



Lincoln Lore

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BLAIR

The elder statesman is a familiar fixture on the Washington political scene today. In recent years, the names of Clark Clifford and Averell Harriman have often appeared in the headlines at times of national crisis. Abraham Lincoln's administration was one long crisis, and Francis Preston Blair was the Civil War's elder statesman. A relic of the Presidency of Andrew Jackson, Blair was influential because of his proximity to Washington, his blurred partisanship, his many political connections, and his age and experience. At last he has a modern biographer, Elbert B. Smith, who gives considerable stress to the Civil War years in *Francis Preston Blair* (New York: The Free Press, 1980).

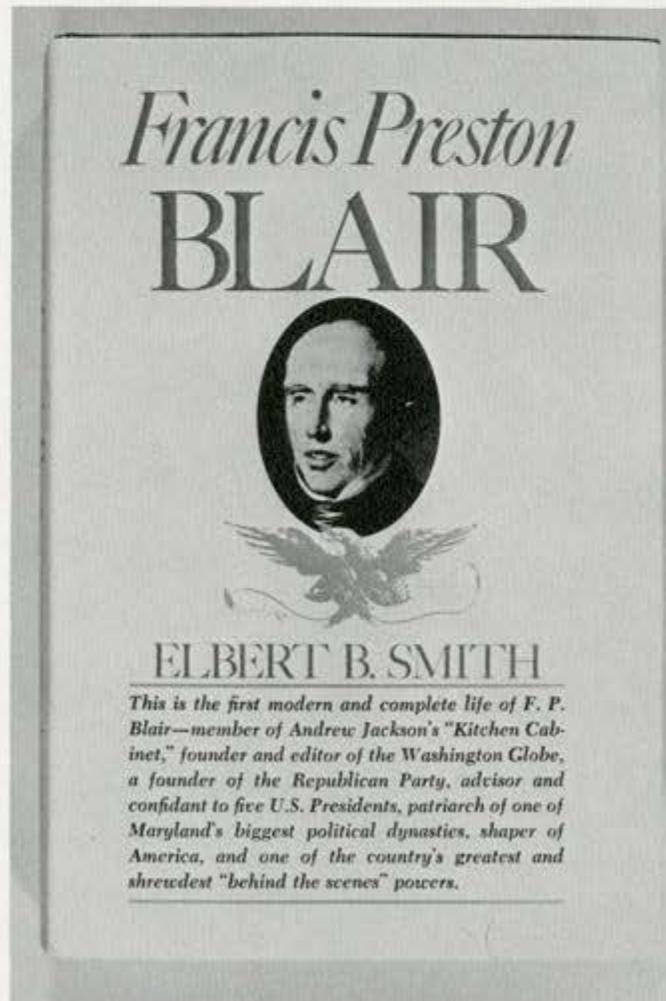
Blair was seventy years old when the Civil War began. An architect of Jacksonian Democracy in his prime, he bitterly opposed the expansion of slavery and became an important founder of the Republican party when he was well into his sixties. His family and political relations formed a powerful network throughout the Union, especially in the Border States of Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky. One of his sons, Montgomery Blair, was Lincoln's Postmaster General. Francis Preston Blair, Jr., "Frank," flitted from politics to the battlefield and had sensational impact almost everywhere he went. Even Francis P. Blair's political enemies liked him personally. His family adored him and carried his political ideas everywhere they went. Like most elder statesmen, he played his largest role in foreign policy, initiating the abortive Hampton Roads Peace Conference. Confederates who would trust no other Republican trusted Blair.

This is a competent and fair-minded biography of a man whose political ideas have not been popular in recent years. Like all elder statesmen, Blair's age made him in some respects a political troglodyte. A kindly slaveholder himself, Blair and his politically important family were ardent colonizationists long after the idea was a sociological, political, and economic absurdity. The

triumph of their conservative — even reactionary — constitutional ideas after Lincoln's death has not endeared the Blairs to modern historians. Eight years ago, when I asked a college professor what was the point of his lecture on Reconstruction in an American history survey course, he replied humorously, "To hell with Montgomery Blair." Smith's biography, which is particularly strong on the Blair family's inner workings, is a valuable corrective to this hostility absorbed by so many historians in recent years. It is most illuminating to discover how personally likable the old man was. Even the unbudging Charles Sumner never took personal exception to attacks on his political ideas by members of the Blair clan.

