



Lincoln Lore

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LAWANDA COX ON RECONSTRUCTION IN LOUISIANA: A REVIEW

President Lincoln's attempt to reconstruct Louisiana has been the focus of a tremendous amount of attention in recent years. It has provided the exclusive subject matter of two major books in the last three years: Peyton McCrary's *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction: The Louisiana Experiment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) and LaWanda Cox's *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981). Other historians have given it considerable notice in books, articles, and scholarly papers of broader focus. Reconstruction in Louisiana is a hot topic these days.

The attraction lies not so much in swampy Louisiana itself as in the subject of Reconstruction, for Lincoln made Louisiana a sort of model of his policy toward the conquered South. Interest in Reconstruction is high for three principal reasons. First, scholars, jurists, reformers, and policy makers have been look-

ing for precedents set in the 1860s and 1870s for the modern movement for civil rights for black people a century later. Indeed, the measures of the modern era are sometimes called the Second Reconstruction. That initial impulse to study the first Reconstruction is well on the wane, but scholars trained in graduate schools in the 1960s did their initial work on Reconstruction and continue to work in the field even though many reformers, jurists, and policy makers have abandoned those concerns. If that second factor may be characterized as scholarly inertia, a third factor is surely scholarly thoroughness. There is a sense abroad in academe that Reconstruction scholarship, like the Second Reconstruction to which it was a handmaiden, must move on to new insights that go well beyond the now old-fashioned attempt to prove that Reconstruction was not as bad as most white Americans used to think.

LaWanda Cox, with her late husband John, wrote one of the



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FIGURE 1. When Union forces arrived in Louisiana, Lincoln had his first big chance to reconstruct a state.



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FIGURE 2. Some New Orleans residents scrambled to take the oath of allegiance to the United States.

1960s' most important and influential works on Reconstruction, *Politics, Principle, and Prejudice, 1865-1866: Dilemma of Reconstruction America*, a book which did much to destroy Andrew Johnson's reputation. Mrs. Cox was already a mature scholar at the advent of the heyday of Reconstruction studies. Her interest in the subject endures because of essentially scholarly impulses. In her long career, she came across documents which did not seem to jibe with the accepted wisdom on Abraham Lincoln's Reconstruction policies, and she wanted to figure out what was correct.

In one respect, but in one respect only, her conclusions are not original. She shares with McCrary and other scholars a view, fast gaining wide acceptance among historians, that Abraham Lincoln would have reconstructed the South had John Wilkes Booth not stopped him. In light of the preponderance of evidence in favor of this view — one thinks immediately of the numerous Lincoln letters urging military governors in the South to get on with the work of reconstructing their states — the conclusion may seem obvious and banal. A quick glance at the conclusions reached by the previous generation of historians like Allan Nevins and James G. Randall, will quickly reveal the unanimity of the contrary opinion until very recent times. And outside the scholarly community, the older view still reigns supreme and shows few signs of movement toward the newer view. It will require many more reiterations than Mrs. Cox's to turn the tide of majority opinion, and there is nothing wrong with her reasserting this truth.

The real originality of *Lincoln and Black Freedom* lies in the nature of Mrs. Cox's proof of the proposition that Lincoln would have reconstructed the South had he lived to complete his second term. Readers of McCrary's book in particular will be surprised to see who Mrs. Cox's heroes and villains are. The reader should not be fooled by her assertion that her approach in the book was "one of reflection rather than research." She has solid documentation for her most important conclusions. She

read the crucial documents and, more important, read them with care and with discerning and sympathetic intelligence. It is a convincing book.

The care with which Mrs. Cox read the documents is apparent in her first chapter. Relying for the most part on documents read by hundreds of historians before her, she manages nevertheless to describe Lincoln's policies toward slavery in a fresh and exciting way:

When war opened possibilities unapproachable in the 1850s, Lincoln's reach was not found wanting. Indeed, there is something breathtaking in his advance from prewar advocacy of restricting slavery's spread to foremost responsibility for slavery's total, immediate, uncompensated destruction by constitutional amendment. The progression represented a positive exercise of leadership. It has often been viewed as a reluctant accommodation to pressures; it can better be understood as a ready response to opportunity. Willing to settle for what was practicable, provided it pointed in the right direction, Lincoln was alert to the expanding potential created by war. Military needs, foreign policy, Radical agitation did not force him upon an alien course but rather helped clear a path toward a long-desired but intractable objective. Having advanced, Lincoln recognized the danger of a forced retreat, a retreat to be forestalled with certainty only by military victory and constitutional amendment. His disclaimer of credit for "the removal of a great wrong" which he attributed to "God alone," though in a sense accurate, for the process of emancipation did not follow his or any man's design, was nonetheless misleading.

