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Recommended Citation

Holzer, Harold (2009) "Lincoln President-Elect: Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter, 1860-1861," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss1/2>

Interview

LINCOLN PRESIDENT-ELECT: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE GREAT SECESSION WINTER, 1860-1861

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Winter 2009

Interview with Harold Holzer

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): What drew you to study Abraham Lincoln, especially because you've written so much on him?

Harold Holzer (HH): I wish it was a more dramatic story to tell. Some of my colleagues were literally in fox holes thinking of Abraham Lincoln while bombs were bursting in the air. I don't have any story like that. Mine is prosaic but it's true. When I was in the fifth grade in New York City—in a New York City public school—I was one of a class that was assigned to pick a name out of our teacher's hat and write a one or two page biographical composition about a particular hero's life. We lined up and I picked Abraham Lincoln. The person behind me, my friend Dennis, picked Genghis Khan and he went on to be a rock and roll promoter, so you never know how these things will turn out. I was lucky enough to have a middle school level library in the elementary school that I attended. It was something of an experimental school and in that library where I went to do my fifth grade research, I found *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* by Richard Nelson Current, which I have actually reviewed as a classic for the *Civil War Book Review* in the last few years. In that review, I told a bit of this story about my childhood introduction to the book and everything about the book, especially the photograph on the cover. I recalled the black shiny black cover that sort of looked down from the shelf. Never say that the book jackets and the way that books look from the side when they are standing up don't matter. I tell my publishers about it all the time. For me, that was the moment of inspiration.

CWBR: Historians such as David M. Potter have echoed the sentiments of an Ohio politician and Lincoln contemporary that you quote in the book, Donn Piatt, who said that Lincoln "could not be made to realize the existence of the gathering storm, the coming of this great secession crisis." How do you revise that assessment in your latest book?

HH: It's a tough question, and I'm reluctant to say because it's a long standing enduring interpretation so it's difficult to counter and challenge. How I did it is to go back to the original sources. I actually made a conscious decision about four years ago to stop reading Potter and Baringer and all the other historians—even David Donald—who have written about the period and just focus on the newspapers, correspondents, and recollections from the time. It seemed to me that the original evidence suggests Lincoln was much more resigned to secession than as opposed to it and consciously willing to fight whatever fight was necessary. That said, I don't think he believed that the fight would be quite as bad and bloody as it became. No one anticipated the length, the duration, or the intensity of the war. But he wasn't willing to give up on his pledge not to extend slavery into the territories and he was not willing to perpetuate slavery or expand slavery for the sake of reversing a secession movement that he thought would resume at the first inclination. Nor was he willing to beg for the right to be president when he believed he was constitutionally elected. I think he was much more politically savvy than he has been given credit for and quite a masterful puppeteer, even in the early stages of his career. I have to say that one of the most interesting reviews this book has received was from a writer who said that by showing Lincoln to be so calculating and sophisticated and manipulative and controlling, I've shattered the idea that Lincoln grew immensely in office—and he regrets that. He did grow in office, but he was a pretty sharp operator in 1860 and I think the book shows that.

CWBR: That interpretation has been around for many years, going back to a book written by Don Fehrenbacher in the early 1960s. Related to that question, in what way did Lincoln's preparations to assume the presidency belie the fact that he worked in the midst of a crisis and in what way did business proceed as usual?

HH: That's a very good question. I chose the organization of the book intentionally, although it may not seem like it to people who pick it up and read straight through. I deliberated the idea of having sections on cabinet appointments, patronage, family life, image making—transforming Lincoln from

a little known or little introduced figure into a widely introduced figure—and other section on inaugural preparation and the inaugural journey. That probably would have been easier for readers to deal with for some reasons, but I intentionally selected the chronological approach because I wanted to demonstrate how much work Lincoln faced, how varied were the challenges he faced, not only on a daily basis but an hourly basis. There was not a minute that he was not forced to confront all of those issues at the same time. In writing letters with political instructions, facing the continental crisis dealing with immigration reports dealing with the public, having his picture taken, paintings made, thwarting compromise to give away too much on the slavery issue, he faced so many issues. In the face of all of this, he conducted the normal business of an administration, which is filling federal jobs, interviewing people for federal jobs, selecting a cabinet, and writing an inaugural address. There was the additional fact that his election was not universally recognized and that his election really wasn't guaranteed. Lincoln faced a very wrenching couple of months because he wasn't altogether sure that the Electoral College would validate the choice of the voters. He wasn't sure he had been elected until he was on the road—in Columbus actually. The pressures, I think, were unequalled in our history.

