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"A Task ... Greater than that which Rested upon Washington": A Review of *Lincoln, the War President*

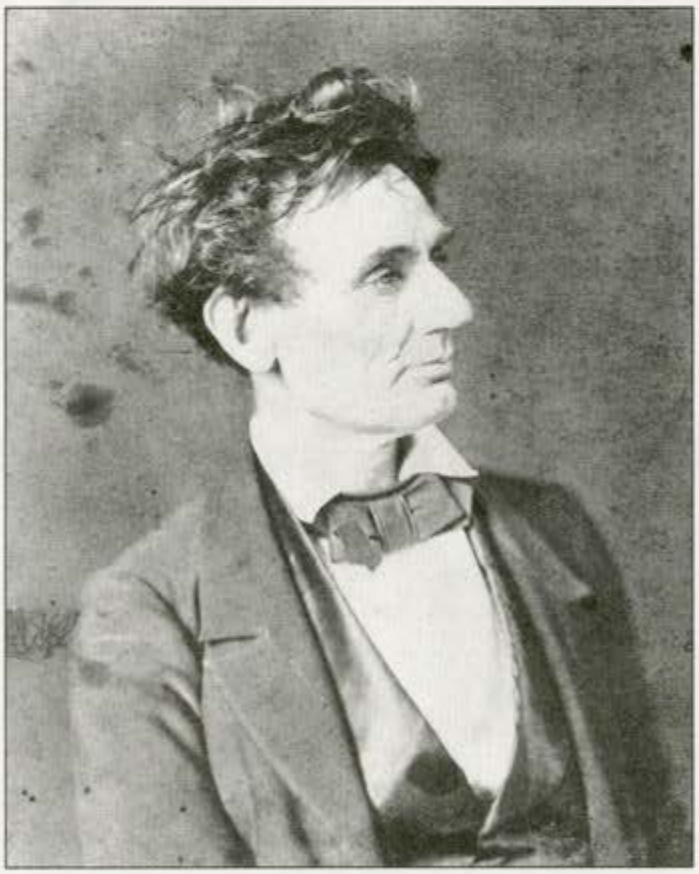
By Matthew Noah Vosmeier

In the recently published book, *Lincoln, the War President: The Gettysburg Lectures*, two photographs of Lincoln, one taken by Alexander Hesler in 1857 (O-2), and the other by Alexander Gardner in 1865 (O-118), are appropriately reproduced. The contrast between a youthful-looking political candidate of the 1850s and the aged and war-weary, but kind and wiser-looking president of 1865 quickly reveals the astonishing effect of presidential responsibility during wartime. For the United States, the Civil War was a central, transforming event, disrupting people's lives with rapid change; clearly, Lincoln did not escape its effects. As James M. McPherson notes in the Preface to his award-win-

This lithograph entitled The Council of War, *published in 1865, portrays Admiral David D. Porter, Admiral David G. Farragut, Lincoln, General William T. Sherman, General George Thomas, General Ulysses S. Grant, and General Philip Sheridan. Also known as* Lincoln and His Generals, *this lithograph is discussed in Holzer, Boritt, and Neely's* The Lincoln Image *(1984).*

ning *Battle Cry of Freedom*, for Americans who lived through the Civil War, "time and consciousness took on new dimensions." He quotes one northerner who wrote that the war "crowded into a few years the emotions of a lifetime," and General George Meade recorded after the Battle of Gettysburg that, in ten days, he lived "as much as in the last thirty years."[1]

Lincoln's presidential responsibilities undoubtedly affected him in much the same way. As president-elect, he parted from his friends in Springfield with the realization that he left for the nation's capital with "a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington," but he could not foresee the scope or outcome of the coming struggle. In 1864, he would "confess plainly that events have controlled me" and that "at the end of three years' struggle, the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man, devised or expected." Nevertheless, in that time, he had worked vigorously to reestablish national authority in the rebellious states, for he believed, as he explained in 1862, together with Congress, he would "hold the power, and bear the responsibility."[2]



Lincoln in February 1857.

Presidential power and responsibility are at the center of *Lincoln, the War President*, edited by Gabor S. Boritt and published by Oxford University Press in 1992. The first six of the seven chapters were originally delivered for the Robert M. Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture at Gettysburg College; now they form a well-joined look at Lincoln's presidency. Seven noted historians — Robert V. Bruce, James M. McPherson, David Brion Davis, Carl N. Degler, Kenneth M. Stampp, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Gabor S. Boritt — grapple with Lincoln's wartime policies and his legacy in the light of the two central issues of the Civil War — the nature of American national identity and the role and meaning of emancipation. Their analyses are well-focused and attend to interconnecting themes, and are enriched by their sometimes conflicting perceptions of Lincoln.

