



Lincoln Lore

Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor.
Mary Jane Hubler, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.

March, 1979

Number 1693

PEYTON McCRARY ON LINCOLN'S LOUISIANA EXPERIMENT: A REVIEW

The capture of New Orleans by Commodore David Glasgow Farragut on April 25, 1862 gave the North a pleasing taste of victory and gave the Lincoln administration an opportunity to test the depths of Confederate sentiment in a state of the lower South. To judge from the fact that Federal troops occupied the state for fifteen years thereafter, one would have to say that the sentiment ran very deep indeed. Professor Peyton McCrary's book, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction: The Louisiana Experiment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) agrees that the sentiment was strong but argues that the opportunity to use white Southern dissidents and Negroes as a base upon which to build a viable party to revolutionize that sentiment was missed. He lays most of the blame for missing the opportunity on General Nathaniel P. Banks and not on the man who chose him to reconstruct Louisiana, Abraham Lincoln.

Chapter VI is the crucial one for Lincoln students. Reconstructing Louisiana would be no more difficult than "the passage of a dog law in Massachusetts," General Nathaniel P. Banks, military commander of the Department of the Gulf, informed President Lincoln in one of the extreme political understatements of American history. Anxious for speedy action towards reconstruction in occupied Louisiana, disgusted with the slow progress to date, and impressed with Bank's extravagant promises of quick results, Lincoln wrote the general on Christmas Eve, 1863, to make him "master of all" in giving "us a free-state reorganization of Louisiana in the shortest possible time." No longer would jurisdictional disputes between the military governor, George F. Shepley, and the commander of the military district, Banks,

slow the reconstruction process. Lincoln could not have been much impressed, either, with the work of the local radical white movement for reconstruction led by the Free State General Committee. They had been fumbling along with Shepley to organize elections for a constitutional convention in Louisiana, and Banks would presumably be their master

too. However, Lincoln did state carefully that Banks was not "to throw away available work already done for reconstruction," and the Free State Committee had been doing much of that work.

The immediate background of Lincoln's letter to Banks was the visit to Washington of two Louisiana conservatives, Thomas Cottman and James Riddell. These men led a movement opposed to Negro suffrage, and they argued that occupied Louisiana would likely be willing to return to the Union under the provisions of the President's recent Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction (December 8, 1863) and thus recognize emancipation — if "they could come back to civil government under their [existing] constitution and laws." In other words, they feared the movement of the Free State Committee, which was beginning to show itself willing to cooperate with elite Negro groups in Louisiana, to draw up a new state constitution before electing a new government for the state and presenting the state to Congress for readmission to the Union. The old state constitution, of course, restricted voting to whites only. They told Lincoln that Louisiana's citizens would not accept a government reconstructed with Negro votes. The day before Lincoln wrote his letter giving Banks exclusive control of the situation, Riddell wrote the general to tell him that the President would soon send a letter authorizing him to take control.



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. General Nathaniel P. Banks.



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. Lincoln is depicted as the impossible idealist Don Quixote in this political cartoon by the brilliant Copperhead etcher, Adalbert Johann Volck. Benjamin F. Butler makes an excellent Sancho Panza, ironically rooting Lincoln's idealism in the earthy character of this cockeyed general reputed to have stolen silverware from the mansions of occupied New Orleans (note the knife stuck in his belt). Butler, who incurred Volck's talented wrath when he commanded Federal forces in the cartoonist's beloved Maryland, went on to command Federal forces in occupied New Orleans and to become a favorite target of Volck's savage wit. The artist wrote and illustrated the *Life and Adventures of B. F. B. (Bombastes Furioso Buncombe), The Warrior, Sage and Philanthropist, A Christmas Story* in 1862 and reissued it with slight changes in 1868 as *The American Cyclops, The Hero of New Orleans and Spoiler of Silver Spoons*. Butler's sensational actions in New Orleans did much to focus national attention on events in Louisiana. This fine example of Volck's work is a recent acquisition of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum and joins a rare set of his pro-Confederate etchings.

