



Lincoln Lore

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Pale-faced People and Their Red Brethren

It was inevitable. The civil rights revolution led to a spate of works on Lincoln and the Negro. When the civil rights movement spilled over into crusades for other kinds of people, Lincoln scholarship could not be far behind. The American Indian movement now has its angry equivalent of Lerone F. Bennett's "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?" (*Ebony*, XXIII [Feb., 1968]). David A. Nichols's *Lincoln and the Indians: Civil War Policy and Politics* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978) is less journalistic and more scholarly than Bennett's uncompromising attack on Lincoln, but, fundamentally, it makes the same unreasonable demand that Abraham Lincoln live up to this century's definition of humanitarianism.

The chapter titles constitute the headings of an indictment: "The Indian System: 'A Sink of Iniquity,'" "Lincoln and the Southern Tribes: 'Our Great Father at Washington Has Turned Against Us,'" "Indian Affairs in Minnesota: 'A System of Wholesale Robberies,'" "Lincoln and Removal: 'A Disagreeable Subject,'" "The President and the Reformers: 'This Indian System Shall Be Reformed,'" "The Failure of Reform: 'The Do Nothing Policy Here Is Complete,'" "Concentration and Militarism," and "Lincolnian Attitudes Toward Indians: 'A Dying Race . . . Giving Place to Another Race with a Higher Civilization.'" The tone of the book is indignant, and the message, as with almost all modern books on Indian policy in the nineteenth century, is depressing.

What Nichols proves

and what he laments are two different things. The record of the United States government in Indian policy during the Civil War was deplorable as usual. Lincoln's culpability for this record, however, is not so clearly delineated.

No book in the field yields so clear a view of the developments in Indian affairs during the Civil War. There were really several different Indian problems, each of which ran its course to a different unhappy ending. The Southern tribes (or Five Civilized Tribes), resident by the time of the Civil War in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), were peculiar in that they held Negro slaves and were close to the Confederacy geographically. Despite treaty obligations to protect the tribes on their reservations, the United States abandoned the tribes, who made alliances of convenience with the Confederate States of America. Loyal Indians led by Creek Chief Opothleyaholo fled to Kansas, where they lived the miserable life customary for all war refugees.

Late in 1861, the administration decided to retake the reservations, and by January of 1862, it was decided to use Indians as soldiers in the campaign. Nichols notes that this decision did not have the far-reaching effect of leading to citizenship for Indians that the decision to use Negroes as soldiers would have. He does not give a full analysis of the reasons for the difference in result, but speculation on the subject is illuminating. In the first place, Indians were not vitally and logically linked to the Civil War, as Negroes were. The Indians



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FIGURE 1. Creek Chief Opothleyaholo in a youthful portrait painted long before he led loyal Indians to Kansas in the Civil War.

played the same role that they had played in earlier power struggles on the North American Continent; they were pawns used by the greater powers. From the Indians' perspective, they played their accustomed roles in dangerous diplomacy, trying to pick the side that would win or to maintain neutrality. In the second place, Indians, as always, were divided and hence could be used to fight each other. "These Indians," General Halleck ordered on April 5, 1862, "can be used only against Indians or in defense of their own territory and homes." Using Indians for war was akin to fighting fire with fire. When Indians entered the fray, the conflict was no longer civilized warfare. The fact that they could fight each other instead of white men kept their warfare on the plane of savagery and did not lead to the privileges accorded white soldiers and veterans. Third, there were not enough of them to worry about, and it was widely assumed that their numbers were diminishing towards extinction. There was little need to be concerned about the future of the Indian in American society; he had no future.

The Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas, in which a number of Indians fought for the Confederacy, was a defeat for the Confederacy which caused an abandonment of Indian territory. The loyal refugee problem was not solved, however, since the government had to pay to send them back and pay to protect them once they were there. In 1864, the government removed the refugees from Kansas, too late for planting season.

