



Lincoln Lore

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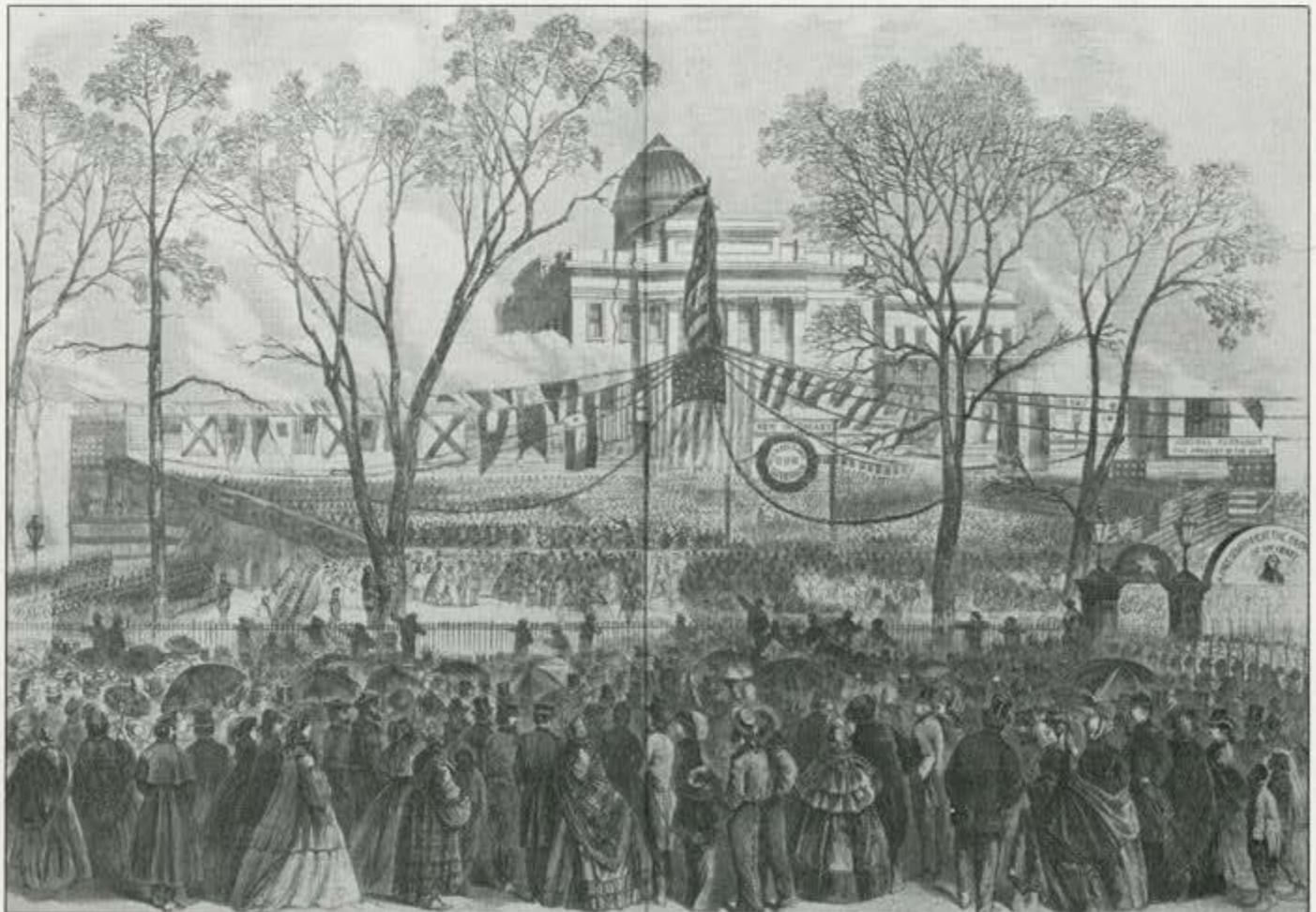
LAWANDA COX ON RECONSTRUCTION IN LOUISIANA: A REVIEW (Cont.)

The President then blamed Banks for the lack of progress, and the general, whose military duties kept him from seeing Lincoln's letter until December 2nd, did not get around to defending himself until December 6th. Banks said, and it was true, that he had no orders authorizing him to take charge of the political situation. Since word that it would take a long time to organize a constitutional convention in Louisiana came from Durant himself, it is little wonder that Lincoln turned to Banks and sustained him, as Mrs. Cox argues, when he differed with Durant and the Free State movement.