General Banks then lied to Lincoln, or at least neglected to tell him the whole truth. On December 30, 1863, he told the President that his own scheme — which, by design or by coincidence, was like the scheme suggested by Riddell and Cottman — would work faster than that of the Free State Committee. Banks said that the election called for by that Committee could not be held until March; he did not tell him that they were calling for elections on January 25th. McCrary considers this deception important for explaining Lincoln's shift in reconstruction policy for Louisiana.

McCrary points out still another important change in the Louisiana situation. George Denison, a Treasury agent in New Orleans appointed by Salmon P. Chase, had given up his opposition to Banks's policies in the state by the time Lincoln turned the Louisiana operation over to Banks. The general could now count on the cooperation of this powerful Treasury Department presence in the state, but the price of Denison's support — as an intermediary between Denison and Banks, B. Rush Plumly, told Chase — had been a promise by Banks to deliver reconstructed Louisiana's delegates to the Republican Presidential nominating convention in 1864 to Chase rather than President Lincoln. Of all this, of course, Lincoln was profoundly ignorant, as all historians have been since. Denison personally carried Banks's deceptive letter to Lincoln in Washington.

McCrary's is certainly the best account of the origins of reconstruction policy in Louisiana in 1863-1864, but, even so,

its meaning is not as clear as McCrary seems to think it is. To him it seems that Banks had engineered a "coup," altering the radical direction of Louisiana politics under the Free State Committee's leadership and forcing Lincoln to move in a more moderate direction led by General Banks. McCrary attributes the general's motivation to political ambition. An outsider could more quickly organize a few candidates for a state government than he could a hundred delegates for a constitutional convention, and a speedy restoration of the state would be a political achievement helpful to his dark-horse chances for a Presidential nomination in 1864. Moreover, McCrary claims, "Banks' ideological differences with the radicals centered on the question of Negro suffrage, which he feared would antagonize many potential supporters of the free state movement." Lincoln's "motivation . . . in throwing power into the general's hands" is "not entirely clear" to McCrary, but he stresses that "Banks had deceived him about the situation: the President did not know that the radicals were ready to hold an election within a month." On the other hand, McCrary admits, "Lincoln may have shared the general's reluctance to countenance Negro suffrage in Louisiana for fear of antagonizing conservative opinion."

McCrary makes a great advance over the existing literature on the subject, but he somewhat overstates his case. He can prove "deception" — a powerful word in swaying the reader's sentiments — only in the case of the timing of Banks's election as opposed to that called for by the Free State Committee. Yet that deception occurred *after* Lincoln had given control to Banks on the 24th; Banks's letter about election dates was dated the 30th. Otherwise, Banks's campaign to secure control of Louisiana politics had been based on oversanguine predictions and a braggart's inflation of his own abilities, but the election dates provide the crucial case for deception — and they could have nothing to do with Lincoln's decision to make Banks "master of all."

The true origins of Lincoln's shift to Banks in Louisiana lay in the visit of Cottman and Riddell. The latter's letter of December 23, 1863 accurately predicted what Lincoln's letter of December 24, 1863 would do: give the authority to Banks. The Louisiana conservatives had also given the President an earful of arguments proving that Louisiana would never swallow a reconstruction brought about even in part by Negro votes. Nor does it seem fair to call Banks's view that Negro suffrage would block acceptance of any new Louisiana government an "ideological" difference from the Free State Committee. It was a tactical one, a practical one, a question of means rather than of ends. The use of the word "ideological," however, tends to conjure up in the reader's mind a frothing-mouthed ideologue of racial hatred.