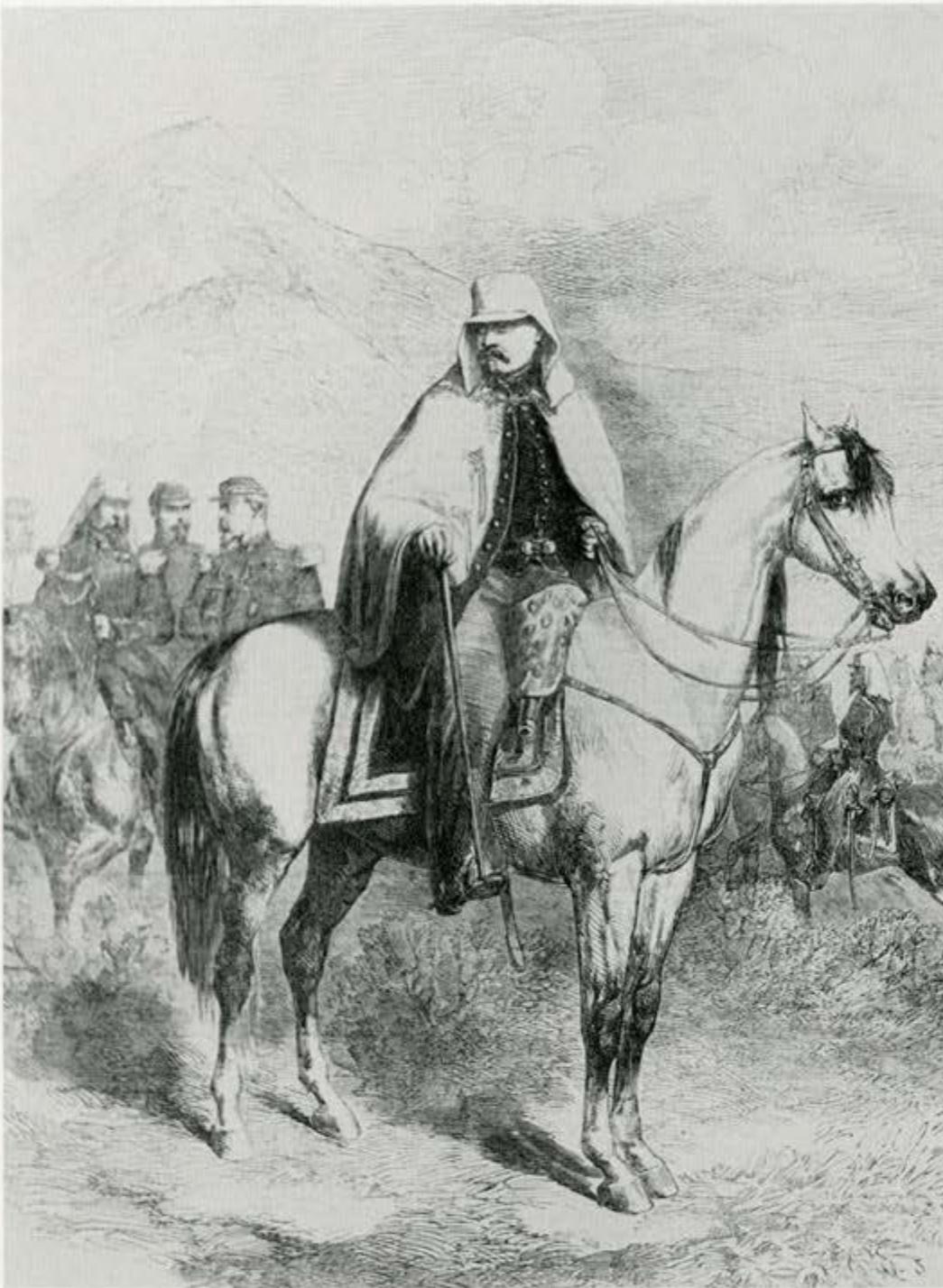
Nevertheless, the book's weaknesses must be the real focus of this review. Despite competent research and readable prose, *Francis Preston Blair* is lacking in at least one important respect. Professor Smith, for all his ability to capture Blair the man, never quite delineates Blair the political thinker. To describe the political thought of many a politician / editor / wire-puller, would be a mistake. Opportunism and ad hoc political apologetics too often destroy anything systematic about their political thinking. With Blair, however, it is a serious mistake not to do so. He played a larger role in making Jacksonian political doctrine than Andrew Jackson himself did. When political problems arose, President Jackson always shouted, "Take it to Bla'ar." Despite his ability to land on his feet politically, despite his brave and clever moving with the times into the Republican party, and despite his steady personal loyalty to those he served, Blair's ideas had so ossified by the Civil War era that the most distinctive thing about him was his ideological quality. Even when his policies were up to date, the ideas underlying them were strangely archaic.