Although historians have often remarked on Lincoln's "growth" in office, none has heretofore called the rapidity of change in his views on slavery "breathtaking."

Can Mrs. Cox document it? In a word, yes. She notes that Lincoln was the first President ever to ask Congress to pass an amendment to the Constitution fully drafted by the President

himself (in December, 1862). "Lincoln took the initiative against slavery," she says. When he had first suggested his scheme for gradual and compensated emancipation in the border states the previous March, "Congress had not yet taken any action against slavery as such." The first Confiscation Act (August, 1861) affected only slaves used for military purposes, and the bill to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia had not yet passed either house. Even Wendell Phillips had to admit that Lincoln was "better than his Congress fellows." The Phillips letter came to light only in 1979. Mrs. Cox has been reading as well as reflecting.

Mrs. Cox's interpretation of the Emancipation Proclamation likewise gives firm support for her use of the word "breath-taking":

In issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln is sometimes seen as lagging behind Congress, which had passed the Second Confiscation Act on July 17, 1862. Yet the first draft of his proclamation was presented to the cabinet just five days later and his decision had been made earlier, at least by July 13 — that is, before Congress acted. When his advisers convinced him to delay until a Union victory, Lincoln promptly issued the first paragraph of his draft as a separate proclamation giving warning that all persons who did not return to their allegiance would be subject, as provided by the Confiscation Act, to forfeitures and seizures.

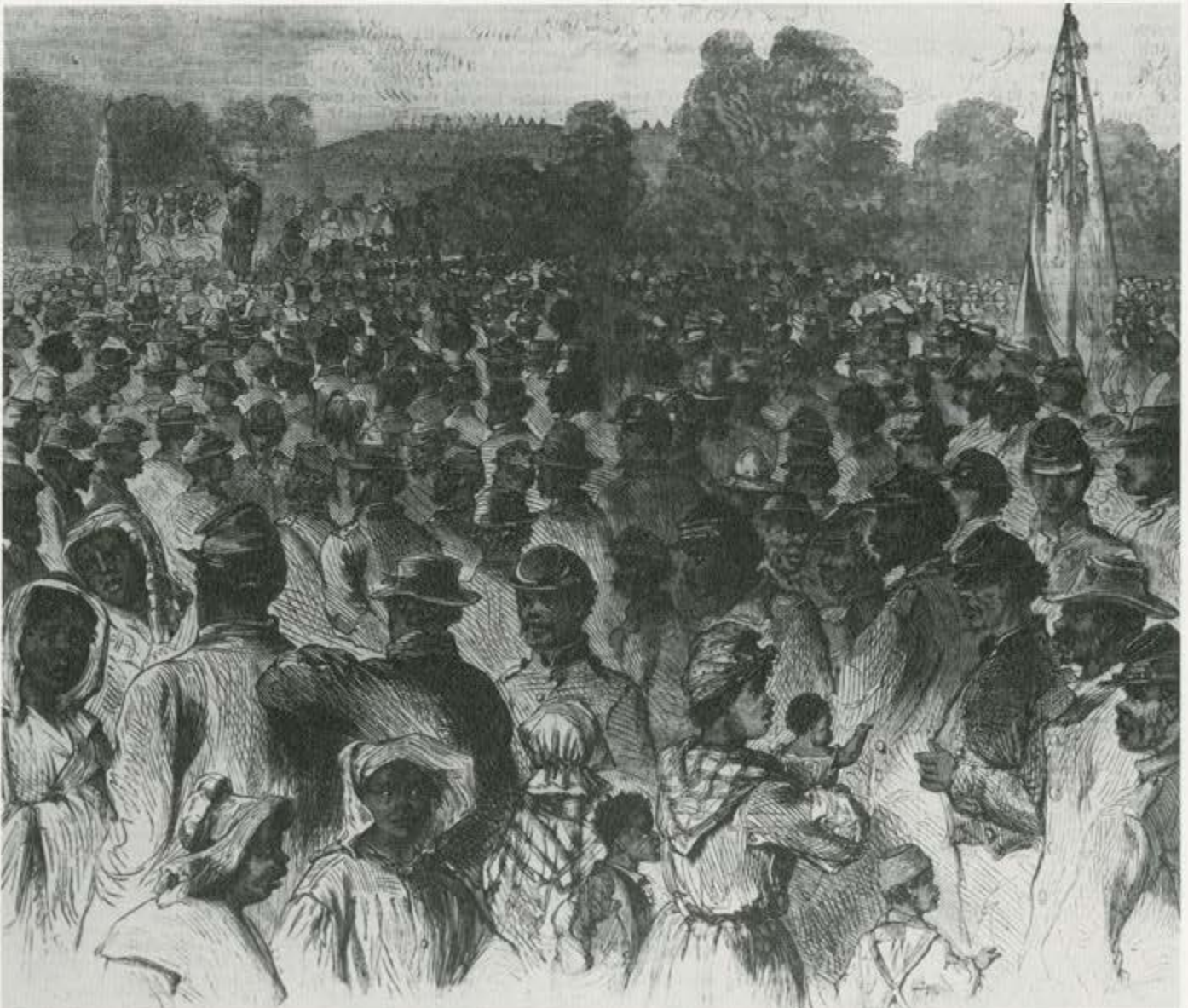
The discerning intelligence with which Mrs. Cox read the documents is everywhere apparent. She knows that tone is