Nineteenth-century America was a democracy marked by capitalist expansion, yet it lacked a comprehensive definition of nationhood and was periodically faced with sectional crisis. To understand how America came to accept war in 1861, Professors Bruce and Boritt assess the country's fears of disunion and conflict and Lincoln's attitudes toward war. During the Civil War, Lincoln's policies were directed toward suppressing the insurrection but also influenced the shape of American national identity. For Professor McPherson, Lincoln's "national strategy" demanded unconditional surrender, requiring the Union's restoration and emancipation. Placing the American experience into a broader world context, Professor Davis focuses on the first of these, emancipation, and Professor Degler the latter, nationalism. Professor Stampp considers America's dual traditions of perpetual Union and national self- determination, and finds connections among war, emancipation, and American nationalism, but unlike Degler, he describes a Lincoln less like Bismarck and more a humane statesman moved by the trauma of war. Although all consider Lincoln's motivation and use of power, Professor Schlesinger specifically studies Lincoln's actions and his justifications for them, and he compares Lincoln to another war president accused of overstepping his authority, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

An important focus throughout the book rests on the meaning of political Union in antebellum and Civil War America. Robert V. Bruce, for example, studies the unsettled nature of the American union and the uneasiness it created in "The Shadow of a Coming War." Bruce finds a common thread of foreboding about the Union running through the American psyche from the time of the Revolution, when Americans feared the newly independent states would erupt in civil war in the absence of a stronger union, to the time of sectional crisis in the mid-nineteenth century. He writes that "the nightmare of Balkanized free-for-alls

lived on in American minds, including Abraham Lincoln's, and so became a factor, perhaps a significant one, in the calculations that determined the ultimate crisis" (p. 4).

Underlying this fear, Bruce suggests, was what "might in psychological terms be called avoidance or denial." Through the antebellum years, some politicians used threats of disunion to gain leverage in sectional disputes, while others paradoxically, used them to spur dedicated Unionists to compromise. Many Americans, however, preferred to ignore the shadow that hung over them. When Lincoln delivered his Young Men's Lyceum address in 1838, for example, he dwelled on his fear of mobocracy, not on sectionalism, indicating to Professor Bruce that he had a "personal reluctance" to recognize the danger of disunion and conflict. By the late 1850s, the threat had existed for so long that many Republicans, including Lincoln, were convinced that secession was not possible and that Southerners were bluffing. Only in 1861 did Lincoln accept the idea that the time had come not to yield to southern demands, even at the cost of war (pp. 10-11, 24, 18, 22).

Though Lincoln shared with his generation a fear of civil war, in "War Opponent and War President," Gabor S. Boritt uncovers Lincoln's personal attitude toward war and seeks to reconcile an essentially peaceful man with the president who came to guide the North through the nation's most devastating conflict. During his life, Lincoln expressed seemingly inconsistent thoughts about war. He saw some of war's tragic results during his own short time of soldiering in 1832, he reminded listeners of the cruelties of the American Revolution, and he saved his harshest criticism for President James K. Polk and the war against Mexico. In part, these attitudes were tied to Lincoln's thinking about the centrality of politics to American life. Referring to the Young Men's Lyceum Speech, Boritt explains that Lincoln ignored the shadow of the coming war because of an "excessively optimistic liberal faith" that peaceful solutions would always be ready remedies for threats against democracy. He also suggests that Lincoln was made uneasy by the practice of nominating war heroes for political office as a danger to the political workings of democracy. Such feelings were expressed when he sometimes criticized the heroic pretensions of others with humor, and when he referred to his own "bloody struggles with the musquetos" and "charges upon wild onions" (pp. 186-187, 195-196).

Yet, Lincoln also praised the accomplishments of the Revolutionary generation, supported Whig generals for the presidency, and he hailed Zachary Taylor's achievements in Mexico in an 1850 eulogy, and Henry Clay's pro-war stand in 1812 in an 1852 eulogy. In 1861, he became a war president when he determined that war as the only means to preserve political liberty. At first he pursued a limited war; later, he grimly carried on "ever more terrible war, a people's war, a total war" (pp. 188- 191, 198-200, 204).

