

Lincoln's Scribe: John Hay Grew In Office Serving A President He Revered

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Recommended Citation

Pederson, William D. (2001) "Lincoln's Scribe: John Hay Grew In Office Serving A President He Revered," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol3/iss2/20>

Review

LINCOLN'S SCRIBE

John Hay grew in office serving a president he revered

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Spring 2001

Burlingame, Michael and Hay, John. *At Lincoln's Side: John Hay's Civil War Correspondence and Selected Writings.* Southern Illinois University Press, 2000-04-01. ISBN 809322935

Modern White House staffers are far removed from their original role as "passionate anonyms." Today they wield power once reserved for cabinet secretaries. Simultaneously, the number of employees in the White House has expanded from a handful during Lincoln's administration to several hundred. Yet some White House staff characteristics have not changed. Lincoln's "secretaries" were young; today's White House employees tend to be young. Supporting the president is still the essential purpose of staff, although nowadays support of the First Lady is just as needed. Conflicts between Mary Todd Lincoln and her husband's staff foreshadowed the role that First Ladies now enjoy.

Civil War correspondence not destroyed by John Hay as well as several selections from his other writings are contained in **At Lincoln's Side**. From that material, some of which has previously appeared in print, emerges a sketch of Abraham Lincoln and John Milton Hay (1838-1905). Hay comes across as a bit of a romantic who does not enjoy politics and who tends toward extreme judgments. He comes to identify with Lincoln, and, consistent with Hay's exaggerated tendencies, eventually reveres the president as the "greatest character since Christ." Yet Hay worked hard and became more diplomatic through experiencing the political world. Lincoln is pictured as a democratic leader firmly in charge of his administration. Mutual respect between the two somewhat poetic characters is evident.

The work also contains two appendices with articles by editor Michl Burlingame on "The Authorship of the Bixby Letter" and "Mary Todd Lincoln's Unethical Conduct as First Lady." Burlingame, who states in the introduction

that "it is impossible to identify precisely" what Hay wrote for Lincoln but that "informed guesses can be made," deems the Bixby letter the work of Hay rather than Lincoln.

There is always the danger of staff coming to believe they are more important than the elected leader they assist. The second appendix, on Mary Todd Lincoln, presumably is included to justify Hay's dislike of the First Lady, even though the tone of Hay's letters seems to become less critical of her over time. Mary Todd Lincoln needs to be placed in the broader perspective of an individual who never intended to become an invalid First Lady and who was as determined as her male contemporaries to achieve her ends.

The placement of the editor's numerous and often helpful notes at the end of the book makes reading tedious. This is not a book for general readership, but it will be useful in Lincoln collections.

William D. Pederson is the American Studies Chair and director of the International Lincoln Center at Louisiana State University in Shreveport. He edits the International Abraham Lincoln Journal. He recently authored George Washington and the Origins of the American Presidency (2000).