Blair was an ideologue, and his children inherited a penchant for grandiose ideas from him. It is virtually impossible, incidentally, to write about Francis Preston Blair. One



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FIGURE 1. Dust jacket of the new Blair biography.



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FIGURE 2. French troops in Mexico worried Blair but did not faze Lincoln.

must always write about the Blairs. Smith does this without really admitting that he does, probably because the only other existing work on the subject, William Ernest Smith's *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics*, did exactly the same thing in 1933. One is immediately attracted to Elbert B. Smith's *Francis Preston Blair* because it promises to sort one member of that clan out, but, in fact, the modern Smith cannot do it either. When one finishes the new book, one still thinks of the Blairs' political ideas, not Montgomery's, not Frank's, and not the patriarch's particular ideas.

These ideas were all important, and they are all too sketchily delineated in Professor Smith's book. What Smith has failed to describe is the tendency among the Blairs to think always in systematic, gigantic, almost cosmic geopolitical terms. Among American politicians this trait has often been lacking, and it is a serious error for a biographer of such a rare thinker to ignore it.

To end the Civil War in 1865, Blair concocted a scheme to fight France in Mexico. This was the idea behind the Hamp-

ton Roads Peace Conference, and it is common knowledge. There are other clues in Smith's book that the Blairs always painted their political ideas on a grand canvas. The Blairs were not deeply troubled by the policy of emancipation. As Francis P. Blair explained to a Maryland friend as early as April 9, 1862:

You seem dissatisfied over abolition. All practical men are now sensible that slavery so affects the people whether it ought to do so or not as to make it a terrible institution to our race. They see that it imbues a brother's hand in a brother's blood, and invites foreign despots to plant monarchies on our continent. With this result before us, the only enquiry should be how to get rid of an institution which produces such miseries.

Never content with the practical, parochial, and powerful argument that slavery was bad for the white race, Blair somehow managed to conjure up the bogey of monarchy.

True, French bayonets propped Maximilian up on the Mexican throne, but most Americans took little interest in Latin America. President Lincoln was never much interested in Mexican schemes. As a former Whig, he had long detested American imperial designs on her southern neighbor. A politician of moral vision, Lincoln was also an eminently practical man, and he was content to fight one war at a time. Blair, on the other hand, was obsessed with the monarchical threat on America's southern flank. Democratic politicians, even those with free-soil proclivities like Blair's, had a weakness for Latin American ventures.

Somehow, any threat to American national solidarity caused Blair to see monarchy in the wings. Months before the firing on Fort Sumter, the elder

statesman told Lincoln that the North was "as much bound to resist the South Carolina Movement, as that of planting a monarchy in our midst by a European potentate." The days of Jackson seemed not far removed to Blair, who still called the secessionists of 1860-1861 "nullifiers." His policy of resisting secession was up-to-date, all right, but the assumptions behind it were decades old. Earlier still, just after Lincoln's election in November, 1860, Blair had given him a piece of bad advice, telling him to mention colonization in his letter accepting the Republican nomination. This would have the practical effect of warding off "the attacks, made upon us about negro equality." Blair did not leave the subject on that banal, but practical plane, however. He also launched into an elaborate analogy between the Chiriqui Improvement Company, an outfit poised to colonize blacks in Latin America, and the old East India Company, which had made England's empire in India possible. The same anarchy which had invited English intervention in India through a private corporation prevailed "among the little confederacies . . .

