

LOOK AT LINCOLN: Validating the Necessity of the Civil War

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Feature Essay

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Williams, Frank J. *LOOK AT LINCOLN: Validating the Necessity of the Civil War.*

The War Worth Fighting

edited by Stephen D. Engle

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At the close of its sesquicentennial, the Civil War is still seen as an ennobling sacrifice, resulting in the liberation of four million slaves. Yet, historians have removed much of the luster from this four-year blood bath and question its beatification. After all, the war killed over 750,000 Americans, and the sesquicentennial ignored the question of whether this war was necessary and justified.

Revisionist historians from the 1920s to the 1940s argued that the war was not an inevitable clash over irreconcilable issues. Rather, it was a needless bloodletting which was the fault of “blundering” statesmen and “pious cranks,” the abolitionists. Writing when they did, these critical authors considered the twenty million losses from World War I and concluded that all war was irrational. World War II undermined this view somewhat because Nazism and aggressive militarism was viewed as a modern form of slavery. The post-World War II Civil Rights Movement placed slavery and emancipation at the center of the Civil War and made the slaughter seem worthwhile.

Not everyone agrees. Neo-Confederates refuse to accept the centrality of slavery in the war. Historian David Goldfield in *America Aflame* argues that the

war was over slavery but it was also “America’s greatest failure.” He indicts politicians, extremists, and the influence of evangelical Christianity for dividing the nation to the point where any compromise became impossible. Freedom was the war’s great achievement, he agrees, but white supremacy was so entrenched in the North as well as in the South that the newly freed people became subject to economic peonage and incessant lynching. It would take a century and the Civil Rights struggle for blacks to achieve legal equality.

This new volume of six essays, edited by Stephen Engle, offers interpretations of Lincoln and the Civil War which argue that despite the immense toll in blood and treasure, the effort was worth it. The essays and an epilogue analyze Lincoln as leader, diplomat, communicator-in-chief, and commander-in-chief. Three essays discuss northern culture during the war.

Orville Vernon Burton reiterates the argument he presented in his *Age of Lincoln*. The United States, he argues, was becoming an industrial wage-based society rather than an agrarian one. Slavery was a contradiction to the free-soil, free-labor, policy of the North, and Lincoln, who himself was a product of free-labor and the epitome of “the right to rise,” strongly believed in the validity of this transformation. He held high the vision of equality exclaimed in the Declaration of Independence.

As a great communicator, Lincoln was eloquent in how he explained wartime behavior to northern civilians. J. Matthew Gallman uses Lincoln’s personal and public messages to demonstrate the President’s expectations for northern citizens. These included loyalty, patriotism, engagement with national events, and voting, but it did not include the demand for any real sacrifice.

While Lincoln expected his generals to fight, Mark Grimsley believes that the President’s interference with military operations sometimes led to failure, as was the case in the Shenandoah Valley in 1862. The author does not indicate that, as commander-in-chief, he had no choice but to deal with his many inept commanders. Author Richard Carwardine views Lincoln in the same context and argues that his success in this sphere was the reason that Lincoln became such a superlative leader.

Although some historians believe that the President was weak in foreign affairs, Howard Jones finds that Lincoln was in reality a natural diplomat whose foreign policy prevented England and France from intervening in the Civil War.

Secretary of State William H. Seward was indeed the chief diplomat, but Lincoln remained in full control throughout.

As the nation enters the sesquicentennial of Reconstruction, Brooks Simpson insists that Lincoln's Reconstruction policy – such as it was and can be determined – should not be considered in a vacuum separated from his military objectives. The President's support for the restoration of a civil government in the Southern states was a key way he believed that freed men could gain the rights of citizenship. Simpson believes that Lincoln's biggest mistake during the war was his acquiescence in the selection of his Vice President, Andrew Johnson, "A man who held such different views when it came to what freedom meant." But Abraham Lincoln never expected to be assassinated during his second term. He saw his 1864 re-election as giving him the chance to put the nation on the higher road of Reconstruction and reconciliation.

One of the many challenges that Lincoln faced and one that is underestimated – even today – is the role of the Copperheads. Jennifer Webber believes that these northern Democrats were a significant threat to Lincoln and the war effort causing the President to take political risks in order to fulfill his belief in freedom for African Americans.

These opponents of the President continually criticized administration measures, especially the suspension of habeas corpus. Mark E. Neely, Jr. believes that the Copperheads were so successful in repudiating the President's policy in this area that they actually created the myth that Lincoln was weak on protecting civil liberties when he suspended habeas corpus. Neely examines fifty habeas corpus cases from 1862-1863 and finds minimal resemblance, as Copperheads charged, that suspension of habeas corpus was a frontal attack on freedom of speech. The cases were really attacks concerning under-aged soldiers and child custody.

During the war, black activists initiated major changes in Washington with the support of congressional Republicans. Kate Masur reviews this battle for racial equality and cites the primary efforts of African Americans in trying to accomplish it.

The epilogue, by Michael Burlingame, articulates the reasons he believes that Lincoln was so successful. The President was "strong willed without being willful, moral without being moralistic, and righteous without being

self-righteous.” As such, he “inspired confidence and affection” and possessed a “profound understanding of public opinion.”

It is clear that Lincoln’s standing among scholars and with the American public has survived the Civil War Sesquicentennial. He remains America’s greatest chief magistrate. Yet, in many respects, the struggle for racial justice for national cohesion continues. As Abraham Lincoln said at Gettysburg, it is for “us the living” to rededicate ourselves to the unfinished work of the Civil War. Only then will the sacrifices of the Civil War generation be validated.

Frank J. Williams is the Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of the Ulysses S. Grant Association, and author of Lincoln as Hero. He is a contributing columnist for the Civil War Sesquicentennial.