Mrs. Cox's understanding of the situation in Louisiana is markedly different from McCrary's. In her book, Banks is depicted as leading a temporarily successful Unionist move-

ment in Louisiana fully in keeping with the President's wishes. In his book, Banks is depicted as the President's deceiver. In Mrs. Cox's work, Durant appears as a difficult stumbling block to progress toward the goal of making Louisiana a free state before adverse political developments in 1864 could undermine the work. In Mr. McCrary's work, Durant appears as a man thoroughly wronged by Banks and a President working under false assumptions about political reality in Louisiana.

Mrs. Cox wins this argument hands down. Durant chose to make his name in history by opposing the Lincoln-Banks government and by claiming that it was engineered to undermine the radical Free Staters' desire to urge suffrage for Negroes in Louisiana. *Lincoln and Black Freedom* shows that in fact



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FIGURE 1. Governor Michael Hahn's inauguration in New Orleans, March 4, 1864.



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FIGURE 2. Mrs. Banks sponsored a splendid entertainment on election day in Louisiana.

the President, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, and Durant himself were, in the beginning, all in agreement on the suffrage issue. All three were committed to registering freeborn black citizens, principally the New Orleans Creoles.

Durant had not gone farther than that in urging black suffrage by February, 1864. And Lincoln had already gone that far. He had twice approved registration of freeborn Negroes as voters in Louisiana. Lincoln approved Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton's order of August 24, 1863, telling the military governor in Louisiana to register "all the loyal citizens of the United States" there. Chase had objected to the first draft of the order, which stipulated organizing a constitutional convention based on the white population. The final order stipulated "loyal" citizens rather than "white" citizens. "For the instructions," Chase said, "we are indebted to Mr. Stanton and the President." In the following November, Chase had to write to urge Durant, in charge of the voter registration, to register Negro citizens. Durant replied that he favored it himself, but it would be helpful to have specific directives from Washington. Chase went to Lincoln. "I informed the President of your views on this subject," Chase told Durant on December 28, 1863, "and he said he could see no objection to the registering of such citizens, or to their exercise of the right of suffrage."

Banks ruined this hopeful unanimity of opinion on a delicate subject by opposing any black suffrage. He feared that the issue would divide Southern loyalists and endanger the abolition of slavery by the new state government. The split in the Louisiana loyalists which followed was Banks's fault, as McCrary and Cox both agree, but it was also Durant's fault. In a huff over Banks's assumption of power in Louisiana at the President's direction, he chose not to discuss and compromise but to fight the Banks government to the bitter end.

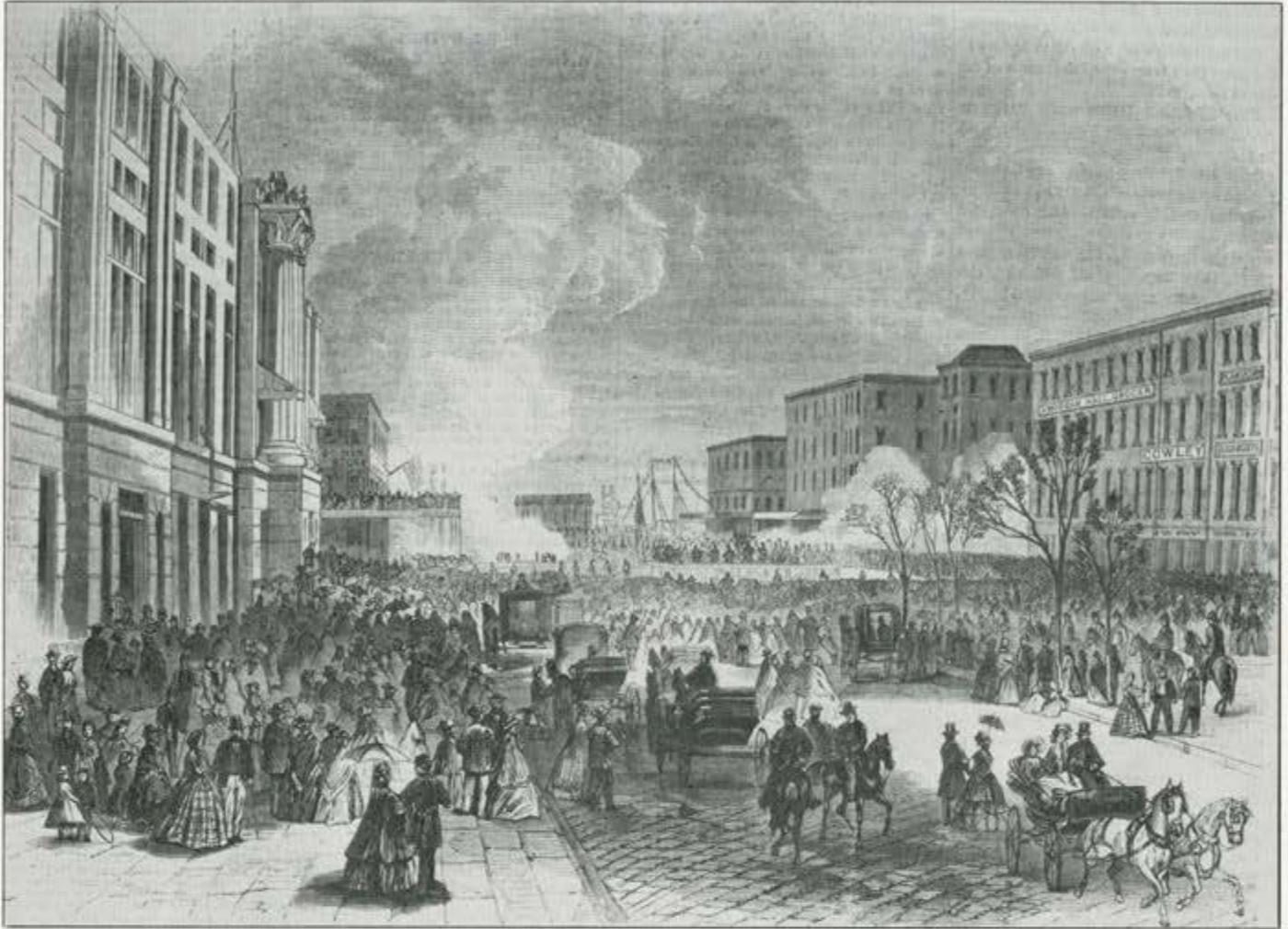
That opposition, combined with the suspicions of the radical

