



# Lincoln Lore

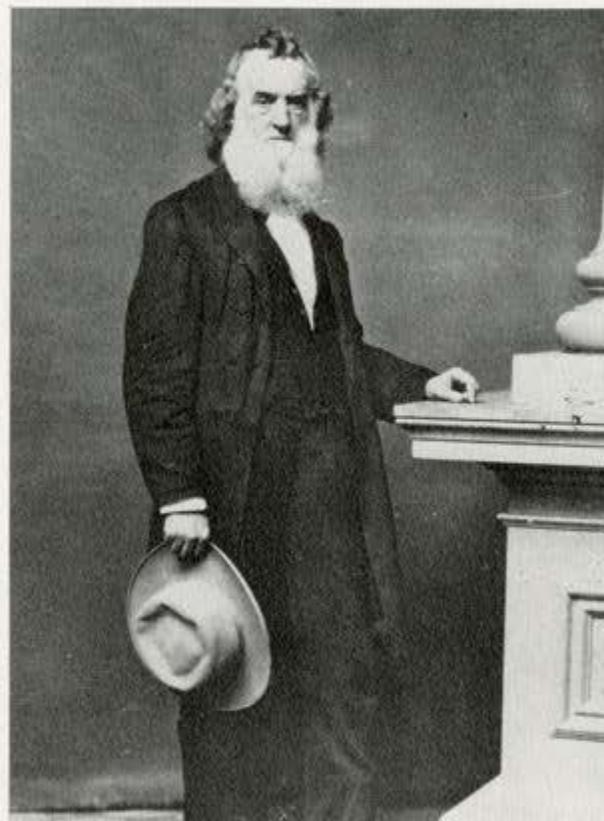
September, 1974 Bulletin of The Lincoln National Life Foundation...Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor. Published each month  
by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.

Number 1639

## John Niven on Gideon Welles A Review

Politics makes strange bedfellows, and there are none stranger than President Abraham Lincoln and his Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles. Welles was not only a Democrat before he became a Republican, but more or less a Democrat of the Loco-Foco variety; "Locofoco" was Lincoln's Whiggish term of opprobrium for his Democratic opponents. An ardent expansionist, Welles urged Martin Van Buren to embrace the cause of Texas annexation in 1844; Lincoln made an early mark in national politics when, as a Congressman, he opposed the war with Mexico for Texas. George D. Prentice, whose editorials Lincoln admired, had been Welles's arch rival in Connecticut's political newspaper wars. Nevertheless, in 1861, the two men began a cooperative effort to win the war against the South and keep the Republican party in power.

John Niven's new biography, *Gideon Welles: Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), will be described as the "definitive" work on the famous white-bearded Civil War diarist. Over 650-pages long, prodigiously researched, and smoothly written, the book deserves that description in many ways. Still, such a description does not quite capture the essence of Professor Niven's work. Despite the importance of Welles's position in President Lincoln's administration and the frequent use made of his diaries by many writers on the Civil War era, Welles has been a man more often referred to than studied, analyzed, and understood. His writings have been like a sign-post pointing the way to understanding the Lincoln administration; few have stopped to study the make-up of the sign itself. Therefore, one gets less the feeling of satisfaction associated with learning the definitive word than



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

**FIGURE 1.** Gideon Welles was born in Glastenbury, Connecticut in 1802. He attended the Episcopal Academy in Cheshire, Connecticut and Alden Partridge's military school in Norwich, Vermont. His father wanted him to become a lawyer, but Welles became a newspaper man, editing the *Hartford Times*. He served four terms in the Connecticut state legislature where he wrote America's first general incorporation law by which businessmen gained limited liability according to general rules established by law rather than through a special grant of monopoly privileges from the legislature. While serving as chief of the Navy's Bureau of Provisions and Clothing under Democrat James K. Polk, Welles gained valuable experience in administering naval affairs and also established valuable connections with Maine's Hannibal Hamlin. As Lincoln's vice-president, Hamlin was later entrusted with the choice of naval secretary for Lincoln's cabinet. Welles was a capable Secretary of the Navy, reading a staggering amount of the incoming correspondence (perhaps one-third) and drafting replies in his own hand.

the feelings of surprise and curiosity stimulated by finding an important but previously hidden historical personality. Niven's book makes one want to get out materials on and by Welles and to study them rather than to shelve the Welles materials and say, "We know exactly where he fits in now."

