

### Lincoln's Autocrat: The Life of Edwin Stanton

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## Review

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**Marvel, William** *Lincoln's Autocrat: The Life of Edwin Stanton*. University of North Carolina Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9781469622491

### An In-Depth Look at Lincoln's "Hatchet-Man"

With his ZZ-Top beard, granny glasses, beady eyes, receding hairline, pudgy face, and downturned mouth, Edwin Stanton is among the more instantly recognizable characters from an era filled with striking visages. He is also among those most likely to provoke a hiss from viewers familiar with him. He is easy to vilify. With his reputation for being stern, judgmental, heartless, self-righteous, ruthless, humorless, cantankerous, and hypocritical, Stanton is perceived as the polar opposite of Abraham Lincoln, revered for his wisdom, humor, courage, charity, and decisiveness. Or, at least those are the popular views.

In his meticulously researched biography *Lincoln's Autocrat*, William Marvel does nothing to disprove either reputation. Indeed, he warns the reader that while some people "will think me too harsh on Stanton" the "preponderance of testimony suggests that, at least in his public life, Stanton tended to be insincere, devious, and dedicated to self-preservation (xii)." What follows is essentially a dense 600 page indictment of Stanton on those and an array of other character flaws and deplorable acts.

Marvel reveals the often mysterious dynamic among upbringing, character, and behavior. Stanton was the "son of an apparently imprudent father who was raised in genteel but worsening poverty, and who never completed his formal education, yet increasingly competed against and associated with men of more advanced background. Why those circumstances wrought such unpleasant consequences in Stanton, when Abraham Lincoln surmounted worse difficulties with no apparent degradation in character, necessarily remains a matter of speculation (xii)." Actually Stanton enjoyed a far more advantageous early life than Lincoln, who was raised in genuine poverty. He was born into a respectable

middle-class family in Steubenville, Ohio on December 19, 1814. His father was a doctor who ensured that his son attended private academies and Kenyon College. The hard times came when a heart attack killed the father and Stanton had to drop out of college to find work. He eventually studied law and passed the bar.

He became a corporate lawyer who represented manufacturing, mining, engineering, and financial interests. He made dubious legal history as a member of a dream team of acclaimed lawyers who convinced a jury that Dan Sickles suffered "temporary insanity" when he shot and killed his wife's lover, and thus was not guilty of murder. In that first recorded case of the "temporary insanity" plea, Sickles walked free despite overwhelming evidence that he had carefully planned the murder. It is guys like Edwin Stanton who give lawyers a bad name, at least for most people outside that profession. Marvel explains that undoubtedly "Stanton possessed remarkable professional talents. He could organize and control volumes of information in preparation for a complicated legal case." What was troubling was how he wielded that information: "By dint of obfuscation, sarcasm, theatrics, and browbeating of witnesses, he could sway judges and juries. Within the adversarial legal system those are all qualities that are admitted and envied (xiv)." Stanton excelled in "the adversarial system observed in American courtrooms" which can "subordinate evidence to the personal persuasiveness of the advocate (30)."

Edwin Stanton had an authoritarian personality or, to use a nonclinical term, was a control freak. Like most bullies, he sucked up to the powerful and disdained the powerless. He wielded his keen intelligence like a rapier, eviscerating witnesses and the accused in court and his enemies elsewhere. Like most Americans during the antebellum era, he accepted slavery although when he was with powerful abolitionists like Salmon Chase, he feigned sympathy with his cause. Stanton did have at least one redeeming quality. He seems to have genuinely loved each woman he married along with his two children by his first wife.

He became better known and connected in Washington with each of numerous cases that he argued before the Supreme Court. Although at times he toyed with the idea, he never ran for office. Instead, that chain-smoker was in his element cutting deals in smoke-filled backrooms. He had no conflict promoting his own interests along with those who hired him, given the opportunity. The Civil War accelerated the industrial revolution's inevitable transformation of the

United States into a gilded age of crony capitalism, crony democracy, and extremes of wealth and poverty. And Stanton was among the self-serving elite who spearheaded that transformation. Marvel vividly exposes the putrid bowels of Washington politics during the mid-nineteenth century.

Stanton spent little more than seven years in the federal government. He was the attorney general for President Buchanan from December 1860 to March 1861, during the secession crisis. He then served as secretary of war from January 1862 to March 1868 under presidents Lincoln and Johnson. President Grant nominated him to be a Supreme Court justice, but a heart attack killed Stanton at age 55 on Christmas Eve 1869 before a congressional vote could be taken.

Lincoln tapped Stanton to replace Simon Cameron, whose blatant corruption and ineptness damaged the war effort and the administration's reputation. He chose Stanton for his powerful political ties and vaunted court room skills. He hoped that Stanton would make up for his ignorance of military affairs with the strength of his mind and attention to details. Although Stanton did prove to be a hands on manager, Marvel writes that his "performance was often measured against the man who preceded him, and the comparison worked to Stanton's distinct advantage. The relative order he wrung from the chaos of Simon Cameron's tenure is generally and justifiably regarded as his principle contribution to the war (355)." As for grand strategy, Stanton had nothing of substance to offer. Worst of all, the autocrat in Stanton drove him to have critics jailed on spurious charges and tried by military commissions even though civil courts were functioning. Marvel issues this damning assessment: "Stanton's precedent-setting repression of the civilian population stood as his foremost legacy to the nation, and it seems particularly unfortunate that so much of it was so unnecessary and so partisan (356)."

Although Stanton initially despised Lincoln, with time he grudgingly appreciated him. Lincoln mostly kept his view of Stanton to himself, but came to wield him as his hatchet-man for unpleasant but necessary duties. Marvel writes that the notion that "Lincoln used Stanton to do his political dirty work...seems substantially true (xiv)." Yet Lincoln also "usually let Stanton have his way—sometimes to his political advantage, and to the detriment of his historical image (268)." The most controversial act that Stanton talked Lincoln into was suspending habeas corpus.

*Lincoln's Autocrat* is an excellent account of a powerful man who most knowing people then and since have found unsavory and even despicable. Anyone who reads this book in search of uplift will be disappointed. This is not a story of heroic leaders on or off the battlefield but a chronically sordid distant mirror of Washingtonian infighting, partisanship, and skullduggery. All along Stanton's machinations are interwoven with the nation's ongoing critical events, issues, and personalities. Marvel's *Lincoln's Autocrat* should be high up on the shelf beside Doris Kearns Goodwin's "Team of Rivals."

*William Nester is the author of thirty-five books on international relations, military history, and the nature of power, including The Age of Lincoln and the Art of American Power.*