

# The Age of Lincoln and the Art of American Power, 1848-1876

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## Review

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**Nester, William** *The Age of Lincoln and the Art of American Power, 1848-1876*. Potomac Books, \$35.00 ISBN 9781612346588

### Lincoln's Persuasive Power

William Nester's newest book, on how "Lincoln and other key leaders from 1848 to 1876 reacted to the crises and opportunities they faced and in so doing decisively shaped American history" (7), reminds us why that era remains the public's most popular historical period. No time has been as transformative or more important to the nation's development. In *The Age of Lincoln and the Art of American Power, 1848–1876*, Nester adroitly examines, in very fluid prose, the period's military, political, economic, and social and cultural development.

Nester teaches at St. John's in New York and is the author of more than thirty books. He has been extraordinarily prolific throughout his career, especially recently: this is Nester's fifth in the past three years in a series that all have "The Art of American Power" as subtitles: *The Revolutionary Years, 1775–1789*; *The Hamiltonian Vision, 1789–1800*; *The Jeffersonian Vision, 1801–1815*; and *The Age of Jackson ... 1815-1848*.

"Defining the art of power is as simple as it is profound; it is the ability to get what one wants," Nester writes (1). Lincoln, "a master" of this, would successfully use "persuasion rather than coercion" (2). His skills were "innate" (2), aided by an ability to "think outside the box" (3) and to lead by the power of example. Our 16th president--unlike his successor, Andrew Johnson--"excelled at the art of American power even if he only briefly wielded it" (6). Nester traces this strength through each stage of Lincoln's political career, from his ascension to the presidency through his planning for Reconstruction, where "as usual Lincoln was many moves ahead of everyone else" (206).

Part one, "Manifest Destiny," focuses on how the issue of slavery's fate so thoroughly dominated American life in the period before the Civil War. Nester is

critical of American expansion, writing "If imperialism is the conquest of one people by another, then America has been imperialistic from the beginning" (14). Topics included here are Western expansion; the Gold Rush; the women's and abolition movement; and the Mexican War.

Turning to the fascinating tale of Lincoln's rise, Nester notes the future president's pragmatism, eloquence, speaking skills, and "emotional maturity" (32), as well as his fatalism and "bleak view of human nature" (35). Nester's Lincoln was "a deeply compassionate, forgiving, and nurturing man who sought to channel the self-interest of others into beliefs and acts that benefitted humanity" (35).

Nester devotes a chapter to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*--whose "political impact ... far exceeded its literary qualities" (37)--recounting along the way the history of American slavery; the growth of the abolitionist movement, black and white; the southern defense of slavery, led by, among others, George Fitzhugh; and the Pierce presidency.

The fallout from the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the subsequent violence in Kansas, are subsequently examined, as is a very sophisticated--and too often overlooked--discussion of how thoroughly the potential expansion of slavery, not only in the West but also the Caribbean, dominated American policies. As Dred Scott and Harper's Ferry moved the Nation closer to war, Lincoln wrestled with the race issue, described here in especially nuanced fashion (also luminously discussed in detail later in his chapter "Emancipation," an especially riveting section). Throughout the text, Nester is especially insightful when discussing Lincoln's reverence for, and use of, the Declaration of Independence.

Echoing issues raised by the Civil War's Sesquicentennial anniversary, Nester seems almost exasperated to have to point out that, yes, slavery indeed caused the Civil War. He also usefully reminds us that the rebellion was an act of treason, and that acts of treason would be "countless" over the course of the war (99). (Nester notes that, in contrast to Lee, General Winfield Scott "was also a Virginian, but he put America first" (116).)

*The Age of Lincoln's* second part looks at the Civil War. Highlights of the opening chapter include the difficulties Lincoln faced in keeping the Border States loyal to the Union and keeping Britain out of the conflict, and his endless frustrations with his commanders, especially McClellan, whom Nester pillars

throughout, pulling no punches: "In a profession not known for humility, few commanders have matched and none have exceeded McClellan in egomania and arrogance as vast as his generalship was disastrous for America" (120). You can almost feel Nester's rage that Lincoln stuck with McClellan, and that many times early on the North failed to earn clear cut victories that would have ended the war.

Nevertheless, we see Lincoln's genius as a military strategist and leader, faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges on both the battlefield (the inability of the North to deliver a final blow; ineptitude among his commanders) and home front (low morale; enlistment problems; the New York Draft Riots; the Copperhead challenge). But thanks to Grant and Sherman, the war would soon end; though it could have much sooner, Nester reminds us, and with far less loss of life.

Nester ends this moving section with a most powerful understatement: "That night the president and his wife attended the play *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre" (221).