There can be no blinking this chronology away, and it is ironic that so gifted a narrative historian would do so. It is especially ironic because McCrary's conclusion stresses the importance of the "precise chronology of events" in December of 1863. To be sure, much of the chronology points to the accuracy of McCrary's conclusions, and it is only fair to quote the fuller chronology here:

A major turning point in wartime reconstruction occurred in December 1863, when General Banks decided to seize control of the reorganization of civil government in Louisiana. . . . The general asked Lincoln to grant him full authority over reconstruction on December 6, before learning of the President's ten-percent proclamation — but after Durant [leader of the Free State Committee] had openly advocated the limited enfranchisement of blacks. Lincoln's proclamation was delivered to Congress, moreover, before he received Banks' request; nothing in the document necessitated the substitution of Banks' new plan for a continuation of the existing program of reorganizing civil government through a constitutional convention. The sole issue involved was Lincoln's impatience with the slow pace of voter registration, which Banks attributed to the incompetence of Shepley and Attorney General Durant. In none of his correspondence with the President did Banks mention the controversial issue of Negro suffrage; nor did Lincoln comment on the question when authorizing the general to take charge of reconstruction, even though representatives of the sugar planters had just told him in his White House office that Durant was already registering the free men of color. The President's instructions to Banks on December 24 did not preclude the adoption of Negro suffrage; in fact, they suggested that the general continue to work with the leaders of the Union Association. It was Banks' idea to throw down

the gauntlet to the New Orleans radicals and offer the full weight of military influence and patronage to the moderate minority within the Union Association.

Making Banks the active source of change in policy from radical to moderate is a bit less convincing than McCrary's interesting proof that Lincoln did not shift to Banks in order to keep Louisiana from falling into the hands of radicals who would support Chase for the Presidency. Ironically, it was Chase's man Denison, who carried Banks's deceptive letter to Lincoln, and Denison's willingness to work with Banks to get Louisiana's delegates for Chase surely discredits the old view of Lincoln's shift in Louisiana as a shift away from Chase. In fact, one of McCrary's most valuable contributions is to show the unity of the Free State movement before Banks took over; Banks's policies created a factional split in 1864.

McCrary's emphasis on the passage in Lincoln's letter to Banks which cautioned him against throwing away existing work towards reconstruction seems very proper. When Denison brought Banks's letter to Lincoln, what a vision of unity in Louisiana Lincoln must have seen!

McCrary is at his best in showing that Andrew Johnson, when he assumed the Presidency after Lincoln's assassination, completely reversed the policies of his predecessor. Lincoln had created a moderate regime led by Banks's favorite, Governor Michael Hahn. When Hahn resigned to run for the United States Senate, Madison Wells assumed the office. He very quickly executed a conservative coup, replacing the mayor of New Orleans with a man who in turn replaced most of the local officials with conservatives and returning Confederate veterans. Wells himself appointed former Confederate Major Paul Théard as judge and filled other offices with conservatives, planters, and ex-Confederates. Even General Beauregard was expecting an appointment. Banks returned from Washington as military commander and quick-

ly confronted Wells. The Governor asked President Johnson to give him Banks's powers. Banks halted Wells's removals, replacing the new mayor of New Orleans with a former captain of a Negro regiment. Wells demanded that the President intervene, and on May 17, 1865, Johnson deprived Banks of command. Johnson sustained Wells's reorganization of the state completely. Lincoln may have failed to bring about a revolution in Louisiana politics and society, but Andrew Johnson certainly brought about a counterrevolution against the moderate Banks-Lincoln government. McCrary states it very well: "When Andrew Johnson assumed the presidency in 1865 he pursued a reconstruction policy antithetical to that of his predecessor, if viewed in terms of its impact on the party system rather than in light of superficial constitutional similarities." Of this there can be no doubt.

