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“A TASK ... GREATER THAN THAT WHICH RESTED UPON WASHINGTON”: A REVIEW OF LINCOLN, THE WAR PRESIDENT

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(continued from previous issue)

One month before the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863, however, Lincoln proposed a series of constitutional amendments, one of which called for federal compensation to states abolishing slavery before 1900. The preliminary proclamation and this proposed, but not adopted, amendment, Davis argues, “exemplified the two images of emancipation.” The former proclaimed



This woodcut portrays the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam, a costly battle of the summer of 1862 which, along with other battles that year, writes Kenneth Stampp, “brought home to him [Lincoln] the magnitude of the task he had undertaken” (p. 140).

"liberty to the captives," and the latter was "a utilitarian plan attuned to costs, benefits, and population trends and designed to induce slaveholders to act voluntarily in the public interest" (pp. 84-86).

The states in rebellion did not recognize the authority of the national government, and Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. "He was certain he had done the right thing," Davis argues, "but expressed no jubilation," as it was a "reluctant act, dictated by the grim necessities of war." Davis does not discuss Lincoln's pressure for passage of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, or how this amendment may have shaped later perceptions of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation. He does explain, however, that if Lincoln and the proclamation were products of nineteenth-century culture and the realities of the Civil War, the proclamation's "words ... transcended the immediate historic moment," and have "acquired new meaning" over time. The "the context and even the content" of the proclamation pale against the power of an "enduring moment of promise" which could be called on, notably by the civil rights movement in the twentieth century, to counter oppression (pp. 87-88).⁵

As historians debate Lincoln's legacy, questions of American nationalism and the expansion of presidential power during the Civil War are essential to consider. In *Lincoln, the War President*, historians Carl N. Degler, Kenneth M. Stampp, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., take varied approaches to Lincoln's views on the Constitution and the Union, his strong actions upon assuming the presidency, and emancipation. In "One Among Many: The United States and National Unification," Degler looks at Europe's era of "nation-building" from 1845 to 1870 to study the how the Civil War, often treated as a uniquely American experience, can be compared with European experiences. (pp. 92-93).

Degler proposes that Germany and Switzerland provide appropriate comparisons for the American Civil War. Germany had been joined loosely as a confederation of thirty-nine states in 1815. Through the efforts of Otto von Bismarck, however, Prussia created the North German Confederation after its victory over Austria in 1866, and then brought the southern states into a unified Germany in 1870-1871 with the Franco-Prussian War (pp. 102-103, 107). Switzerland's experience provides an even closer analogy for America, however. Its once-independent states were joined in confederation after the Napoleonic Wars. After one canton suppressed all religious orders in 1841, tension increased between Switzerland's Protestant northern cantons, influenced by secular and liberal economic and social ideas, and its southern Roman Catholic cantons, which perceived a threat to ancient rights. In 1847, after the latter

cantons joined together in defense of these rights, the Diet of the Confederation used force to compel them to disband. In the short civil war that followed, the Confederation defeated the discontented cantons, but insisted that the Jesuit Order be barred as a requirement for their returning to the Confederation (pp. 112-114).

According to Degler, in the decades before the Civil War, a sense of American nationhood was felt more strongly in the North than in the South. A distinctive southern nationalism stemmed from slavery, an institution at its economic base which also shaped its society and culture. Secession was therefore a manifestation of America's incomplete national identity. After the war began, Lincoln and other northerners realized that southerners were not coming to the defense of the Union, and thus, the Civil War, writes Degler, "was not a struggle to save a failed Union, but to create a nation that had until then not come into being." From Lincoln's viewpoint, then, if slavery was the source of southern distinctiveness, it was essential that it be destroyed "for nationalist as well as humanitarian reasons." Degler concedes that Lincoln was not like Bismarck in terms of the American president's liberal democratic beliefs. Yet, judging from Lincoln's refusal to surrender Fort Sumter, Degler suggests that his actions "display some of the earmarks of Bismarck's maneuvering in 1870," for "Lincoln's nationalism needed a war, but one that the other side would begin." Lincoln used military power and stretched the Constitution to draw the South into the new nation, and has become, from a southern perspective, the "true creator of American nationalism" (pp. 95-99, 101-102, 106-109).

