

### Perspectives From Afield And Afar A Column By Morgan N. Knull, Contributing Editor: Town And Country

Morgan N. Knull

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## Feature Essay

### PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR A COLUMN BY MORGAN N. KNULL, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Town and country

Knoll, Morgan N.

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**Holzer, Harold and Shaara, Jeff.** *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR: State of the Union: New York and the Civil War.* Fordham University Press, \$40.00, hardcover/ \$20.00, softcover ISBN ISBN 0823221393, ISBN 0823221407

The love/hate relationship that America has with New York perhaps is surpassed only by the ambivalence that New Yorkers feel about one another. The state splits, culturally and politically, into upstate and downstate regions, with affluent suburbs in between holding the swing vote in political contests. Manhattanites are more likely to have visited Paris than Buffalo. A certain reciprocity nevertheless holds New Yorkers together: upstate streams supply New York City's drinking water; "the City" generates job growth throughout the state; leafy suburbs provide tax revenue.

An outgrowth of a 1999 symposium sponsored by the New York State Archives Partnership Trust, *State of the Union: New York and the Civil War* provides a timely reminder that similar political tensions wracked New York during the Civil War, making it an essential but unstable constituent in the Union effort. As editor Harold Holzer notes, New York's contributions of men, materiel, and money to the war effort surpassed those of any other northern state. Yet Abraham Lincoln's share of the popular vote in New York actually declined in 1864 (50.4%) from 1860 (53.7%).

Essays by Holzer, Joseph W. Bellacosa, Frank J. Williams, and Hans L. Trefousse focus on New York's relationship with Lincoln and Andrew Johnson.

Bellacosa and Williams debate Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus and other constitutional safeguards, with Bellacosa, a former justice on the New

York State Court of Appeals, posing this question: "Was the real goal of this extraordinary deprivation of liberties and due process the lofty preservation of the Union--or was the activity a shield for suppressing powerful political opposition and dissenting expression and a sword for enforcing conscription?" Williams, chief justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, replies that Lincoln used imperial means to secure benign ends. He allows that Lincoln was not above counting "popular, congressional, and judicial votes" but insists that such scheming conserved the Constitution.

In his essay on Andrew Johnson's impeachment, Trefousse describes New York's public as divided over the merits of removing Johnson from office. During the first Reconstruction years, control of New York's legislature alternated between parties, and while the state's Republican senators in Washington both supported Johnson's removal, the business community worried about possible commercial repercussions.

The remaining essays in **State of the Union** cover social and historical topics. Iver Bernstein's examination of the infamous July 1863 riots in Manhattan and Troy notes that what began as a draft riot turned into a race riot, one in which Irish immigrants violently reacted against the prospect of being displaced by lower-income black workers.

Lillian Serece Williams's essay considers the war's disruptive effect on gender and class relations. Williams suggests that white Northerners otherwise opposed to emancipation took up the Union cause to prove themselves to white women.

Shifting attention to western New York, Lonnie R. Speer documents the harsh conditions that made the Elmira prison camp the Union equivalent to Andersonville. A camp designed for 5,250 captured Confederates routinely held between 8,000 and 10,000.

State of the Union opens with a foreword by Jeff Shaara, who observes, "History is not a measure of years, it is a measure of deeds." The essays offer testimony on how the sudden tragedy in April 1865 united New Yorkers in grief, as Lincoln's funeral train slowly wound its way through New York City and upstate towns. Much has changed in the Empire State since then, but in the aftermath of September 2001 we know that the center still holds.

*Morgan N. Knoll, contributing editor to CWBR, grew up in Dutchess County, New York, not far from where the 150th New York Volunteers were mustered into service. He may be reached by email at [morgan@knoll.com](mailto:morgan@knoll.com).*