antislavery men that Lincoln was not radical enough to suit them, eventually doomed the Louisiana experiment. Banks, a political general if there ever was one, proved to be politically inept. Mrs. Cox describes the demise of the experiment with equally convincing attention to close reading of the documents and careful chronology. In sum, there is a great deal more in the book than can be described within the confines of this review.

If there is a significant flaw in *Lincoln and Black Freedom*, it is an error of omission rather than one of commission. Mrs. Cox tends to be a bit skimpy on biography. With as famous a figure as Lincoln, this is no problem. In his case she very properly focuses on the particular problem and aims at straightening out the reader's understanding of Lincoln's role in it.

With Nathaniel P. Banks, Mrs. Cox's failure to provide a wider biographical focus is more problematic. "The fate of Lincoln's free state," she says accurately, "suggests the vulnerability of presidential purpose and power to ineptitude of execution, the obstinacy of human nature, and misperceptions fired by the passion of great ends linked to personal conceits." She documents Lincoln's purpose in the Louisiana experiment better than anyone has ever done before. She finds the important instances of ineptitude. She describes Durant's obstinacy in unforgettable terms. She shows the vital links between personal conceits and conflicts over national policy. Yet Banks's inept policies are central to the story, as is his obstinacy and his conceit. They are as central as Lincoln's purposeful leadership, but they are not as well described.

Mrs. Cox realizes that Banks was too optimistic. When he told Lincoln that reconstructing Louisiana as a free state would be no more difficult than "the passage of a dog law in Massachusetts," Banks made one of the worst predictions in American history. Thirteen years of Federal occupation and struggle — some of it bloody — followed Banks's assumption of political control in Louisiana. There was special irony, as she points out,



*From the Louis A. Warren
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FIGURE 3. While Louisiana's loyal citizens voted, a military band played in Canal Street. It was George Washington's Birthday, and the occupying troops marked the anniversary with patriotic fervor.

"in the political general failing to be politic." She shows very well what went wrong in Louisiana, but she does not say why Banks erred. There was the factor of his gross optimism, of course, but why was he so optimistic?

Only biography can tell, and the problematic nature of Banks's conception of the Louisiana experiment seems glaring enough to demand more attention to his biography. Advising President Lincoln on Louisiana policy in 1863, Banks said:

Offer them a Government without slavery, and they will gladly accept it as a necessity resulting from the war. Other questions relating to the condition of the negro, may safely be deferred until this one is secured. If he gains freedom, education, the right to bear arms, the highest privileges accorded to any race and which none has yet proved itself worthy unless it be our own, his best friend may rest content for another year at least.

