

Mr. Lincoln Goes to War

John Deppen

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Recommended Citation

Deppen, John (2006) "Mr. Lincoln Goes to War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss3/18>

Review

Deppen, John

Fall 2006

Marvel, William *Mr. Lincoln Goes to War*. Houghton Mifflin Company, \$30.00
ISBN 618583491

Lincoln's Legacy or

Revisionism Gone Awry?

In the field of history, revisionism should be used with care and precision to excise untruths and correct misunderstandings. William Marvel uses revisionism like a baseball bat, inflicting blunt force trauma on historical figures and events, with seemingly no other useful purpose than to stake his claim as a revisionist.

Marvel takes several swings at Abraham Lincoln in his latest book, **Mr. Lincoln Goes to War**. Marvel is scathing in his judgment of Lincoln's performance during the first year of the Civil War. Marvel declares, 'In his mission to preserve the nation's geographical boundaries, Lincoln quickly violated his oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.' Marvel portrays Lincoln in terms nearly as unflattering as those used by Lincoln's sneering contemporary, Major General George B. McClellan. Marvel's Lincoln is unsophisticated, naive, short-sighted, and ignorant of the spiraling costs of war. Lincoln is undeserving of his many accolades, according to Marvel, since he adopted a singularly destructive and unimaginative course that nearly ruined the country.

Marvel asserts that disunion might not have been a bad idea after all, and that only Lincoln's insistence on attempting to re-supply Fort Sumter ignited the war. Lincoln could have avoided four years of unimaginable bloodshed and destruction if only he would have heeded the veritable chorus of Northerners who advocated letting the Confederacy go its own way. Marvel's contempt of Lincoln is so strong that he even feels compelled to point out the Commander-in-Chief's frequent misspellings of Sumter as Sumpter, like a college professor scowling at a hapless country bumpkin.

Readers who are willing to set aside their skepticism about Marvel's basic assumptions will find a narrative that is difficult to read and often meandering in its focus. Marvel devotes whole paragraphs to irrelevant minutiae, including a description of the uniforms of Federal volunteers entering Washington, D.C. in the summer of 1861. The fact that the 71st New York Militia carried grey cardigan jackets for fatigue duty and that the 1st Rhode Island wore long, loose overshirts called 'Burnside blouses' might be of interest to some, but such information has nothing to do with Marvel's central premise.

Marvel attempts to create a tragic hero in the figure of Brigadier General Charles P. Stone, who was caught up in the Union disaster at Ball's Bluff in October 1861 and eventually spent several months in prison without charges after Radical Republicans accused him of treason. Marvel points to Lincoln's lack of intercession on Stone's behalf as further evidence of the Chief Executive's weakness in the face of his strong-willed, iron-fisted Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton. Marvel's description of the combat at Ball's Bluff is commendable and detailed, but readers will be carrying a great deal of the author's baggage by the time they reach this point in the book.

Marvel states the obvious in his epilogue, Any appraisal of Lincoln's decisions in 1861 is deeply influenced by the viewpoint of the observer, for political perspective and personal values bear heavily in balancing considerations of human life, human bondage, and individual liberty. Marvel spends nearly three hundred pages making his viewpoint painfully clear. It is a viewpoint that will create a minor wave of controversy and then recede into obscurity. It is not a viewpoint that will change Abraham Lincoln's place in American history.

John Deppen is a past president of the Susquehanna Civil War Round Table. He has written feature articles for Military Heritage Magazine, The Gettysburg Magazine, and Civil War Historian Magazine. Deppen can be reached via email at GeneralWSH@aol.com.