

### The Meaning of the Civil War

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## Editorial

### THE MEANING OF THE CIVIL WAR

Childers, Christopher

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On April 5, 1864, Abraham Lincoln penned a letter to a group of schoolchildren from Concord, Massachusetts, in response to a petition they sent to the White House asking him to free all slave children. He wrote, Please tell these little people I am very glad their young hearts are so full of just and generous sympathy and that, while I have not the power to grant all they ask, I trust they will remember that God has, and that, as it seems, He wills to do it. This letter recently sold at Sotheby's auction house for \$3.4 million, proving yet again the amazing popularity of the sixteenth president. Yet the letter itself proves much more. Over a year after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln still grappled with his decision to emancipate slaves in regions under rebellion. In 1864, Lincoln still called on a higher power as the ultimate authority over whether African American slaves would be free or remain in bondage, for he questioned his own power in the matter.

Historians marvel at these sort of letters, these primary sources that serve as our only lens into a time far different from ours. Today's commander in chief possesses a level of power unimaginable to his nineteenth-century predecessors. Yet the Civil War itself strengthened the federal government and increased the role of the chief executive. It also completed the work that the schoolchildren of Concord asked President Lincoln to do—the slaves were freed.

This issue of *Civil War Book Review* features reviews that deal with the full gamut of issues that Americans—from President Lincoln to the common farmer—faced over the course of that terrible conflict. David W. Blight's beautiful new work *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation* captures the nature of slavery in the words of those in bondage. Mark M. Smith reviews this new book. Aaron Sheehan-Dean has contributed to the discussion of how families maintained the home front while often living next to—or even on—the battlefield in his book *Why*

*Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia*. John C. Inscoe offers a review of this important new work in this issue. On the military side, Joseph T. Glatthaar discusses his latest book, *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse*, in the CWBR Author Interview. This new book offers a comprehensive synthesis of life as a soldier in Lee's army.

In this issue, we feature several new works of political history that seek to explain the nature of antebellum politics and offer new insights into the state of the union before the guns roared at Fort Sumter. Stephen Hansen reviews *Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemmas of Democratic Equality*, a biography of Illinois's lesser known favorite son. James L. Huston offers a new portrait of this significant antebellum political figure. Daniel Feller reviews a new book on the Young America movement of the antebellum Democratic Party. Yonatan Eyal's *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861* chronicles the history of this group and analyzes its influence on politics before the Civil War.

And in the latest installment of *A New Birth of Freedom: Studying the Life of Lincoln*, eminent Lincoln scholar Frank J. Williams honors one of his colleagues and one of the nation's leading Lincoln scholars. Phillip Shaw Paludan, who died last year, wrote many books on the Civil War era, including a standard account of the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Williams discusses his last book, *Lincoln's Legacy: Ethics and Politics*, which deals with Lincoln and how he grappled with questions of law, politics, and democracy.

Which brings us back to Lincoln and that letter to the schoolchildren of Concord—that letter that so concretely shows how Lincoln grappled with fundamental issues of liberty, slavery, and democracy. While Lincoln's words garner much attention (and vast sums of money!), he voiced the concerns and thoughts of his countrymen, many of whom took up arms over these issues. Historians and students of the Civil War era will continue to mine the letters and other writings of Lincoln and his contemporaries to gain a better understanding of what the war meant then—and means today.

As always, enjoy studying the rich history of the Civil War.