

### A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln's Relationships Lincoln and the Union Governors and Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops

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## Feature Essay

Spring 2014

**Williams, Frank** *A LOOK AT LINCOLN: Lincoln's Relationships Lincoln and the Union Governors and Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops.*

### **Lincoln and the Union Governors**

by William C. Harris

**Publisher:** Southern Illinois University Press

**Retail Price:** \$24.95

**ISBN:** 9780809332885

### **Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops**

by John David Smith

**Publisher:** Southern Illinois University Press

**Retail Price:** \$24.95

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Many contribute the victory of the Union during the Civil War to Abraham Lincoln, but much of the success stems also from the contributions of the Union governors. President Lincoln understood the necessity of gaining and retaining gubernatorial support would help to bolster his policies. *Lincoln and the Union Governors* by William C. Harris provides a fresh insight into the complex relationship between Lincoln and the Union governors in this dynamic

partnership.

Although many accused Lincoln of attempting to create a centralized federal government to diminish the power of the states, Lincoln considered his partnership with state executives essential to achieving reunion and emancipation. Despite these accusations, Lincoln's intention "was not so much to resolve the conflict between localism and centralism as to keep that conflict from fatally crippling the war effort" (pg. 2). In truth, Lincoln fully understood securing the governors' cooperation required treading carefully.

During the course of the war, 59 men served as governors of the 25 Union states. Most of these governors were from Lincoln's Republican or National Union Party and had earlier associated with the Whig party. The governors who did not affiliate with his party were loyal to the Union, except for Missouri's Claiborne Fox Jackson, who favored the Confederates and fled south in July 1861. Despite their overwhelming support for the war, the governors reflected different regional interests making unanimity difficult to achieve. Harris credits the September 1862 governors' conference at Altoona, Pennsylvania, with coalescing support for Lincoln in order to maintain a unified war effort and assisting in President Lincoln's re-election.

Although Lincoln is considered the spearhead of the Union war effort, the governors actively served as war ministers throughout the course of the war. This included rallying citizens for the war, organizing state regiments for the Union army, raising troops and support for their families, sustaining morale, encouraging perseverance, and suppressing treason. In addition, the governors kept Lincoln informed about political conditions in their states.

*Lincoln and the Union Governors* offers a short primer on the important aspects of the war. It's an easy read for anyone interested in Lincoln and Civil War scholarship.

The removal of slavery from the American republic and the preservation of the Union owed a great deal to the cooperation that Abraham Lincoln received from the governors. The Emancipation Proclamation would not have been enacted if it were not for their support. Lincoln's two-part Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863 had not only controversially freed the slaves in the Confederacy but also encouraged the arming of African Americans to fight for the Union. *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops* by John David Smith focuses on

the second part of Lincoln's emancipation program—the implementation, recruitment, and deployment of black troops. This two-part emancipation program of freeing and then arming the slaves brought into conflict two basic tenets of American life—democratic ideals and white racism. No chief executive had issued such a controversial order. It achieved an immediate and long lasting impact on American history.

Smith illustrates the apparent contradictory, tentative, and vacillating nature of Lincoln during the shaping of his emancipation project. Despite the President's opposition to slavery on economic and humanitarian grounds, he confronted complex constitutional and political questions of sovereignty and law. However, within two years, Lincoln went from hesitation to enthusiasm because he believed emancipation “was both morally right and also expedient as a means of prosecuting the war against the Southern Confederacy” (pg. 5).

The United States Colored Troops (USCT) signified the first systematic large scale effort by the U.S. government to arm blacks, who had previously “been doomed to slavery,” to aid in the nation's defense. Although initially hesitant to arm them, Lincoln came to admire their service and staked the credibility of his racial policies on their performance. By the end of the war, there were a surprising 178,975 black soldiers which represented 21 percent of the eligible black male population (some 200,000 if black sailors are included). The participation of African Americans in the USCT fashioned the meaning of the war from one fought for the Union into one fought for Union and African American freedom. Many historians have reported that the USCT exceeded expectations and were just as successful, if not more so, than all-white infantry units.

Despite the successes of the USCT, the black soldiers still faced hardships and inequalities due to fears of black insurrection and mayhem. The majority of black unit officers were white. In addition, though colored troops fought in 449 military engagements, they received a far greater amount of fatigue duty than their white counterparts. They were less fed, less paid, and given less medicine than whites, while facing murder or being sold into slavery by the Confederates. Despite the hardships and inequalities they faced throughout the course of the war and many decades following emancipation, African Americans still viewed President Lincoln as their emancipator and savior.

*Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops* provides a short and definitive exploration of the implementation, recruitment, engagement, sacrifices, and contributions of the USCT under President Lincoln's emancipation program. The author has written a riveting, often neglected half of this transformative project. It's a must read for anyone interested in African American soldiers, Abraham Lincoln, and the Civil War.

*Frank J. Williams is the Chair of the Lincoln Forum and author of Lincoln as Hero, and is a contributing columnist for the Civil War Sesquicentennial.*