South of the Free States of this continent." Chiriqui, Blair said, "may be made the pivot on which to rest our lever to sway Central America and secure . . . the control . . . necessary for the preservation of our Republican Institutions." He was like an ancient and battered weather vane rusted into pointing fixedly in the same direction all the time. Sometimes the winds shifted so that he pointed the way truly, but the key factor was his fixity, not his wisdom.

Inside Blair's odd-shaped and proverbially ugly head, there swam a strange array of sophisticated but old-fashioned ideas. The electoral defeat of Breckinridge, Bell, and Douglas could lead him to think, not of possible civil war or the deeper problem of slavery and racism which underlay that threat, but of Mexico and monarchy. He could leap from political considerations of the racial views of the American electorate to geopolitical blather about analogies to the British empire. And all this was mixed with occasional acute judgments and a charming self-deprecation. In a letter written before Lincoln's election, Blair told his son Frank that Lincoln had "genius [and] . . . political knowledge" and stressed the importance of his honesty in bringing support. Blair described himself as "a sort of relic which Genl Jackson wielded against the very Nullification" which again threatened the Union.

Smith leaves much of this out, and, in doing so, he nearly leaves Blair out of his biography of Blair. It is most unfortunate that Smith chose to write a "life and times" of Blair, for his life was long and his times comprehended most of American political history from the Era of Good Feelings to the end of Reconstruction. Smith spends entirely too much time in describing general political events, sometimes well and sometimes poorly, and far too little time in analyzing Blair's political vision.

One cannot, from all evidence, dismiss as claptrap and window dressing the grand geopolitical context of Blair's often crudely practical ideas. Though attempting to escape the wrath of Northern racism may appear to be the only operative content in Blair's colonization obsession, in fact the analogies to England and the muttering about monarchy seem really to be the heart and kernel of his thought. In the letter suggesting that Lincoln talk of colonization as a way to ward off accusations that Republicans advocated racial equality, Blair explained the connection between monarchy and slavery. The Southern "oligarchy," he thought, had lost its American love of freedom and saw the "degraded lower orders of whites" as fit only to be slaves or soldiers. Southerners would rather fight than work, and such pre-bourgeois attitudes (Blair did not use that term) would lead to monarchy. From this system of ideas, at least in part, came the Blairs' famed obstinate resistance to secession and compromise!

Francis P. Blair's fevered vision of American politics was always informed by his acquaintance with world history. From the men he regarded as the great luminaries of American history, Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson, Blair claimed to have learned the inevitability of a final solution to America's race problem. "The period has come," he told Lincoln after his election, "which Mr. Jefferson saw would arrive, rendering the deportation or extermination of the African Race from among us, inevitable." He pointed to the "Hostilities of irreconcilable Castes" which "marked the annals of Spain during 800 years, springing from the abhorrent mixture of the Moors with Spaniards, in the same peninsula." Lincoln called him "Father Blair," and one can imagine the mixture of awe and incredulity with which he must have regarded such cosmic musings. The President's own political vision included little of this grand world-historical baggage. Yet at the moment of his greatest political influence on the Lincoln administration, the time of the Hampton Roads Peace Conference, Blair insisted to Lincoln: "You see that I make the great point of this matter that the War is no longer made for slavery but monarchy." The old man blurted his fears that Jefferson Davis would league with a foreign monarchy to save Southern independence. He babbled that Napoleon had wanted a black army from Santo Domingo to invade the American South, stir up insurrection, and bring about French conquest of the United States. At Hampton Roads, by contrast, Lincoln scoffed that he left history lessons to Seward. The President



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FIGURE 3. Francis Preston Blair, Jr.

was interested in Southern peace terms — even, as G.S. Boritt has suggested, in how much coin it would take essentially to bribe the South into reunion.