James M. McPherson furthers the idea of the Civil War as a total war in "Lincoln and the Strategy of Unconditional Surrender." Unlike other historians who have emphasized the president's skill at military strategy, McPherson uses Carl von Clausewitz's analysis of war to show that military strategy was a part of his larger "national strategy." Lincoln always considered the southern states to be in rebellion, not members of a belligerant government; however, in practice, the North carried on the war much as if the South were a foreign enemy, as evidenced by its blockade of southern ports and its use of prisoner exchanges. As the war dragged on, the North changed to a national strategy that included total war and demanded unconditional surrender: "Lincoln lost faith in those illusory Southern Unionists and became convinced that the rebellion could only be put down by complete conquest." The Federal army would move to destroy the Confederate forces, and enemy property was confiscated. Most important, Lincoln moved toward emancipation as a military measure to weaken the enemy and gave the war a revolutionary character. In the end, peace would require both the restoration of the Union and the abolition of slavery (pp. 40-43, 45-47, 52-60).

Lincoln in February 1865 (O-116).

Based as it was on military necessity, Lincoln's argument justifying emancipation as outlined in the Proclamation was straightforward. The Proclamation's legalistic language and its exemptions of particular areas already controlled by the Union army attracted criticism but was defended as necessary by a president who feared wandering "in the boundless field of absolutism" and sought to place emancipation on solid legal ground.[3] Using a comparative approach, David Brion Davis places emancipation in the broader context of British, French, Spanish, Brazilian, and American history. He delves into the intellectual roots and nineteenth-century perceptions of the idea of emancipation which, he argues, account for the disparity between reformers' idealized visions of "the emancipation moment" and their often conservative plans to effect the end of slavery. Through this, Davis seeks to understand the symbolic importance of the Emancipation Proclamation and Lincoln's legacy as the "Great Emancipator."

The idea of emancipation in the nineteenth century included both radical and conservative elements. Shaped by biblical ideas of deliverance from evil, as well as by the Enlightenment's and evangelical revivalism's regard for individual rights, the language and imagery of reformers often invoked the millennial ideal of an instantaneous destruction of slavery. They were also associated with the ancient ritual of manumission, in which individual slaves were perceived to be reborn as loyal and grateful freedmen, and through which the social order would remain unchanged. Thus, artwork and the imagery of official celebrations often portrayed both elements of the idea of emancipation: a millennial moment at which grateful freedmen could thank their paternal liberators (pp. 67-69, 81-84, 69-72).

Similarly, actual plans for emancipation, Davis explains, contrasted sharply with visions of a glorious and immediate end of slavery. Political leaders of various countries were guided by notions of property rights and compensation, by fears of alienating slaveholders, by slave insurrection, and by their arguments that "time would be needed to 'prepare' slaves for freedom." Among politicians and even immediate abolitionists in Britain, for example, there was an accepted "conceptual demarcation between the formal act or command of emancipation, with all its religious overtones, and the 'practical' regulations to give the command effect" (p. 73-76, 77).

During the American Civil War, McPherson and Davis both point out, many slaves, particularly from the border states, crossed Union lines to freedom, aided somewhat by the Confiscation Act of July 17, 1862. Lincoln wished not to alienate the loyal slaveholders of the border states, and hoped in vain that the movement of slaves across Union lines would prompt the border states to adopt plans for compensated emancipation. Guided by military and constitutional concerns, he presented his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862, which declared that slaves would be "then, thenceforward, and forever free" in areas of the South still in rebellion by January 1, 1863.[4]

(To be continued.)

Notes

1. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. viii.
2. Abraham Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, 4 April 1864, in Roy P. Basler, et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. plus Index (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 7: 282; "Annual Message to Congress," 1 December 1862, in Ibid., 5: 537.
3. Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982) p. 105.
4. "Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation," 22 September 1862, in Basler, et al., eds., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* 5: 434.

LINCOLN LIBRARY INVENTORY BEGINS

The Lincoln Library, the research area of The Lincoln Museum, closed June 1, 1993 and will be closed for a short time to allow Museum staff to conduct an inventory of the collection's books and manuscripts. The Lincoln Museum will not be affected by the inventory. It will remain open to the public as usual, free of charge, and can be visited during normal business hours — Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays from 1 - 5 p.m. The Museum is closed on national holidays. Call (219) 455-3864 for information.

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