A separate Indian problem was the Sioux uprising in Minnesota in 1862. Nichols devotes about one third of his book to this famous episode in Lincoln's Indian relations. The virtue of his account lies not only in its thorough grounding in manuscript sources but also in its treatment of the Sioux uprising, not as an individual and spectacular event, but as a part of the Lincoln administration's continuing development. Nichols's account is particularly useful in showing the resolution of Indian problem after the famous hangings in Mankato, Minnesota, the day after Christmas, 1862 (see *Lincoln Lore* Numbers 1627 and 1628). The war interested Lincoln for the first time seriously in Indian reform, but the resolution of the Minnesota problem involved no reforms. Minnesota officials and the national government assuaged local resentments over Lincoln's pardoning 265 Sioux prisoners by removing the tribe from the state and keeping the pardoned Indians in confinement. The government also removed the Winnebagos, who had not participated in the uprising, but let the Chippewas stay, probably because they were of special interest to Indian reformer Henry B. Whipple, who had influence with the Lincoln administration.

By 1864, Lincoln had lost interest in Indian reform. The war and reelection preoccupied him. Indian Commissioner Dole tried a policy of concentrating the Indians on a few reservations remote from white settlement, and the military played a larger role than before in dealing with Indians. The Army proved as inept at handling Indians as the Interior Department's notoriously corrupt Office of Indian Affairs. In November, 1864, at Sand Creek, Colorado Territory, white militia massacred hundreds of Indians, killing children, scalping women, castrating men, and butchering pregnant women. News did not reach Washington until January, 1865, but it startled Congress and led to debate, investigation, and, years after Lincoln died, reform.

It is never very inspiring to read about nineteenth-century Indian affairs, and the Civil War years are no exception. The story — though with special nuances of Confederate diplomacy, high drama in Minnesota, and extraordinary brutality in Colorado — is largely the same old story. Because the story continues while Abraham Lincoln is President, however, it becomes noteworthy. Lincoln, Nichols seems to be saying, in order to live up to his reputation should have stopped all of this.

There is no doubt that Lincoln did not alter the course of American Indian policy, but it has always seemed that he had an adequate excuse. Surely he had less opportunity for Indian reform than any President preceding him except James Madison. Indian affairs were matters of low priority for Lincoln, as Nichols admits on occasion. Lincoln wrote Cherokee

Chief John Ross, for example, on September 25, 1862, explaining that a "multitude of cares" had prevented his examining the treaties between the United States and the Cherokee Nation. Rarely does Nichols forgive Lincoln for his inattention to Indian policy. He repeatedly accuses the administration of procrastination, temporizing, and abandonment — sins of omission which might more charitably be described as preoccupation with larger problems.

Nichols also accuses Lincoln of exploitation, a far more serious charge. Nichols has trouble proving it. His principal reliance is on pointing to what Lincoln would tolerate as proof of Lincoln's policy. Toleration of evil is another sin of omission, however, and could as well be a function of preoccupation with other problems.

In most instances, because of Lincoln's inattention to Indian affairs, Congress played a major role in Indian policy. The settlement of Minnesota's Indian problems, which Nichols characterizes as "Trading Lives for Land and Money," was embodied in legislation passed by the United States Congress. Congress gave Minnesota a \$1.5 million indemnity for losses incurred in the war. Congress appropriated the money to remove the Sioux from Minnesota. Congress appropriated money to remove the Winnebagos from Minnesota. If this was a "Lincoln bargain," as Nichols describes it, it was a bargain on which there was widespread agreement in Washington, D.C.

Often, Nichols assumes that Indian Commissioner William P. Dole's policies were Lincoln's policies. Were Salmon P. Chase's Treasury Department appointees who opposed Lincoln's renomination in 1864, Lincoln's appointees? One must be careful in judging the "Lincoln administration" or "the government." In fact, it remains difficult to describe Lincoln's Indian policy because he made so few statements on the problem and because he took little direct action in Indian affairs.

Barnum's American Museum. Sioux and Winnebago



Indian Chiefs, Warriors, and Squaws.

All fine specimens of their tribes, to be seen at all hours, together with

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FIGURE 2. An advertisement in *Harper's Weekly*.