Jefferson Davis was a political realist too. He told Blair that France did not want a Mexican empire as much as she wanted a base from which to build up her feeble navy. Davis, at war with an industrially superior nation, knew the lure of coal, iron, and timber. Blair did not get the point. He still feared that Davis would become France's ally in subjecting the United States to monarchy. The elder statesman told Lincoln, far too busy even to read long letters from his generals, to observe the parallels with modern times in Carlyle's *Life of Frederick the Great*.

An old-fashioned idea lay at the heart of Francis P. Blair's thought and that of his influential children. Jacksonian ideologues always saw sharp class conflicts in America. They thought government aid to private corporations aided only rich men. They denied the possible general benefits of economic development. Such issues were irrelevant during the Civil War, but seeing Southern society in the same class terms was not. A perception of class conflict between Southern poor whites and a slaveholding oligarchy apparently lay at the bottom of Blair's fears of Southern willingness to invite monarchies to save their movement for independence. This error in perception of Southern society had serious political consequences. Montgomery Blair inherited from his father a penchant for seeing class conflict, whether it was there or not. Montgomery always insisted that secession was a minority movement and that "Military Government" in the Confederacy held the essentially loyal Southern masses at bay. This was carrying the common Northern belief in the existence of a slave oligarchy to an extreme, but in 1861 more people than the Blairs believed it. Even President Lincoln may have thought that way in 1861. He at least insisted that there was no majority for secession in any Southern state except, perhaps, South Carolina.

Ever the practical observer, Lincoln came to see that this could not be so. After two and one-half years of war, Lincoln admitted that it would be difficult to find even ten percent of the population in any Southern state loyal to the Union. Montgomery Blair never changed his mind. The rigid Blair class analysis ground to its inexorable conclusions. The point



A SELF-APPOINTED ENVOY.

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FIGURE 4. This cartoon from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 21, 1865, depicted Blair as a granny, trying to bring the Confederacy to the bargaining table with sugarplums and barley water. General Ulysses S. Grant points to cannonballs as the more appropriate way of convincing the Confederates to rejoin the Union.

of the Postmaster General's famous speech at Rockville, Maryland, late in 1863, was that there existed a loyal *majority* in the South against which the North must never be at war. It brought him the undying hatred of all the Radical Republicans (except friendly Charles Sumner). There is little wonder the Blairs opposed Reconstruction. They had never seen much disloyalty in need of restructuring into loyalty.

It is almost impossible to write a decent biography of a man the biographer hates. The spirit rebels so at spending great amounts of time with an unlikable person that it can result only in unbalanced fulmination against the poor subject of the biography. The problem with Elbert B. Smith's *Francis Preston Blair* is not its mild bias in favor of its subject. This is almost necessary in order to attract a biographer to work, and it is rendered harmless by the common knowledge that most biographers suffer from this fault. Abraham Lincoln himself scorned biography because of its predictable lionization of its subject, no matter what the subject's faults.

The problem with this book is more serious. Smith fails essentially to capture Francis Preston Blair's nature. The

ideologue surfaces only occasionally, most notably in Smith's treatment of Frank Blair's speech "The Destiny of the Races of this Continent," delivered in Boston in 1859. There the great Blair political universe is laid out in an astonishing array of references to Dr. Livingstone on African hybrids and to the role of Moors in Spanish history. The speech, as Blair's daughter observed, dazzled "not only the politicians — but the Literati — & State street gentility." Smith's discussion of it dazzles the modern reader too and should make him wonder where all these ideas came from and whither they were going in the Civil War. This rare and brief glimpse of the Blair world view is but a dazzling moment in what is otherwise a competent, but sometimes sketchy, chronicle of Blair's role in many events of American history described at too great length. The inner springs of this fascinating elder statesman's thought and actions are too often left unexplained. And, as Smith's book clearly proves, Blair's thought and action were too important to too many people — from Andrew Jackson to Abraham Lincoln, from Thomas Hart Benton to Charles Sumner — to be left in such a state.