

Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln

Kevin Adams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Adams, Kevin (2014) "Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.4.13

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss4/12>

Review

Adams, Kevin

Fall 2014

White, Jonathan *Emancipation, The Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln*. Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780807154571

A Contrarian Look at Union Soldiers in the Election of 1864

Although Jonathan White completed his dissertation at the University of Maryland, the spirit of his undergraduate education infuses his *Emancipation, The Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln*. As an undergraduate at Penn State, White had the good fortune to not only take courses from Mark Neely, but to complete an independent study with him. The present volume is dedicated to Neely, a gesture that becomes more meaningful upon reading it, for *Emancipation, The Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln* seems inspired by Neely's rigorously contrarian approach to the Civil War era. Having made a career out of refusing to accept conventional historiographical platitudes, Neely has performed a valuable service to the field by re-examining seemingly settled historical questions and discovering new insights that challenge the reigning orthodoxy. By tackling the question of the soldier vote in 1864, more particularly the extent of soldiers' support for the Republican party, White follows in this estimable tradition. Not surprisingly, White's conclusions diverge from those reached by a number of prominent historians who write about northern soldiers.

The basic thrust of *Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln* is that scholars, such as Chandra Manning, James McPherson, and Jennifer Weber, have overstated the extent of soldiers' support for the Republican Party because they have missed or ignored evidence of the suppression of Democratic votes as well as "a transformation in composition" within the ranks of the army as Democrats deserted, refused to re-enlist, or resigned their commissions (4). At the "apex of the story is the presidential election of 1864," where political divisions within the north, which had become

more prominent after a period of ephemeral unity at the war's outset, appeared in the army in the form of "strong pressure and intimidation" applied to Democratic soldiers. Consequently, the oft-cited statistic that 78% of soldiers voted for the GOP is misleading because "at least 20 percent of the soldiers who were eligible to vote in the presidential election chose not to" (5-6).

In taking on Manning, McPherson (see especially White's hard-hitting critique of a passage from McPherson on pages 2 and 3), and Weber, White makes a bold statement. Here, the spirit of the book draws less from Neely and more from Gary Gallagher's *The Union War*. Yet, perhaps because the timing of the publication process precluded a consideration of it, the absence of James Oakes' prize-winning *Freedom National* from the historiographical discussion makes said discussion seem not only incomplete, but a little outdated. This is unfortunate for many reasons, not least of which is that the combination of White's clear prose, argument, and talent for historiographical engagement would have produced a stimulating reading of Oakes' book.

Unfortunately, two methodological issues pose serious problems for White's conclusions. The first is a familiar one, having been raised by scholars like Pete Carmichael, and Joseph Glathaar. By deploying a wide range of anecdotes from diaries and letters, White effectively demonstrates that the components of his argument either mattered to some soldiers, or affected them. But, as Carmichael, Glathaar, et al., have pointed out, so many letters and diaries from the war survive that one can find anecdotal support for practically any position. In the absence of a systematic procedure for sifting and evaluative qualitative sources, it can be hard to tell just how credence the reader should lend them. (It should be noted that White's use of courts-martial also suffers from this lack of proportionality.)

A flawed quantitative analysis of a central element of the book represents a more serious threat to the book's argument. White's assiduous compilation of voting returns for over 30 Union Army regiments (found in Table 1) serves as an important point of the departure for the claim that historians have exaggerated the Union Army's support for the Republican Party and minimized the extent of either Democratic support or political disaffection among soldiers. Unfortunately, this math does not add up. First, while White notes that his sample yielded "a slightly lower" percentage of votes to Lincoln, this description is misleading, for the rate of Democratic support in his sample (29% of the popular vote) is nearly a third higher than the percentage of Union Army voters

who actually cast a ballot for George McClellan (171). The rate of Republican support in his sample, meanwhile, lags about 10% behind the entire Union Army. This may not seem like much, but, consider that a sampling of voters from the 2008 Presidential Election in which Barack Obama loses 10% of his overall support produces a universe in which John McCain wins a majority of the popular vote. Given the overrepresentation of Democratic voters in White's sample, it is unclear how much it reveals about the Union Army writ large. This does not mean that the author should have dispensed with this data entirely—indeed, White should be recognized for the hard work involved in compiling this sample—but he should have acknowledged its limitations, and qualified his conclusions accordingly.