important. In discussing Lincoln's message on compensated emancipation of the spring of 1862, she notes that in "earnestly beg[ging] the attention of Congress and the people," he "rejected the suggestion that he substitute 'respectfully' for 'earnestly.'" He pleaded for his program "in full view of my great responsibility to my God, and to my country." Mrs. Cox adds shrewdly: "In this first major antislavery document of his presidency the word order of 'God' and 'country' may be not unworthy of note." Lincoln was honest, but he was also crafty, as Mrs. Cox knows from her sensitive reading of his works. When rumors that Confederate peace commissioners were coming to Washington threatened passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in the House early in 1865, James Ashley asked the President for a denial.

Pressed, Lincoln sent a one-sentence, carefully phrased response: "So far as I know, there are no peace commissioners in the city, or likely to be in it." Peace commissioners, as Lincoln well knew, were on their way — but to Fortress Monroe rather than to "the city."

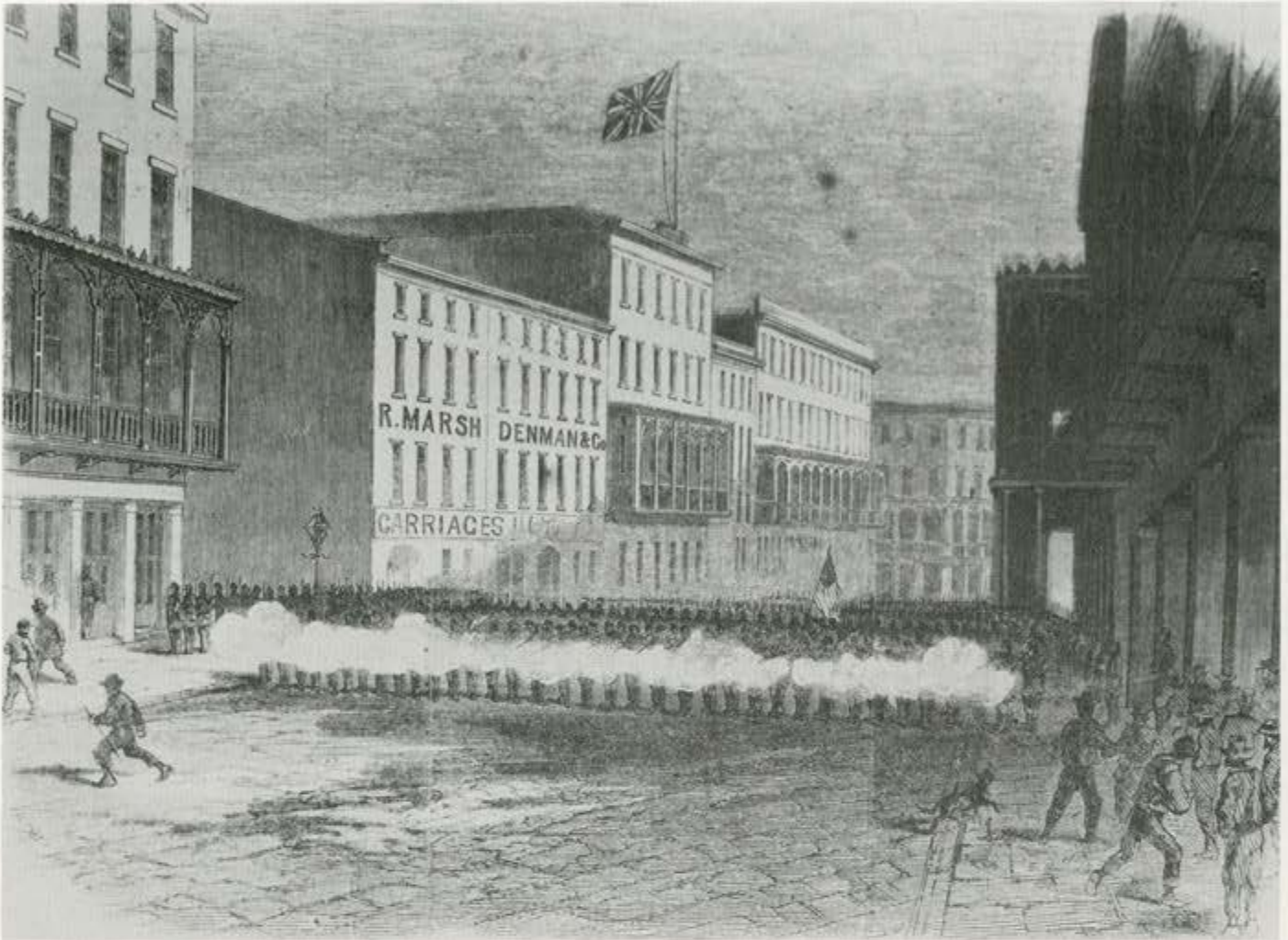
Lincoln and Black Freedom is a book for aficionados who will appreciate the subtle interpretations and the careful attention to chronology.