Lincoln students will also find in McCrary's book the best treatment in print of Lincoln's last speech. Delivered from the torchlit balcony of the White House on the night of April 11, 1865, Lincoln's speech, McCrary says, "made a less favorable impression when delivered than when read in the morning newspaper." The speech dealt "almost exclusively with events in Louisiana." Significantly, Lincoln had asked Senator Charles Sumner, radical critic of his Louisiana policies, to appear with him on the balcony while he gave the speech. Sumner declined, but McCrary notes acutely that Lincoln did not ask Banks to appear, though Banks was in town and had been lobbying for Lincoln's Louisiana government for months. Lincoln defended his commitment to the moderate government of Michael Hahn, "but as bad promises are better broken than kept," he said fairly, "I shall treat this as a bad promise, and break it, whenever I shall be convinced that keeping it is adverse to the public interest." He concluded with those mysterious words which have puzzled and titillated historians for over a hundreds years: "... it may be my duty to make some new announcement to the people of the South." McCrary's view is that Lincoln was most likely to announce that he would institute a more radical reconstruction policy.

There are many insights, too, that are tangential to the Lincoln theme. I know no better treatment, for example, of General Benjamin F. Butler's decision to use Negro troops in Louisiana. In the spring and summer of 1862, General Butler was embroiled in a feud with General John W. Phelps over contraband Negroes in occupied Louisiana. Picturing himself in his autobiography as a radical in advance of his times on this question, Butler has recently been attacked as a conservative opponent of Phelps's schemes to arm free Negroes in Louisiana. McCrary shows that Butler was an opportunist and that the real impetus to arm free Negroes in Louisiana came from the administration to a reflective and vacillating General Butler, who was neither radical nor conservative in this instance. Butler acted the part of the good soldier awaiting orders. The "President of the United States alone," he told Phelps, "has the authority to employ Africans in arms as part of the military forces." Without actually praising Phelps's attempts to arm Louisiana Negroes, Lincoln answered complaints from white Louisianans by telling them they could rid themselves of Phelps by making the state loyal to the Union again. Significantly, he entrusted responses to Butler on the question to Salmon Chase, who advocated arming Negroes. On July 31, 1862, Chase told Butler, "I have heard intimations from the President that it may possibly become necessary, . . . to convert the heavy black population . . . into defenders." Butler had been ambivalent before. He struggled with Phelps because of orders from superiors and not because of personal disapproval of radical policies. His own views were ambivalent but thoughtful. Phelps seemed at times to be stirring up trouble among the blacks. Butler expressed fear of "a negro insurrection," but commented blandly: "... the negroes are getting saucy and troublesome, and who blames them?" Later he would make a similar remark to his wife: "We have danger here of an negro insurrection. I hardly know whether to wish it or fear it most." George Denison told Chase that Butler's opposition to Phelps "was not a matter of principle." Butler simply "wanted the credit of doing it himself, and in his own way."

To focus on sections of the book of most interest to Lincoln students is to give an unbalanced picture of McCrary's work. It is masterful in its sweep. The early chapter on Louisiana before the Union occupation is a model of social and political landscape-painting. He is able to benefit from the statistical tools of the modern political historian, but his extremely skill-



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 3. General P. G. T. Beauregard.

ful use of printed and manuscript sources — especially his sensitive use of articulate diaries — allows him to render his findings in a most fluent and readable prose. He understands the nature of political parties. Above all, he is steeped in knowledge of Louisiana history.

McCrary's thesis, which stresses the potential for social change in Louisiana offered by the Federal army, is sustained by his finely textured narrative of Louisiana history only in part. Here is his fullest statement of the case:

In terms of political survival, then, "Mr. Lincoln's model of reconstruction" proved a failure. Indeed, as long as President Lincoln stuck to the moderate strategy of party building employed by General Banks, it is difficult to see how it could have been otherwise. The general's assumption that a conciliatory approach would win the support of a majority of the white population contradicted the elemental political arithmetic of Louisiana and defied what might be called the central rule of any civil war: the irreconcilability of insurgents and incumbents. The polarization between left and right that leads to the outbreak of a revolutionary civil war is not "resolved" by the conclusion of armed struggle, except to the degree that the victors are able to force their ideological will upon the losers through the application of governmental power. . . .