The book's final part, on Reconstruction, is in many respects Nester's most passionate, as he details the tragedy of Reconstruction for African-Americans. Though among the war's results "was ideological triumph of Americanism itself" (226), Nester recounts step by step how, first under Johnson and then Grant, despite the Civil War Amendments and that blacks outnumbered whites in three southern states, "the South might have lost the Civil War, but it won Reconstruction" (287).

Among the insights here is the paradox that slavery's end helped the white south politically in Congress due to the elimination of the three-fifths clause. "What was needed," Nester concludes, "was a cultural revolution and that was impossible" (258). Nester's ends with wide-ranging and insightful analyses of the literary and cultural developments of the post-war era; the start of the conquest of the West; the contested election of 1876; and an astute summation of how exactly, militarily, the Union emerged victorious. Among the reasons was Lincoln's acute understanding that "the art of power is a leader's ability to convince others that by following him they serve themselves" (306).

Nester enlivens his text with a variety of colorful details, such as: Early in his career Lincoln spent fifteen years paying off a debt given to him after the

death of an alcoholic business partner; in 1842 Lincoln came close to being involved in a duel; Jefferson was afraid that antagonism between blacks and whites "will probably never end but in the extermination of one or the other race" (38); Zachary Taylor never voted before the year he was elected president; many highly disapproved of Lincoln's overly-lenient child-rearing practices; Fillmore would have soundly defeated Buchanan in 1856 had Fremont been his vice presidential pick and not run as a third party candidate; Buchanan, though a failed president, had a remarkably lengthy and impressive resume upon his election (though Nester argues for Buchanan's "mediocrity, incompetence, and venality" (76)); average southern wealth on the eve of the war was more than average northern wealth; Lincoln technically won only 35.4% percent of the 1860 vote, not the usual 39.8% found in standard textbooks, as the Fusion Party tallied 595,846 votes (though they had no candidate) (96); Lincoln, who detested the Dred Scott decision, had his 1860 inauguration oath administered by Roger B. Taney; and on the eve of the war "Seward advocated reunifying the nation by provoking crises with Spain, France, and possibly Britain" (110).

Nester also has some wonderful turn of phrases: "The Republican Party proverbially rose phoenix-like from the Whig Party's carcass" (71); "At a very lean six foot four inches tall, Lincoln towered above the 'Little Giant' [Stephen A. Douglas], who at a stout five foot six inches rose only to his rival's shoulder" (84); "It was easy for Jefferson to idealize farming since he had several hundred slaves doing it for him. Abraham Lincoln had no such sentiments" (166); "Unfortunately, passion rather than reason drives most people, especially in wartime" (200).

Among *The Age of Lincoln's* many strengths is Nester's impressive understanding of military strategy, logistics, and history. The high level of detail and compressed nature of the narrative, however, is at times a bit overwhelming, and it would have been beneficial to have included some maps, especially in the chapters that form the core of Part Two: "Turning Points," and "Total War."

This reviewer was surprised by the large amount of typographical errors: tied is spelled "tried" (91); instead of "not to" we have "to not to" (177); there was a missing period at the end of a sentence (181), a period inserted in the middle of a sentence (248), and a word missing from a sentence (277); and "chose" is written as "choose" (293). Chapter 14's first epigraph appears in the text three chapters earlier. We are told twice that Twain coined the phrase The Gilded Age. Furthermore, far too many times the first line of paragraphs that

come at the top of pages are not indented; they are part of a new section, whose first paragraphs are of course not indented, but since the "break" between sections comes at the bottom of the previous page, the format is very distracting.

And sometimes Nester tries to cover too much. The Panic of 1857 gets three paragraphs in a section that interrupts that chapter's flow. The Temperance Movement gets a paragraph (254). His second-briefest chapter, "The Hamiltonian Triumph," while informative, feels like a side-show. Some sections suffer from excessive detail: a paragraph on a military campaign mentions seven different people (209); a paragraph on the Indian Wars mentions over sixty tribes (maybe that was the point). Also, melancholy is a better description of Lincoln's mental state than "outright depression" (33), as there is no evidence Lincoln's state of mind prevented him from working. And recent scholarship in defense of Grant leads one to wonder if Nester is too harsh on his presidency.

But these are minor quibbles. Readers should look forward to the author tackling future areas of American history as he builds his series. Above all, *The Age of Lincoln* shows that Nester is able to see the big picture: he refers to the triumph by the North as "an American victory" (170), a powerful reminder of what the war was all about.

*Bernard von Bothmer teaches American history at the University of San Francisco and at Dominican University of California. He received a B.A. with honors from Brown University, an M.A. from Stanford University, and a Ph.D. in American History from Indiana University, and is the author of Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush (University of Massachusetts Press, 2010). He can be contacted at [bvonbothmer@yahoo.com](mailto:bvonbothmer@yahoo.com).*