Nichols's brief treatment of Lincoln's personal experience with Indian affairs before entering the White House typifies his grudging interpretation of Lincoln's actions. He mentions the famous episode in the Black Hawk War in which Lincoln allegedly defended an old Indian who strayed into camp from soldiers who wanted to kill him, but he bases the story on Carl Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*. Benjamin P. Thomas found more reliable evidence for the story. In *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography*, Thomas notes that Lincoln let the story stand in a campaign biography which he carefully corrected for William Dean Howells. Nichols concludes that "Lincoln learned how to use Indian affairs for political advantage" in the Black Hawk War. Yet the nature of that experience is not easily interpreted. In fact, Lincoln returned from the war so late in the summer that he had only two weeks to campaign for the legislature. Moreover, Lincoln must have enlisted, in part, for the same inglorious reasons so many soldiers enlist: he was unemployed (or about to be) and had no family in New Salem. He may have "understood the potency of the Indian-fighter image in the age of Andrew Jackson," but Lincoln never tried to capitalize on such an image. He did not go by the phony title many ex-frontier militiamen did, "Captain" Lincoln, and he confessed plainly that he never saw any "live, fighting Indians" in the war. That he also prided himself on his election as captain was a function of Lincoln's love of democratic praise and seems in no way to constitute capitalizing on his experience, such as it was, as an Indian-fighter.

"Lincoln, in the years before he became president," Nichols says, "apparently never challenged the American consensus on the necessity for Indian removal to make way for white progress." This is really Nichols's basic charge against Lincoln for the Presidential years as well: he failed to challenge the consensus on Indian policy. Nichols shares a view of politics common in America today. His book is sprinkled with a street-slang view of the political process; politicians "play their power games" while the Indians suffer, and Indians are "the pawns of power politics." Nichols is outraged that the Indian Bureau was a part of the patronage system. Everything in Lincoln's government ran on the patronage system — in some sense, even the war. To "depoliticize Indian affairs" was an unrealistic ideal requiring a massive reorganization probably unobtainable in wartime and not guaranteed to solve the

Indians' problems.

The book's one-sidedness can best be seen in its treatment of the formulaic language of Indian relations. This mannered, formal pidgin-English seems quaint and has always troubled historians of Indian relations. In the hands of a historian with a case to make, it can be a powerful tool. Nichols, probably unconsciously, has a tendency to make a mockery of the language when used by whites and to interpret it seriously when used by Indians. Lincoln's comparison of "this pale-faced people and their red brethren," when a delegation of chiefs visited the White House on March 27, 1863, is termed an "incredible recitation" by Nichols. By contrast, Nichols says this of a Cherokee pledge of fealty:

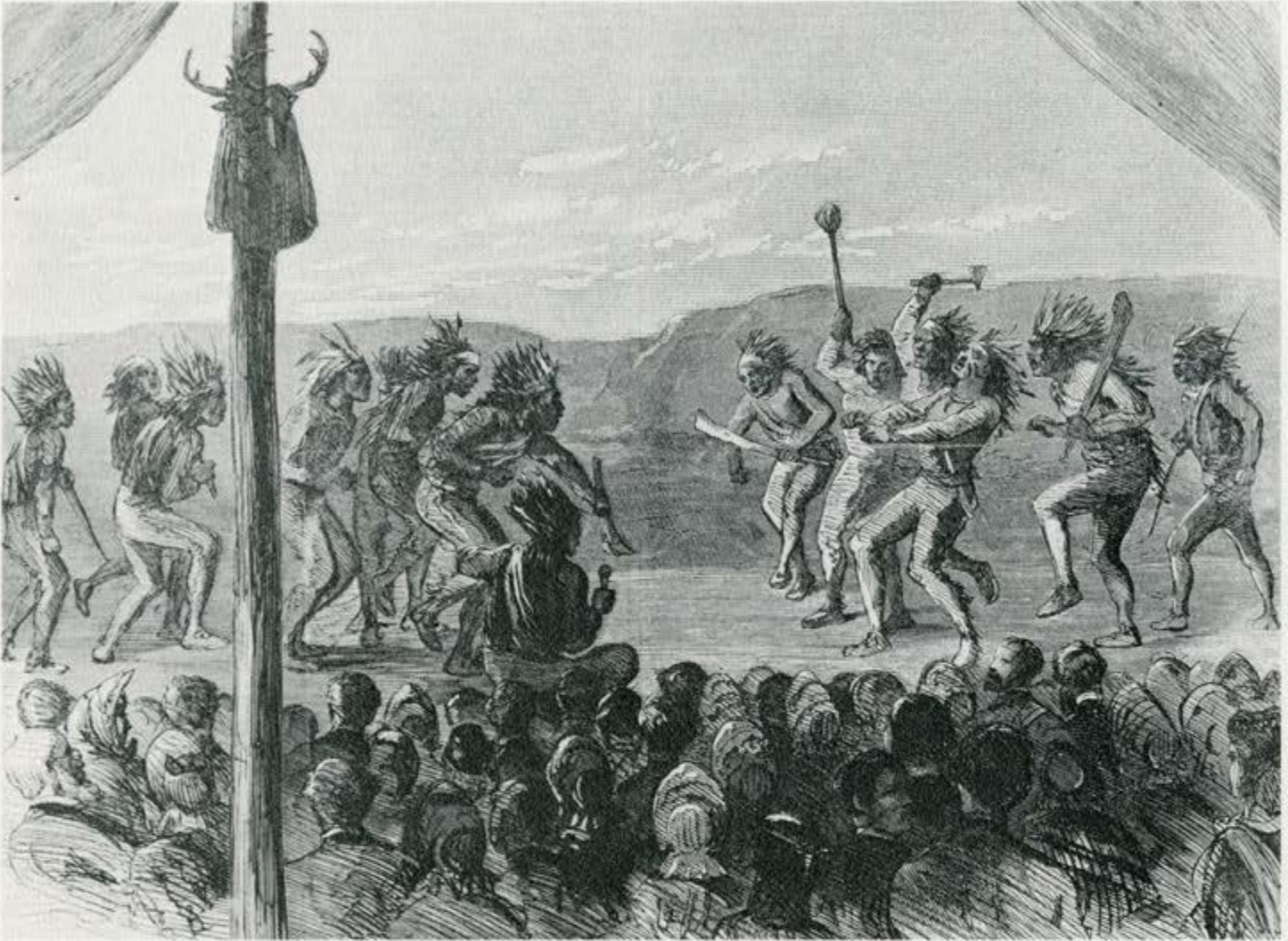
In spite of Lincoln's abandonment of their cause, the Cherokee leaders continued to place faith in the White House after Andrew Johnson assumed office, "Our trust is in your wisdom and sense of justice to protect us from wrong and oppression." That trust in the "great father" was destined to be even more severely tested for the Natives farther north in the Republican state of Minnesota.

There is no more reason to take formal Indian pledges of trust seriously than there is to take seriously white expressions of bonds of brotherhood between red men and white. There is a tendency, however, in today's climate of sympathy for the Indians to treat only one side of the story with the historian's usual critical tools.

The angry tone and constant straining for high effect by linking the Sixteenth President with distant developments in Indian affairs mar this book. It is otherwise a well-researched, competently written analysis of the major developments in Indian relations under the Lincoln administration. Nichols's publisher, the University of Missouri Press, deserves special praise for a beautifully designed and carefully printed book. The typeface is handsome, the footnotes are at the bottom of the page, there are few typographical errors, and the jacket design is original and attractive. University presses have become practically the last bastions of decent book design in the country. Nichols's *Lincoln and the Indians* fills a void in the Lincoln literature which probably will not need refilling (at book-length) again. However, the reader should proceed with caution. The author's animosity to politics can only distort the image of a man with Lincoln's known fondness for the political arts.



FIGURE 3. "Lincoln Receivants Les Indiens Comanches," a rare French print, showing the Sixteenth President speaking to a delegation of Indian chiefs. Such delegations visited Washington regularly, and greeting them was a heavy burden on the President, the Indian Bureau, and other Washington officials.



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FIGURES 4 — 5. A great attraction at the Metropolitan Fair of the United States Sanitary Commission in New York in the spring of 1864, was the Indian Department. *Harper's Weekly* noted high interest in this exhibit "in which the life of those who, only a little while ago, held undisputed possession of our continent, is reproduced by a handful of the once absolute tribes for the pleasure of the pale-faced race, whose ancestors pushed them into obscurity and historical oblivion."



THE INDIAN DEPARTMENT.

COMMITTEE-MAN. "No, no, WALK-IN-THE-MUD! You mustn't go and scalp those ladies. We don't do so here! And your Great Father wouldn't like it!"
WALK-IN-THE-MUD. "Scalpee 'em! Me no want scalpee 'em!—They so nice me want go hug 'em!"
COMMITTEE-MAN. "Oh, is that all! Then you may go. They have a partiality for *Distinguished Foreigners*."

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