The political dynamics of the American Civil War raised almost insurmountable obstacles in the path of the moderate reconstruction policy with which Lincoln was associated. Without suggesting that the revolutionary strategy advocated by men like Wendell Phillips or Charles Sumner would have achieved all their hopes for racial justice and Republican rule in the postwar South, it does seem to be true that the radicals advocated a more practical approach than General Banks.

McCrary is correct in asserting that wartime hatreds could not end with Northern victory in 1865, and he is right, too, to think that civil war permitted revolutionary policies unthinkable to American politicians in peacetime. Emancipation itself was one. Finally, it is true that political arithmetic in the Southern states required either black voting, military occupation, or control by ex-Confederates when the war was over.

Lincoln was a good student of political arithmetic. As G.S. Boritt has shown, when Lincoln followed policies at odds with the numerical facts of life (in advocating colonization, for example), he was not paying close attention to the problem at hand. Lincoln avoided the arithmetic of colonization as a psychological necessity, but his defiance of the arithmetic of loyalty in the South was a function of another problem. "Reconstruction was the crucial question of national politics — at least as a theoretical issue — from the moment the states of the lower South seceded from the Union," McCrary says, and this is probably the cardinal point of the new students of reconstruction policy in the Civil War. However, it is not true. The crucial question was winning the war. Though it is proper to see continuities in the hatreds of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, the discontinuities in terms of constitutional possibility and central political concern are important as well.

Lincoln was thinking of winning the war. He thought Federal emancipation would help win it, though it was a peacetime impossibility. He thought Louisiana's political defection from the Confederate States of America would help win it too. He was less interested in Banks's policies than in Banks's speed in bringing Louisiana out of the Confederacy and into the Union. Banks thought much the same way. His "ideological" differences from the local radicals were often actually differences in estimates of what would get Louisiana out of the Confederacy fastest. Otherwise, he would not so clearly appear to be an opponent of Madison Wells in 1865. The political arithmetic of peacetime would face the constitutional conservatism of peacetime. The war was a revolutionary situation only for activities clearly related to war-making. That situation ended in 1865.

McCrary calls Banks's reasoning "curious" when the general told Lincoln that Louisiana would accept an emancipation forced on it by Banks but would never actually vote for emancipation if a radical constitutional convention offered a free constitution. "Their self-respect, their *amour propre*, will be appeased if they are not required to vote for or against it," Banks said. Curious this may be, but it is revolutionary logic, and it did recognize the grim political arithmetic of Louisiana's slave society.

It is not a small matter to argue with the thesis of a book, but in this case it by no means threatens the overall worth of the book. McCrary's is the definitive study of Lincoln's Louisiana policy, and it is an enormously informative work. There can be no quarrel with that.

Happily, Princeton University Press served its capable author well. I detected only one typographical error (page 183). The editors allowed a couple of slips here and there: Oliver B. Morton on page 281 should be Oliver P. Morton, and Edwin Bates on page 288 should be Edward Bates. McCrary overuses the verb "demonstrate" and the phrase "on a _____ly basis." Otherwise, the writing and printing are immaculate. The footnotes are at the bottom of the page, and the editors allow long ones when necessary. Except for the inexplicable absence of a political map of Louisiana, it is a model of book-making, and McCrary's historical work deserves it.

Beginning with Herman Belz's superb book *Reconstructing the Union: Theory and Policy during the Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), Lincoln students have come increasingly to question the older view that Lincoln would have been "soft" on the South. Most who have done so, however, have been forced to dance around the events in Louisiana, for it is a subject as complex as it is important. Historians need not avoid the subject any more. Peyton McCrary's beautifully written *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction: The Louisiana Experiment* is a detailed but eminently understandable narrative of the history of early attempts to reconstruct Louisiana. The subject of the book is really Louisiana and not Abraham Lincoln, but the events are of such importance for the history of the Lincoln administration that no Lincoln library should be without a copy.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND RECONSTRUCTION

THE LOUISIANA EXPERIMENT

by Peyton McCrary



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 4. Title page of the book.