In January, he told Lincoln that the government he was creating in Louisiana with the help of Federal bayonets would provide "for the gradual restoration of power to the people" but "in such manner as to leave the control of affairs still in the hands of the comm[an]ding General." When Louisiana citizens elected Michael Hahn governor, they "understood . . . that Mr. Hahn represents a popular power entirely subordinate to the armed occupation of the state for the suppression of the rebellion and the full restoration of the authority of the government." "The election perilled nothing," Banks told the President — "Had it resulted in the election of an opponent, he would be without power." When Louisiana's new constitution abolished slavery in September, Banks crowed: "History will record the fact that all the problems involved in restoration of States . . .

have already been solved in Louisiana with a due regard to the elevation of the black and security of the white Race."

Such optimism seems glaringly wrong in the light of subsequent events in Louisiana, but it is more than "twenty-twenty hindsight" that makes the error clear. Foresight at the time surely demanded that General Banks ask what would happen when the Federal troops left. Would the Negro's advance, left to the future, occur then? When the Confederates returned, the opposition would surely win elections. Would the opponents be powerless then? To be sure, Banks's statements were meant to let Lincoln know that the military would not allow a disloyal government to rule if the Unionists lost in 1864, but should not even that mention of the subject have caused Banks to wonder about 1865 or 1866?

Banks was sanguine. He would let the future take care of itself. His government would satisfy the abolitionists for another year (he thought, wrongly), and that was all that concerned him. Banks lived day to day, so to speak, but he also thought that his work in Louisiana guaranteed him immortal fame. "History" would record his deeds. He was conscious of history. He was thinking about what would be said of his Louisiana government in the long run, but he had no long-range plan. Why not?

It is impossible to tell for certain, but a look at the general's career before the Louisiana experiment offers at least one enticing clue. General Banks's first command was the Department of Annapolis. There, in 1861, he controlled the corridor from the Northern states to Washington, D.C. His headquarters was in Baltimore, and Banks "found the situation one of Southern hearts and Northern muskets," as his able biographer, Fred

Harvey Harrington, states. He tried to be conciliatory first, and secession sentiment soared. He was ordered to get tougher. Eventually, Banks's soldiers installed a pro-Union successor to the notoriously secessionist police marshal.

Banks then became the head of the Army of the Shenandoah, and more of Maryland came under his jurisdiction. On George B. McClellan's orders, he arrested secessionist members of the Maryland legislature on their way to Frederick for a special session. His soldiers "protected" the polls, as pro-Union forces swept to victory in the autumn elections.

In later years, Banks would boast that his administration of Maryland was a model for Reconstruction:

The secession leaders — the enemies of the people — were replaced and loyal men assigned to . . . their duties. This made Maryland a loyal State. . . . What occurred there will occur in North Carolina, in South Carolina, in Georgia, in Alabama and Mississippi. If . . . those States shall be controlled by men that are loyal . . . we shall then have loyal populations and loyal governments.

The Maryland experience helps to explain Banks's optimism.

As was more often the case than has been commonly recognized in the study of Reconstruction, such optimism was rooted in a particular analysis of Southern society. The analysis perhaps came easier to former Democrats (like Banks), who were used to invoking a form of class analysis in their prescriptions for political policy. It may have come easier as well to a politician of working class origins (like Banks, the "Bobbin Boy of Massachusetts"): Banks vowed to build a loyal Louisiana out of the "humble and honest farmer, the poor mechanic, the hard-

working classes, the bone and sinew of the land." It will not do to dismiss such statements as the rhetorical litany of American politicians. Banks had blamed secession on a tiny elite of rich planters and a Southern urban aristocracy. He thought that a "clear majority of the people were . . . opposed to the war and could you remove from the control of public opinion one or two thousand in each of these States . . . you would have a population in all of these States . . . loyal and true to the Government."

General Banks may have been inept, but his miscalculations were born of practical experience in Maryland and of assumptions about the social composition of Southern society. His conceit stemmed from memories of his role in one of the North's two big political successes early in the war, the retention of Maryland in the Union. His obstinacy in pursuing his political plan was rooted in a fairly systematic political philosophy which told him what Southern society was like. The deeper roots of the ineptitude, conceit, and obstinacy of the other characters in the Louisiana experiment likewise demand study.

There are limits to what any one historian can do. Mrs. Cox has done more than most. One need only think of the muddled state of scholarship on early Louisiana Reconstruction before her work — and that of McCrary and other recent scholars as well — to be grateful for the modern accomplishments in this field.

On February 10, 1982, the Civil War Round Table of New York City gave LaWanda Cox the Barondess/Lincoln Award for *Lincoln and Black Freedom*. She deserved it. Her book is a contribution to Lincoln scholarship that will last.



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FIGURE 4. A photographer in New Orleans, E. Jacobs, took a picture of Banks and his staff in the spring of 1864. This woodcut was copied from it.