If Degler sees Lincoln's policies and the Civil War as representative of nineteenth-century nation building (and destroying), Stampp, more in agreement with McPherson, reverses the emphasis: perpetual union and emancipation gave meaning to a war that had cost too many lives for a mere return to a status quo ante bellum. Stampp also suggests that the American Civil War provides a context for interpreting American foreign policy. Given its own revolutionary origins, the United States has long supported the right of popular revolution elsewhere in the world — at least in theory, for self-interest has led to inconsistent practice. The Civil War strengthened a second tradition that stressed America's exceptional nature and ensured that the American Union was perpetual. (pp. 124-126).

Although the early republic was often seen as an experiment in which political Union was a good only so long as political liberty was secure, Stampp, like Degler, argues that national feeling grew in the North. Similarly, he pictures an "increasingly disaffected South" that became "the last stronghold of the old and once widely respected concept of

the Constitution as a compact" between sovereign states, but he downplays southern nationalism. Southerners possessed "few unique traits to give them a clear cultural identity." (pp. 129- 130).

Lincoln had long supported the right for a people to revolt, yet when the Union was tested in 1861 by secession, Lincoln argued that revolution should only be "exercised for a morally justifiable cause." Though the North's goal was to restore the Union, the war transformed Lincoln and the nation: "with no end of the war in sight, the ranks of those who demanded the destruction of slavery increased, and the Republican majority in Congress began to act," passing two confiscation acts. For Lincoln, by 1863, "the war had gone on too long, its aspect had become too grim, and the escalating casualties were too staggering for a man of Lincoln's sensitivity to discover in that terrible ordeal no greater purpose than the denial of the southern claim to self-determination." The Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural Address, and Lincoln's pressure to ensure passage of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery all indicate that the war changed Lincoln, and guided him toward the role of "Great Emancipator." The high ideals expressed in his efforts also effectively denied any claim the South made for its independence. A humane president had guided the nation to a new birth of freedom, but left the country with an ambiguous legacy on the question of when national self-determination is justified (pp. 133, 136, 140-144).

Since the Civil War, Lincoln's critics have accused him of a dictatorial disregard of the Constitution. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., however, compares the actions of Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and asserts that the two war presidents can serve as important models for examining presidential power. Because the existence of democracy requires that the people protect their liberty against the potential threat posed by executive power during a national crisis — both real and "those that exist only in the hallucinations of the Oval office" — Schlesinger outlines the

"stringent and persuasive conditions" that would be required for a use of "emergency prerogative." The experiences of Lincoln and Roosevelt are useful in suggesting these conditions, for both faced threats to the republic that prompted them to interpret the Constitution broadly, and their decisions, good and bad, were necessarily shaped without knowing what the future would hold. Yet they conscientiously avoided giving "lesser men precedents to be invoked against lesser dangers" (pp. 149, 160, 176-178).

The Constitution's framers created a government in which foreign policy would be carried out jointly by the president and Congress, yet they were also familiar with the Lockean notion of "prerogative," through which rulers could risk stepping beyond the law temporarily when the preservation of the country was at stake. After the attack on Fort Sumter, Lincoln "greatly enlarged presidential power in war" and even "assumed quasi- dictatorial powers." He argued that his presidential oath to defend the Constitution authorized him as commander in chief to use, in Lincoln's words, the "law of war, in time of war." Some of his actions were characteristic of wars declared on foreign enemies, and he suspended the writ of habeas corpus, the authorization for which is found in Article I of the Constitution and generally considered to be a congressional power.

He justified his actions as temporary military measures to suppress domestic insurrection and to preserve the Constitution, but he did not intend to work without Congress, which ratified his actions. Moreover, other workings of democracy continued, including the presidential election of 1864. He stated that presidential power "would be greatly diminished by the cessation of actual war," and as Schlesinger argues, "resistance by the people and resilience in the system" brought about that diminution after the war. Lincoln's actions in 1861 and Roosevelt's eighty years later, Schlesinger concludes, "did not corrupt their essential commitment to constitutional ways and democratic processes" (pp. 150-154, 156-160, 175-176).