When Mrs. Cox turns her formidable talents to the subject of Reconstruction in Louisiana, she reaches even more impressive and original conclusions. Her straightforward chronological approach allows her first to document Lincoln's education into the realities of disloyal sentiment in the South. Beginning with the notion that indigenous forces in occupied Louisiana could,



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FIGURE 3. Union generals lectured Louisiana's blacks on their duties as freedmen.



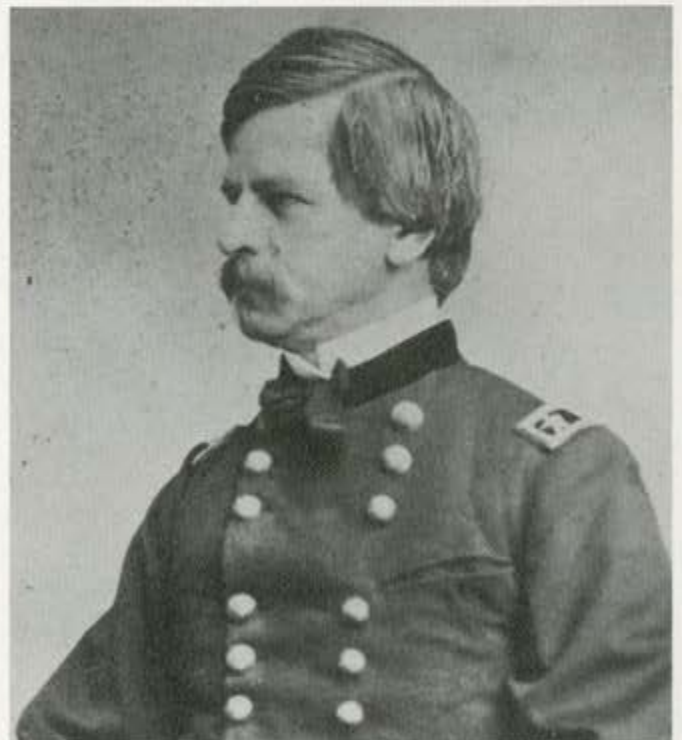
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FIGURE 4. Military power was much in evidence as Union soldiers practiced “street firing” in New Orleans.

with a little encouragement, create a new free state government, the President learned gradually that it could not be done — at least not before 1864, when the threat of Democratic control of the national government might end all efforts to undermine slavery. Slowly he came around to the view of General Nathaniel P. Banks, the Northern military commander in the region, that it could be done by means of military pressure without anything approaching a majority of the local population. That education informed Lincoln's general Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction of December 8, 1863, which asked only for a ten percent nucleus around which to form a free state in any of the occupied South. Banks's idea, which soon became Lincoln's, was to organize elections for state offices under the old prewar proslavery constitution and declare the parts of that constitution upholding slavery null by sheer military authority. It would take too long to wait for majority opinion even among the loyal people of Louisiana to come around to the conviction that slavery should be abolished in a new state constitution.

Readers of Peyton McCrary's *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction* will be surprised to hear of this concurrence of views between Lincoln and General Banks. McCrary accused Banks of deceiving Lincoln into thinking that the local antislavery loyalists, the Free State Committee led by Thomas J. Durant, were dragging their feet in registering voters for a constitutional convention. Banks, McCrary argued, gained control of the political situation in Louisiana and engineered a conservative “coup” which undermined the more radical Free State movement. As Mrs. Cox points out, however, it was a long letter from Durant to Lincoln (October, 1863) which revealed to the President that little or nothing was being done in Louisiana.

(To be continued)



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FIGURE 5. General Nathaniel P. Banks.