In Francis B. Carpenter's popular ideological painting of President Lincoln and his cabinet, the Secretary of the Navy occupies the true center of the painting (but not the focus of the painting, which is on Lincoln, of course [see *Lincoln Lore* Number 1623]). Carpenter rendered Welles's position in Lincoln's cabinet accurately, but Welles has suffered neglect while more colorful personalities to the left and right of him like Edwin Stanton and Montgomery Blair have been repeatedly etched in strong passages in many books and articles about Abraham Lincoln. Niven does not imply that Welles occupied the position of central importance in Lincoln's administrative family; on the contrary, he quite clearly shows that Welles was "not a member of the inner circle" of Lincoln's cabinet. Niven does show, however, that Welles was much less conservative and predictable and much closer to Lincoln's positions on many issues than historians previously thought.

Far from colorless, Welles had a radical streak in him. Niven argues that he "inherited" it from his father, a Jeffersonian Republican and religious skeptic from the high Federalist and staunchly Calvinist state of Connecticut. Welles became an early follower of Andrew Jackson and the father of the Democratic party in Connecticut. Uncharacteristically for a political organizer, Welles had some strong political opinions and definitely leaned towards the radical or Loco-Foco wing



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

**FIGURE 2.** John P. Hale was Gideon Welles's "nemesis," according to Professor Niven. New Hampshire's Senator Hale served as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs, and he and the Secretary of the Navy feuded constantly over the awarding of naval contracts and Welles's unfortunate penchant for nepotism in the administration of naval affairs. Hale eventually supported Salmon P. Chase's bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 1864.

of the Democratic party.

Niven's book is more truly a biography than the subtitle suggests, for he spends a great deal of time on Welles's early career before he became Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy. He suffers, therefore, from the problems many biographers have: the man's life that they are studying generally spans a great period of time and therefore requires writing about eras of history that are not necessarily the writer's particular specialty. This makes the biographer rely less upon his own synthetic judgments than upon the most acceptable historical interpretations of others for the periods beyond his major area of interest. Professor Niven's first book was about Connecticut during the Civil War; his judgments about Welles's role in the era Niven knows most about seem independent and do not follow closely or slavishly any particular school of thought about the Civil War. When Niven writes about Welles as the early organizer of the Democracy in Connecticut, however, he follows rather closely the interpretation of party formation in this era laid down by Richard P. McCormick's book, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966).

It is McCormick's contention that party formation during the Jacksonian era had little or nothing to do with economic interests or local issues, and the Democratic and Whig parties were not continuations of the Federalist and Jeffersonian Republican parties. Parties arose to battle for the presidency when there was no candidate with which the particular section of the country could identify as a sectional choice. In Connecticut, therefore, no Jackson partisans appeared until "they saw some prospect that Adams might lose the presidency." The Jacksonians did not contest local elections in Connecticut until they were sustained by the outside help of federal patronage available because of Jackson's victory in 1828. The two parties became much more evenly matched in 1832, when the Jacksonians made a much stronger showing. Henry Clay simply did not have the sectional identification in Connecticut that New England's own John Quincy Adams had had; therefore Jackson's men could make great gains. To perceive party formation in this way, of course, is to see politics as pure opportunism: parties formed when ambitious

local organizers had a chance to win and therefore chanced their fortunes on one national personality or another.

Thus McCormick (and his case is important, for his book has influenced many others besides John Niven) argues that the Democratic and Whig parties "of the 1840's were 'artificial,' in that they seemingly existed in defiance of the real sectional antagonisms that were present at the time." He sees them as artificial, too, in the sense that their appeal to the voters had nothing to do with issues that affected the voters in any way. This is McCormick's description of American antebellum politics before the 1850's:

The second American party system also brought into vogue a new campaign style. Its ingredients can scarcely be described with precision, but they included an emphasis on dramatic spectacles — such as the mass rally, the procession, and the employment of banners, emblems, songs, and theatrical devices — and on club-like associations, colorful personalities, and emotionally charged appeals to party loyalty. Politics in this era took on a dramatic function. It enabled voters throughout the nation to experience the thrill of participating in what amounted to a great democratic festival that seemed to perceptive foreign observers to be remarkably akin to the religious festivals of Catholic Europe.