At the same time, the author tends to treat all of the soldiers who did not vote as anti-Republican. He then adds them to known Democratic votes, such that “more than 40 percent” of soldiers refused to endorse Lincoln's reelection (11). This leap in logic seems extreme. Not only does it run counter to the point made in Chapter 4 that soldiers might choose not to vote for a variety of reasons (so non-voting should not necessarily be read as a political act), but it also downplays the reality that Republican or Republican-leaning soldiers could choose not to vote (112-14). Even if one grants White's point that Democrats comprised a disproportionate number of non-voters, it is not clear that this changes the basic storyline. For instance, if the non-voter population split for the Democrats 65-35, and if we add these putative votes to the actual votes recorded in his already Democratic-leaning sample, we end up with an election where 2/3 of soldiers voted for Lincoln, a decisive victory by any standard, and a rate well ahead of the civilian population.

More to the point, there is ample reason to doubt White's points about turnout. That the soldiers in his sample voted at about the same rate as the civilian population (approximately 80% turnout), should have led White to back down from his account of a national conspiracy to keep Democrats from the polls. Furthermore, while White's calculation of turnout includes a sophisticated accounting of how many soldiers were old enough to vote, *it completely ignores the question of soldiers' nativity*. A “back of the envelope” weighted average of nativity calculated using the percentage of foreign-born residents in the home states of the regiments in White's sample reveals that just under 20 percent of soldiers in these regiments were foreign-born. (N.B.—This number and the ones below are in no way dispositive, but are used for the purpose of suggestive illustration.) As historians of immigration have known for some time, many of

these soldiers would not have been naturalized, and were thus ineligible to vote in federal elections. If one removes foreign subjects (however many there were) from the pool of eligible voters in White's sample, turnout subsequently increases. For example, if half of foreign-born soldiers remained unnaturalized in 1864, a figure that would not surprise immigration historians, soldier turnout in the 1864 election *increases to over 90%*. Perhaps White has removed these soldiers from his sample, but he does not mention doing so. Additionally, without a full examination or sampling of naturalization records, which do not appear in the bibliography, it is impossible to know roughly how many of the foreign-born soldiers in his sample regiments were even eligible to vote in federal elections.

For this reviewer, the failure to even consider nativity within the analysis of soldier voting exemplifies a disconcerting insularity apparent both in *Emancipation, The Union Army and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln* and the field as a whole. White's ambitious and passionate study seeks to reshape our understanding of the Civil War North, and its war effort, by exposing a hidden history of coercion, intimidation, and politicking initiated at the highest levels of the Lincoln administration and brought to bear most forcefully in the Union Army. But by failing to grapple with the previous work of political historians on period elections (e.g., Mark Wahlgren Summers' *Party Games*) and military historians on regular army standards of military justice and discipline during the nineteenth century, White is unable to achieve the decisive historiographical intervention to which he aspires. For example, a glance at the politics of Reconstruction would have provided a needed counterweight to the claims White advances. Jennifer Weber's offhand comment that many Union soldiers became lifelong Republicans in *Copperheads* is certainly open to question, as White does, but by failing to look at voting returns during the rest of the 1860s, White commits the same sin for which he castigates Weber—ignoring the postwar period. That Congressional Reconstruction was even a possibility stemmed from the widespread conviction among northern voters—including a goodly number of veterans—that the resurgence of the Democracy portended a dangerous Thermidorian reaction. Even if Democrats crossed party lines not because they loved Republicans more, but because they loathed the politics of the national Democratic party, an interpretation that fits with the one presented in his study, this is an important development in the period's political history. Confronting it would have added needed nuance to the account presented here.

In fact, the most effective portions of the book are those that move beyond the war itself and engage with larger literatures. Chapter 5 and the Epilogue, which relate the story of soldiers' disfranchisement from federal and state policies enacted immediately after the Civil War up to the difficulties encountered by active-duty service members today are particular high points. As *Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln* draws to a close, the forceful high points that White reaches in these sections remind us of the potential and the missed opportunities found elsewhere in the book.

Kevin Adams is a specialist in the study of War & Society in the United States and Associate Editor of Civil War History.