

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln: Competing Perspectives on Two Great Presidencies

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Recommended Citation

Owens, Mackubin Thomas (2004) "Franklin D. Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln: Competing Perspectives on Two Great Presidencies," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss3/19>

Review

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Summer 2004

Pederson, William D., Editor and Williams, Frank J., Editor. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln: Competing Perspectives on Two Great Presidencies*. M.E. Sharpe, \$26.95 ISBN 765610353

Threatened with destruction

Crises and the rise of great American statesmen

Democratic governance is difficult under any circumstances but none more than during wartime. President George W. Bush is currently confronting this reality. For solace he could do worse than turn to the examples of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who led this nation during its two most demanding emergencies.

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln: Competing Perspectives on Two Great Presidencies, a useful new collection of essays edited by William D. Pederson and Frank J. Williams, looks at many aspects of these two watershed presidencies, examining the legacies, leadership styles, and respective places in history of the two great men. The book offers a wide array of essays covering everything from FDR's view of Lincoln and the comparative political styles of the two men to the roles of their wives and how current history textbooks portray FDR.

Since **Franklin D. Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln** is one volume in a series on Roosevelt, most of the essays understandably focus on FDR. But it seems to me that pride of place for the most challenging crisis must go to Lincoln in his conduct of the Civil War. President Bush can look back to both Lincoln and FDR, and FDR could look back to Lincoln, but Lincoln himself was entering uncharted waters as he confronted the rebellion. There were few precedents to which he could turn in response to the emergency facing the government.

Claiming broad emergency powers that he argued the Constitution had vested in the executive branch, he called out the militia, authorized increases in the size of the regular army and navy, expended funds for military purchases, deployed military forces, blockaded Southern ports, suspended the writ of habeas corpus in certain areas, authorized arbitrary arrests, and empanelled military tribunals to try civilians in occupied or contested areas. He took these steps without Congressional authorization, although he subsequently explained his action to Congress once it convened in July of 1861. Later he authorized conscription and issued the Emancipation Proclamation. He also contributed to the development of Union strategy during the war and took the lead in finding the generals to implement it.

On the surface, Abraham Lincoln seemed ill-prepared to meet the military challenges that this crisis generated. Indeed, by all measures, the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis would seem to have had the edge. He was a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he had a distinguished record during the Mexican War, he had been Secretary of War during the administration of Franklin Pierce, and as a United States Senator from Mississippi, had chaired the Committee on Military Affairs.

In contrast, Lincoln had served as a captain of militia during the Black Hawk War, during which he had seen no action. Indeed, as a Whig Congressman for only one term, Lincoln had poked fun at his own military record by way of mocking the attempt by the Democrats during the election campaign of 1848 to turn Lewis Cass of Michigan into a military hero comparable to the Whig's Zachary Taylor. By the way, Mr. Speaker, did you know I am a military hero? Yes sir; in the days of the Black Hawk war, I fought, bled, and came away. Speaking of General Cass' career reminds me of my own. I was not at Stillman's defeat, but I was about as near it, as Cass was to Hull's surrender; and like him, I saw the place very soon afterwards. If Gen. Cass went in advance of me in picking huckleberries, I guess I surpassed him in charges upon the wild onions. If he saw any live fighting Indians, it was more than I did; but I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes; and although I never fainted from loss of blood, I can truly say I was often very hungry.

His one term in Congress was lackluster. He gained notoriety for opposing the Mexican War, as did most Whigs, and demanding of President James Polk that he show the very spot upon which Mexico had provoked the conflict. Yet as president during the Civil War, he made the political and military decisions that

ultimately saved the Union. In addition, his republican oratory kept the people focused on the task to be accomplished.

FDR's presidency had many things in common with Lincoln's. Like, Lincoln, FDR also mobilized the country for a twilight struggle. He made the political and strategic decisions that were necessary to achieve victory. Like Lincoln, he employed republican rhetoric to mobilize and reassure the American people. And also like Lincoln, he was accused of employing extra-constitutional means in pursuit of victory. Of course, the magnitude of the conflict FDR faced was much greater than the American war of secession and he had to expend a great deal of effort in maintaining the grand alliance that would defeat Germany, Japan, and Italy.

As the essays in this collection make clear, FDR deserves our gratitude for the steps he took to guide the United States through World War II. But FDR was able to find precedents in Lincoln's actions, while Lincoln was largely on his own. Our Constitution is a remarkable document, but as Lincoln observed in his wonderful letter to Erasmus Corning and the Albany Democrats, it is not the same document during war that it is during peace. I can no more be persuaded that the Government can constitutionally take no strong measures in time of rebellion, because it can be shown that the same could not lawfully be taken in time of peace, than I can be persuaded that a particular drug is not good medicine for a sick man, because it can be shown not to be good for a well one. Nor am I able to appreciate the danger apprehended by the meeting [of the New York Democrats] that the American people will, by means of military arrest during the Rebellion, lose the right of Public Discussion, the Liberty of Speech and the Press, the Law of Evidence, Trial by Jury, and Habeas Corpus, throughout the indefinite peaceful future, which I trust lies before them, any more than I am able to believe that a man could contract so strong an appetite for emetics during temporary illness as to persist in feeding upon them during the remainder of his healthful life.

Lincoln entertained no doubt that any extraordinary powers were limited to the duration of the emergency and not applicable to normal times. Had Lincoln not established the precedent, the learning curve for his successors would have been considerably steeper and the cost to the nation considerably higher.

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