In their exciting election campaigns, the Americans of that generation found a satisfying form of cultural expression. Perhaps because there were so few emotional outlets available to them of equal effectiveness, they gave themselves up enthusiastically to the vast drama of the election contest. They eagerly assumed the identity of partisans, perhaps for much the same reason that their descendants were to become Dodger fans, Shriners, or rock-and-roll addicts. In this guise, at least, campaigns had little to do with government or public policy, or even with the choice of officials. For the party leaders, of course, the purpose of the campaign was to stimulate the faithful and, if possible, convert the wayward in order to produce victory at the polls.

Professor Niven adds an element to McCormick's picture of the origins of the second American party system. He suggests that Welles and other early party organizers copied the "dramatic" techniques that McCormick described in the above passage from the great religious revivals that swept America in the 1820's and 1830's. This was opportunism indeed on Welles's part, for that cool occasional Episcopalian and Jeffersonian skeptic certainly had no truck with the pietistic fervor and enthusiasm of the Second Great Awakening. Even with this addition to McCormick's scheme, Niven's overall characterization of Welles's role in organizing the Democracy in Connecticut is recognizable as nearly pure McCormick:

Writing . . . when revivalist techniques had been rather completely borrowed and secularized in politics, Michel Chevalier [a foreign observer of the American scene] was astonished at the ritualistic tone of party contests. His vivid descriptions of Democratic parades clearly establish their evangelical character. He was struck by their resemblance to religious processions he had seen in Mexico and in Europe — the torches, the mottoes, the transparencies, "the halting places" — all the symbolic trappings and varieties of quasi-mystical experience. Tocqueville, who visited the United States three years earlier, had generalized in a similar vein: "Every religious doctrine," he wrote in one of his pocket notebooks, [ " ] has a political doctrine which by affinity is attached to it." Gideon Welles would have cheerfully applied such a notion to New England Federalism, while rejecting its application to Jacksonian Democracy. Yet he did not scruple to employ both the form and substance of the second Great Awakening in his political and editorial work. He owed more to the itinerant evangelists than he knew, or would have cared to admit.

To borrow McCormick's thesis, however, causes special problems for a biographer who is sympathetic towards his subject: how does one make Welles look good when he is the opportunistic manipulator of an "artificial" system of essentially cosmetic politics? It is fair to say that Niven is sympathetic towards Gideon Welles, although he is not uncritical. Niven rather skillfully shows both sides of Welles's struggle with Samuel F. DuPont over the effectiveness of monitors and later, for example, he is downright censorious of Welles's conservative defense of Andrew Johnson's do-nothing Reconstruction policies after the Civil War. Earlier in the book, however, Niven is wont to argue that Welles was a pro-

fessional politician, yes, but one who cared more sincerely about the issues than his average peers. McCormick's thesis, then, is at odds with the biographer's natural defensiveness about his subject.

Certainly Welles was an adept practitioner of the political arts, and Niven is not afraid to admit it. Allegedly a principled Jacksonian opponent of banks, Welles signed the "memorial praying for the incorporation of the Farmers and Mechanics Bank of Hartford," which would be a "pet" bank to receive from the Democratic administration in Washington some of the federal government's funds as deposits. When members of an opposing faction of Welles's party managed to gain a nomination to run for Congress for one of their members, Welles supported him in his newspaper but published anonymous letters attacking the candidate in his paper too (page 114). Though he had himself been sympathetic with the workingmen's movement in the Democratic party, he attacked some factional enemies as atheistic radicals for having once supported the same movement. (pages 140-141). By 1846, Welles was beginning to have serious ideological differences with the Democratic administration of James K. Polk, which he thought had sold out the Northern Democracy for the slave power's interest in Texas and low tariffs. Yet Welles had urged Van Buren to climb aboard the Texas bandwagon to gain the Democratic nomination in 1844, and he held on to his patronage job in the Navy Department's Bureau of Provisions and Clothing even while he tried to undermine the administration that appointed him (pages 224-225). Clearly, Welles's dismay with the Democratic party was less a matter of sincere concern about the slavery or even the slavery-expansion issue than it was a matter of fear and anger that Northerners were being pushed out of the jobs wielded by the Democratic party when it ruled Washington. Welles also supported Isaac Toucey, his long-term factional enemy in the Connecticut Democracy, in his bid for appointment as Attorney General in Polk's cabinet, not because Toucey was a qualified applicant, but because Welles wanted to get him out of the state (page 235).