In this detail from a cartoon entitled *The Grave of the Union*, or *Major Jack Downing's Dream*, Drawn by Zeke, Lincoln watches editor Horace Greeley and Senator Charles Sumner lower a casket marked "Constitution" into its grave. Caskets marked "Free Speech & Free Press," "Habeas Corpus," and "Union" await burial. Lincoln asks Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, "Chase, will it stay down?" and Greeley says, "I guess we'll bury it so deep that it will never get up again." Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., writes that Lincoln did not intend for that to be the case.

The engaging lectures in *Lincoln, the War President* provide varied, and at times conflicting, interpretations of Lincoln's wartime actions and the forces that shaped them. A task of historians, including those of Lincoln, is to place an historical actor in context and to measure the influence of the historical forces at work. Lincoln faced demands from every side and considered his political and military circumstances and goals: the integrity of the Union, the status of slavery, the progress of the war, and northern public opinion. His decisions were therefore based on his assessment of potential consequences as well as on personal ideals. It was Lincoln's skillful judgment in such matters, Professor McPherson argues, that became a strength of his national strategy in carrying out the war (p. 61). Lincoln was a product of antebellum America, he held certain political convictions but did not possess a comprehensive political worldview. In politics, he balanced "short-term practicality and long-term ideals," as Mark E. Neely Jr., has written, or as Professor Boritt has written elsewhere, he practiced "the art of the possible," and he changed in the midst of the conflict.⁶

This view of Lincoln enables the contributors to raise important and interconnected issues that underlie his actions as president: his attitude toward war, his nationalism, and his interpretation of the powers of the president in wartime. For example, Robert V. Bruce portrays a Lincoln living in an antebellum America that feared civil war, yet denied that it could happen, and perhaps unwittingly fulfilled gloomy prophecies of war. Like Bruce, Gabor S. Boritt sees a Lincoln reluctant to face war, but, in spite of his pacific tendencies, learned to be a war president to defend the nation's liberal ideals. The war that changed Lincoln, also changed the United States. It transformed the Union into "a different kind of nation — giving it a new birth of freedom," writes James M. McPherson, and it was Lincoln's leadership — his adoption of a national strategy of "unconditional surrender" that coincided with a military strategy — that united the North and won the war (p. 31).

McPherson explains how part of that national strategy can be found in Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. David Brion Davis presents well the cultural context in which the idea of emancipation was defined and argues that the proclamation's lasting meaning derives, in part, from the nineteenth-century culture that perceived it in millennial terms. Sharing something of McPherson's perspective on Lincoln, and looking at his presidency in a way that connects several of the chapters, Kenneth M. Stampp portrays a Lincoln moved by the devastation of the war. A defender of the "right to rise up" in revolution, Lincoln, in 1861, defended the Union's integrity and "qualified his position" by discounting southern secession as lacking a "morally justifiable cause" (p. 133). But as the war dragged on, Lin-

coln began "to broaden his vision" and realized that emancipation had given a deep and lasting meaning to the war (p. 140). In contrast, Carl N. Degler assumes that Lincoln changed little over time and argues that he was motivated from the first by a strong nationalism. The "standpoint of the South" reveals the "incomplete character of American nationalism" and the North's misreading of southern Unionism; however, it also shows that the South misunderstood Lincoln (p. 106). Nor does this standpoint account for his liberal ideals or his support of the right of revolution. Finally, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., shows that Lincoln, like Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Second World War, worked to preserve the nation with a vigorous use of presidential power, at times in unfortunate ways, but in ways that would not last beyond the immediate crises.

With these well-crafted and strongly argued studies, *Lincoln, the War President* successfully reconstructs a traumatic time of transformation that required extraordinary skill of Lincoln and aged him beyond his years. It confronts its readers with provocative and essential issues in Lincoln scholarship, and it has gathered thoughtful and persuasive historians to help us make sense of them.

Notes

5. An insightful study of the image of Lincoln in America's public memory is Scott A. Sandage, "A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963," *Journal of American History* 80 (June 1993): 135-167.
6. Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Fate of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 222; Gabor S. Boritt, "Lincoln and the American Dream, 1832-1852," in Mario M. Cuomo and Harold Holzer, eds., *Lincoln on Democracy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 7.



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