported the war effort expressly to restore the Federal Union; not to abolish slavery." Cardinal concludes carefully, "Democratic support for the war at its outset, then, may be characterized as willing, but conditional."

Cardinal is at work on a dissertation examining the experience of the Ohio Democracy throughout the war years. We all look forward to the completion of the project. There is much to be learned about the Democratic party in this period.

Harold Holzer continues to contribute his interesting pieces for Lincoln collectors. *Americana*, V (March, 1977), contains an article which pleads a believable case for "Collecting Print Portraits of Abraham Lincoln." *The Antique Trader* for February 9, 1977, contains Holzer's amusing article, "What Lincoln Touched: Intimate Souvenirs of an American Life" (pages 40-45) and "A Picture's Worth . . . 'Lincoln Mailbag'" on page 47. Holzer's "Print Portraits of a Martyr, Lincoln in Death: Bigger Than Life" appears in *Hobbies*, LXXXII (April, 1977).

American Heritage, XXVIII (February, 1977), contains a brief spread on actors' portrayals of Lincoln, called "Say, who's that tall, homely feller in the stovepipe hat?" There is a solid and accurate chapter on Lincoln by John A. Carpenter in *Power and the Presidency* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976).

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 2. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* **stressed the differences within the Democratic party in this cartoon published on October 1, 1864. George McClellan, the Democratic nominee for President, refuses to drive the miserable one-horse shay rigged up by Clement Vallandigham and the peace wing of the party.**