Nevertheless, Niven calls Welles a "democratic idealist," and he has some persuasive evidence. After all, the effect of office-holding on some politicians is to make them mindless defenders of the administration that employs them. Welles's course of action towards the Polk administration may have been "devious," a word Niven uses to describe it, but he probably would also have been accused of deviousness had he defended an administration he did not really believe in. In many ways, Welles was truly and idealistically democratic. When the anti-masonic fervor struck Connecticut, for example, Welles, himself a Mason, suggested that the Masons ought to dissolve their order out of respect for public opinion.

The problem here is serious, and it is a general one for the historical discipline. If every biographer followed Niven's course, adopting the latest interpretation of the period but noting the exception represented by his own subject's life, then the historian would be faced with interpretations that described movements as a whole but failed to describe accurately the course of any single man. Professor Niven might have demonstrated a bit more independence in his judgments about this phase of Welles's life.

Niven could have done so, had he been more willing to describe and analyze Gideon Welles's political ideas. If there is any consistent failing in Niven's otherwise artful and solid book, it is his reluctance to give the reader much intellectual biography. One learns a great deal about what Welles thought of men, but what he thought of measures often remains infuriatingly vague. There is very little, for example, about Welles's reading, and very probably he did not read very much. However, one does learn to one's astonishment that in a cabinet meeting to discuss Andrew Johnson and the Tenure of Office Act, Welles was the only member who knew that Daniel Webster had given a speech on removals from office. There is doubtless plenty of material for at least a skinny little chapter on Welles's ideology, if not his reading, for he was a newspaper editor and wrote hundreds of editorials. Yet nowhere in the book is there much effort to stitch together the ideas that lie in Welles's writings. The result is that one hears from Professor Niven that Welles was a more principled idealist than many wire-pullers, but one has trouble putting one's finger on the principles and ideals.

It is not the case that Professor Niven is incapable of such an analysis, for on occasion he makes very acute analyses of speeches and ideas. Take, for example, William Seward's 1858

"irrepressible conflict" speech. The common wisdom on this speech is that the phrase "irrepressible conflict" was catchy and led to the easy stereotype that Seward was too radical on the slavery question. Seward's biographer, Glyndon Van Deusen, urges this point and otherwise describes the speech as an attack on the Democratic party for having "become a sectional and local party" (Van Deusen's words). Niven agrees with Van Deusen but adds a perceptive point quite at odds with Van Deusen's characterization but fully as explanatory of the speech's tendency to hurt Seward's chance for the Republican nomination in 1860:

Beyond the words themselves, the tenor of the Rochester speech shook the precarious unity of the Republican party. Seward spoke as a Whig, not as a Republican, and he recklessly and falsely charged that Democrats had always been proslavery. Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and James K. Polk had all been all [*sic*] slaveholders; Martin Van Buren had appeased the slave power in his first inaugural. Slavery, Seward implied, had been a source of political division between the Whigs and the Democrats, with the Democrats always upholding the institution.

Thus the problem with Seward was his Whiggishness rather than his radicalism on the slavery question. He did not say that the Democratic party had *become* a tool of slavery but that it *always had been*.

Niven holds that, just as Welles became a Democrat of



Engraved according to Act of Congress in the year 1862. By E. Anderson in the Clerk's office of the District Court of the U.S. for the Sd. District of New York.

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

**FIGURE 3.** David G. Farragut was a Southerner chosen largely by virtue of his seniority to head the naval expedition to capture New Orleans. Farragut was nearsighted but did not wear glasses, was sixty years old, and had been passed over for other commands before. Yet in 1863, Lincoln told Welles that "there had not been, take it all in all, so good an appointment in either branch of the service as Farragut."

