Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession

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Review

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The Secession Winter and the Coming of the Civil War

In recent decades, nineteenth-century American political history has too often been written as if politicians did not exist. Historians have, since the late 1960s and early 1970s, focused, in turn, on voter identity, the style and culture of politics, forms of political expression by disfranchised groups, and the hidden language of political discourse. The study of the white male elites (either as individuals or as members of political organizations) who actually exercised power and shaped policies seemed hopelessly old-fashioned.

Undeterred by these trends, Russell McClintock resurrects the pivotal role played by politicians in examining closely the actions of Lincoln and others during the secession crisis of 1860-1861. Arguing that secession was a decidedly political act and that the partisan structure of politics shaped the responses of both politicians and their constituents to it, the author argues that too little attention has been paid to the North during the secession crisis. A subsidiary theme—and one which pits McClintock against historians of earlier generations—is that there is little Lincoln could have done, given the partisan and factional framework under which he operated, to prevent the onset of civil war.

The author demonstrates how in between Lincoln's election and his inauguration a tug-of-war existed within the Republican Party over how best to defuse the secession crisis. Whereas a minority of Republicans favored some concessions to the South, the majority considered any concessions as tending to embolden the Slave Power, and most Republicans believed that the party's only alleged aggression, that of fairly winning a presidential election, did not merit an apology. Meanwhile, most northern Democrats opposed secession, but they blamed Republicans for instigating the crisis, and like their lame duck president,
James Buchanan, they were averse to coercion. Caught in between Republicans not yet in power but soon to assume it, and southern secessionists dictating the direction of events, northern Democrats were reduced to bit players.

McClintock ably shows how the general public, while influential in establishing the broad parameters of the stage on which politicians acted, were nonetheless led and to some extent blocked by those politicians. At various time during the secession crisis (such as immediately after Lincoln's election and then again following the attack on the Star of the West and the secession of the bulk of the Deep South in late January), a majority of northerners, the author claims, favored a compromise—first to prevent secession and later to prevent its spread to the upper south. But just as Buchanan foiled those who demanded military action, Lincoln undercut most efforts at compromise. And because voters were so accustomed to viewing political development through partisan lenses, there was no realistic hope for a region wide consensus on how to diffuse the secession crisis.

In the author's hands, Lincoln is best shown as an adept party manager who dispensed patronage in such a manner as to please most of the former Democrats and former Whigs who comprised the still young Republican party, so as to maintain control of his party's congressional delegation and thus thwart all efforts at conciliation when it came to the issue of slavery non-extension, which was integral to the party's strength. And while Lincoln was willing to delay provoking secessionists in the hopes of bolstering unionism in the upper South, in the end party political considerations forced Lincoln to re-supply rather than evacuate Fort Sumter.

Years ago, students in my graduate colloquium and I speculated that the Republicans' loss of two of Connecticut's four congressional seats in the April 1, 1861, elections may have signaled to Lincoln that northern voters were growing impatient with his perceived lack of resolve in using force to end the crisis. McClintock's analysis lends credence to this interpretation, as at a conference three days later, Republican governors made plain that in state and local elections the party was suffering from both Democratic attacks on Republicans for first excoriating Buchanan's inaction in light of the same policy being followed by Lincoln, as well as from internal fear within the Republican party that the continuing stalemate would divide and weaken the party.
Since secessionists had no inclination to retreat from their position, all but a tiny fraction of northern politicians did not recognize the legitimacy of secession, and the vast majority of Republicans did not believe the party could veer from its core principle, the best Lincoln could do was what he did—set a trap to let secessionists begin the war.

Although the ebb and flow of support for and opposition to conciliation does at times make the book seem repetitive, it is well-written, shows appreciation for the complexity of northern sentiment during the secession crisis, and treats the crisis for the essentially political drama it was.

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