

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN BOOK OF THE YEAR—1946

Students of Abraham Lincoln should feel profoundly grateful that a biographer so thorough and painstaking as Burton J. Hendrick chose to turn his attention to a study of *Lincoln's War Cabinet*. The Foundation Advisory Group has selected his contribution as the Lincoln Book of the Year for 1946. An excellent compilation entitled *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* by Roy Basler was the runner-up in this annual contest.

One gets the impression from reading Hendrick's work that the author is not only very familiar with the subject matter which directly relates to his thesis but also that he is widely read in phases of collateral sources which contributes tremendously to the authoritative tone of his argument. Such a grasp of a subject can only be achieved after a lifetime of carefully weighing and sifting of evidence.

There seems to have been a tendency on the part of some biographers doing work in this field to minimize the ability of Lincoln's cabinet. That is not the conclusion made by Hendrick who indicates his approach to the question by using as a caption for his first chapter "The Ministry of all the Talents."

There is no finer tribute paid by the author to the democratic statesmanship of the Emancipator than the one which sets him over against the dictator type of executive with this comment:

"Lincoln was not one of those Presidents who hesitate to surround themselves with men stronger than themselves. He deliberately sought the most commanding associates he could find. . . . Personal likes and dislikes had nothing to do with Lincoln's choice of advisors."

The grouping into pairs of most of the members of the cabinet, in considering their qualifications for the task assigned to them, brings home to the reader the far reaching significance of the political alignments of the official family.

Seward and Chase

Referring to the men selected for the two most important posts in the cabinet the author states:

"William H. Seward and Salmon Portland Chase outranked all Republican statesmen of the day, in the brilliancy of their careers, in the predominant leadership evidenced in the anti-slavery crusade, in their intellectual attainments, in gifts of oratory, capacity as legislators, and strength of character."

The author emphasizes the fact that in the political amalgamation of the cabinet Seward, "represented the steady old-line Whig turned Republican, and Chase, the Democratic element which had abandoned the party of Jackson and Buchanan."

Bates and Blair

Even before Lincoln had completed the forming of his cabinet the secession of several of the southern states was an act already accomplished. The supreme immediate task confronting Lincoln was to stop, if possible, further disintegration of the Union which would be caused by the withdrawal of other states. Hendrick gives a realistic picture of the situation as follows:

"At that time, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri were tottering on the brink of secession. In each state a powerful minority was working night and day to accomplish its withdrawal from the Union. . . . As an essential part of Lincoln's statesmanship two cabinet members were selected from these critical commonwealths—Edward Bates from Missouri and Montgomery Blair from Maryland."

The author refers to Bates as "an ideal choice as he was in birth, training, and sympathy a southerner." His "high personal character" is also pointed out as well as the fact that he was "for years the leading citizen of the southwest." More than anyone else he helped to keep Missouri in the Union.

Montgomery Blair was the brother of Francis Blair Jr. and son of Francis Preston Blair. The father and two sons were known as the Blair triumvirate. The father, according to Hendrick, was "the brains of the Jackson Administration" and the kitchen cabinet met in his home. The author states that "no human agency could be so useful in this task (saving Maryland to the Union) as the Blair triumvirate." Montgomery is described as "an able, well documented lawyer of great financial ability . . . stolid, dignified, learned and according to Noah Brooks, the best read man in the Lincoln cabinet and Seward, Chase, Bates and Welles were by no means illiterate." Here again there is evidence of a pairing off of an old line Whig and a Jacksonian Democrat.

Stanton and Welles

The two military portfolios also contributed to the nonpartisan character of the cabinet. Passing by the short term of Cameron we find both Stanton and Welles were early Jacksonian Democrats the latter recently had turned Republican. While Stanton was recognized as one of the most famous and prosperous lawyers of his time, about the only complimentary personal comment which appears about him in the book is, the fact that "He hated slavery and worshiped the Union" and as an administrator "put to flight the corrupt contractors who had reaped a profitable harvest under Cameron" and also "introduced order and honesty into every branch of the service."

Welles headed the department called by Lincoln "Uncle Sam's web feet" and according to Hendrick: "was honest, sincere, fearless and just, never a time server, and never agitating a course in which he did not believe."

Smith

The odd man of the big seven in the cabinet, Caleb Smith according to Hendrick "although an excellent lawyer . . . was unworthy of any appointment." He was an "inflexible Whig" which brought the total count of primary political influences to Democrats, four and Whigs, three. When Lincoln's attention was called to the fact that he had given the Democrats the majority he, an Old Line Whig, is said to have exclaimed, "Well I'm here," which made the count even.

One of the finest displays of an unusual grasp of the entire subject is the setting forth of the contacts between the President and his cabinet with the politically ambitious McClellan. The author handles this exceedingly controversial subject in a way that indicates he understands the ambitions which motivate men whether it be in the field of politics, the armed forces or a combination of both. Hendrick's book by far is the best discussion available on Lincoln and his cabinet.

Lincoln Book of the Year—Former Selections

1941—Leech—Reveille in Washington

1942—Potter—Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis

1943—Pratt—The Personal Finances of Abraham Lincoln

1944—Luthin and Carmen—The First Lincoln Campaign

1945—Randall—Lincoln the President