somewhat radical or Loco-Foco leanings, when he changed parties he became the leader of Connecticut's "more radical" Republicans. This may be true, but it is clear from Niven's book (and he does not attempt to cloak it) that Welles was basically a free soiler who feared Southern power in Washington and the "Africanization" of the territories. Along with this went a strong civil-libertarian strain of outrage at the Fugitive Slave Law. The meaning of radicalism in this context is somewhat unclear, and it would have been more instructive had Niven gone into the varieties of Connecticut Republicanism. A group of conservative heirs of the Connecticut Federalism that Welles despised in fact showed a more "radical" interest in the welfare of the black man. Theodore Dwight Woolsey, the President of Yale, and Leonard Bacon, a New Haven Congregational minister, for example, tended to be very conservative on many political questions like universal suffrage but showed a sincere life-long interest in the black man. As early as 1825, Woolsey and Bacon, according to George A. King's *Theodore Dwight Woolsey: His Political and Social Ideas* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1956), established an Antislavery Association to improve the condition of New Haven's free Negro population and to stir interest among Connecticut's whites and religious seminarians throughout the country. In 1881, Woolsey was in his eighties and serving as a trustee of the Slater Fund, a charitable organization aimed at educating the South's blacks. Welles, by contrast, had opposed Prudence Crandall's attempt to establish a school for out-of-state black girls in Canterbury, Connecticut in 1831 and was rigidly insensitive even to the needs of blacks for protection from bodily harm in New Orleans and Memphis thirty-five years later.

Nevertheless, it is true (and not a little surprising to those who might think that Welles was always as conservative as he was during Reconstruction) that the biggest stumbling block to Welles's selection as Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy was his known radicalism on the Fugitive Slave Law. Lincoln extracted a promise from Welles to obey that law as a condition of membership in the cabinet. Then (this too is a little surprising but better known) Welles did not really live up to his promise. Long before the Army did it, the Navy, on Welles's explicit instructions, sheltered fugitive slaves who sought protection on naval vessels, employed them for wages on shipboard and in the yard, and signed them on at ten dollars a month as the equivalent of army privates for naval service. When Lincoln protested such practices by the Army, he let Welles's flagrant actions go without a reprimand, probably as a signal of his true intentions in regard to slavery as soon as he was assured of the loyalty of the border states.

Niven is on very sure ground when he talks of Welles's years on Lincoln's cabinet and the insights here are fascinating and Niven's judgments independent. The administrative and political workings of the Lincoln administration from its early confused fumbling with secession to its surer prosecution of

the war are described in some considerable detail and with freshness.

In regard to the Emancipation Proclamation, for example, Niven argues that the President asked William Seward and Gideon Welles about the possibility first because he knew where the others in his cabinet would stand. Seward and Welles thus occupied the critical center of the spectrum of political opinion in the cabinet (proof again that painter Francis Carpenter was right). When Lincoln showed his draft of the proclamation to the full cabinet on July 22, 1862, it startled every member. "The measure goes beyond anything I have recommended," said Edwin Stanton. Lincoln was supported only by Bates, usually considered as the most conservative member of the cabinet. Seward, interestingly enough, opposed it on the grounds that its issuance would bring foreign intervention to prevent abolition for the sake of their cotton supplies.

Niven's little description of this oft-described event challenges many commonly accepted beliefs about the Emancipation Proclamation. It makes highly suspect assertions that the Proclamation had the moral grandeur of a bill of lading and that Congress had already done nearly as much in its Confiscation Acts. It also calls into question the old saw that Lincoln was anxious to get the Proclamation out in order to dissuade England from intervention. Seward knew, what some cynical diplomatic historians since have known, that the classes who controlled British government decisions did not care a fig about America's being inconsistent about freedom and democracy.

Hopefully, these few incidents give something of the flavor of Niven's rich book. It deserves its place on the shelf next to Benjamin Thomas and Harold Hyman's distinguished biography of Edwin Stanton. Unfortunately, Professor Niven has been poorly served by his publishers, the prestigious Oxford University Press. The footnotes are at the back of the book, some 580 pages away from the reader who starts on page one. The index is downright puny; it is mostly only an index to proper names, and many of these (Prudence Crandall, for example) do not make the index. The book is also marred by an astonishing number of typographical errors. "Camaraderie" becomes "camaderie." John P. Usher becomes John B. Usher. What should be a comma on page 532 is a period. Fitz-John Porter becomes Fritz-John Porter. They coin the word "inciteful" on page 394. Mr. Stimers becomes Mr. Stimer in the very next line. Parentheses and quotation marks sometimes fail to open. On page 186, the word "arrangements" stands where one strongly suspects that Professor Niven wrote "arguments" in the original.

Fortunately, Professor Niven's meaning shines through the unappetizing format of the book, and students of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, and Connecticut politics are much the richer for it.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

FIGURE 4. The United States Monitor Mahopoc. Welles was slower than his Confederate counterpart, Stephen R. Mallory, to recognize the potential of ironclad vessels.