

### The Struggle for Equality: Essays on Sectional Conflict, the Civil War, and the Long Reconstruction

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## Review

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**Burton, Orville Vernon and Podair, Jerald.** *The Struggle for Equality: Essays on Sectional Conflict, the Civil War, and the Long Reconstruction.* University of Virginia Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780813931739

A Collection of Essays in Tribute to a Great Historian

Eighteen former students of the historian James M. McPherson contributed chapters to this *Festschrift* for their renowned mentor. Few scholars are as deserving as McPherson of such an honor. A historian of Abraham Lincoln, an author of the best one volume work on the Civil War, and a scholar who seeks to take history to the masses, McPherson has enjoyed a career virtually unparalleled in modern American letters.

Orville Vernon Burton, in an introductory chapter to *The Struggle for Equality*, dubs McPherson "America's historian"(p.2) for his ability to write for both scholarly and popular audiences. He points out as well that a host of graduate students learned the craft of history from McPherson and have gone on to notable careers in the historical profession. No matter what their field of expertise --- race relations, the American South, the Civil War --- their work reveals the influence of their mentor's emphasis on the quest for equality as a powerful agent of change in American history.

*The Struggle for Equality* benefitted from the editing skills of Orville Burton, Jerald Podair, and Jennifer L. Weber. The editors deserve credit for producing an attractive and flawless work. They organized each chapter under one of the three topics mentioned in the subtitle, with nine essays included in the section headed "The Long Reconstruction."(p.135) The chapters address a wide range of topics that promise to interest scholars in numerous fields related to the advance of equality in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Lincoln scholars will find three chapters on the sixteenth president. Jennifer L. Weber, in her essay, "All the President's Men,"(p.76) concludes that the political support Lincoln received from soldiers in the Union Army proved crucial to Lincoln's effort to vanquish northern Democrats who opposed his war policies and sought compromises with Confederate leaders in order to end the fighting. Weber cites the soldiers' disgust with "Peace Democrats"(p.87) as a salient reason the majority of men in the Union army favored the Lincoln administration after the president first announced his emancipation policy in late 1862. The bulk of federal soldiers, engaged in a bloody struggle to prevent the dissolution of the Union, resented the Peace Democrats' efforts to halt the war short of a total victory and to block emancipation. Weber argues that the stances of the Peace Democrats stoked anti-slavery and pro-Lincoln sentiment within Union ranks. Lincoln's triumph in the 1864 presidential election, she writes, buried the hopes of Peace Democrats for a negotiated peace and allowed the Union army to complete the annihilation of both the Confederacy and the institution of slavery.

Ronald C. White, Jr., probes the significance of what he terms "Abraham Lincoln's Last 'Stump Speech,'" (p.91) actually a message penned by Lincoln and read in his absence to a large pro-Union rally in his hometown of Springfield, Illinois in the early fall of 1863. Flush from recent Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Lincoln praised federal soldiers, white and black, for the bravery they had shown in propelling Union forces closer to victory in the Civil War. He also compared the determination of black soldiers to restore the Union and end slavery to the hesitancy of many whites to support those goals. Lincoln's Springfield message, writes White, "demonstrated that Lincoln intended to fulfill the promise of the Emancipation Proclamation."(p.98)

Bruce Dain explores Lincoln's complex views on race, arguing that Lincoln's "difficult, frustrated life"(p.113) led the president to adhere to "a Calvinist Enlightenment racial politics."(p.114) Lincoln's "melancholy"(p.114) nature bred in him a lack of faith in human agency and a realization that progress in significant political and social matters came slowly, if at all. Lincoln realized more clearly than did the abolitionists that emancipation promised no halcyon day for the United States, but rather a long period of adjustment to a new dispensation on race. In Dain's assessment, "Lincoln's egalitarianism . . . was grim and limited, and it always had been."(p.114) Along with these chapters on Lincoln, other essays by Catherine Clinton, James K. Hogue, and Michele Gillespie, promise to interest Civil War scholars.

*The Struggle for Equality* addresses more than Civil War topics, however. Two essays, for example, explore important facets of the abolitionist movement; one explains the devastating effects of a nineteenth-century Grasshopper plague on large sections of the West and Mid-West; and another deals with the religious aspects of Black Fraternal Orders founded after the Civil War. Concluding the essays with a chapter on Civil Rights Activist Bayard Rustin demonstrates the editors' belief that Reconstruction's impact extended well into the twentieth century, making for "The Long Reconstruction." The volume ends with an interview with James McPherson in which he discusses his decision to become a historian, his view on the importance of studying history, his fondness for touring the battlefield at Gettysburg, and his interest in writing for a wide audience of scholars and laymen. *The Struggle for Equality* reveals the same precision and expertise that James McPherson has brought to his own work over the past four decades.

*James S. Humphreys is an associate professor of history at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky. He specializes in United States history, focusing specifically on the history of the American South. The University of Florida Press published his biography of the southern historian Francis Butler Simkins in 2008. The book is titled Francis Butler Simkins: A Life. Humphreys also co-edits, along with Brian D. McKnight, the Interpreting American History series, published by the Kent State University Press.*