CWBR: Historians have probed the idea for years now that Lincoln won election to the presidency without a single electoral vote from the South. Did he ever acknowledge this fact and did he acknowledge the sectional nature of his party?

HH: He denied it. Interestingly he argued with the South on this point in one of his addresses, effectively saying, “we cannot win votes in your region because you do not put us on the ballot. Put us on the ballot and we will be competitive.” Of course, ten states still did not put him on the ballot in the 1860 presidential election, but several did, including Maryland, Virginia, and Missouri. All were upper south states to be sure, but he got one or two percent in those contests. He believed that he had the absolute right to create a national government no matter how lopsided the vote was. He never questioned that he was constitutionally elected and that he was elected to be president of all the states regardless of their vote. Every northern state save New Jersey voted for him and every southern state voted for Bell or Breckinridge. It didn't matter to him; the system was sacred and the result was inviolable according to Lincoln's theories of government. He made the point several times that he didn't think he needed to apologize for the victory that he has won.

CWBR: Let's turn to a question that to some in the year 2009 might seem more mundane. You discuss in this book the massive task Lincoln faced in determining patronage appointments and that job consumed so much time for a president-elect, but yet as you argue, Lincoln saw the necessity of that effort and embraced the role. How did he use patronage appointments to reward followers and to secure supporters in his administration?

HH: I'm glad you recognized that, because I loved using some of the examples of patronage applications for the book because they show the variety of a president's mail, which I'm sure is still the case multiplied 500 or 5,000 for all we know. Lincoln received a letter from someone claiming that he was entitled to be secretary of state because he would protect Lincoln's inaugural. Others would write and say, "I've had my nose to the grindstone all my life and I know how to work a job, so please put me in the government." It was annoying and he only had a staff of two to sift through this mess. I think the fact that they saved some of the nuttier ones indicates they had a good laugh over it, but filling federal posts in places like the post offices, the diplomatic corps, the land grant offices, and the port jobs among others was serious business. This was what Lincoln had been elected to do; this was what the Republican Party was formed for—not only to protect against the spread of slavery, but to secure people who could be spread out into federal jobs all over the country and end southern Democratic dominance over the federal system. Lincoln was committed and eager to fulfill the task of transforming the government.

CWBR: Following up on the theme of Lincoln as an astute politician, you discuss Lincoln's use of surrogates to test policy issues. How often did he use that tactic and how effectively did it shield him from potential criticism on policy issues?

HH: He did it frequently and did it more than we know because some of them were voice instructions to people like Lyman Trumbull and others who were in Springfield at the beginning and were intimately involved in developing his policies, especially on how to face the compromise challenge. The irony is that as he shielded himself from this kind of direct confrontation with issues, he also shielded himself in history from credit for these policies. But Lincoln was part of an era where presidential candidates and presidents-elect were not only not seen, but not heard. They were supposed to remain quiet, dignified, and silent. Lincoln varies from the tradition a bit—he invites reporters to his office

and he does make one or two speeches to the public in Chicago. But this is the only way to communicate his instructions, his intentions, and core beliefs. He didn't have the luxury that President-elect Obama has had of having a press conference nearly every day, of rolling out appointments everyday, of answering policy questions every day. Using surrogates was the only traditional acceptable approach.

CWBR: Lincoln's firm stand against the expansion of slavery in the territories runs throughout your narrative. It seems that, as you describe it, Lincoln takes a hard line on the issue at times but at other times he really entertains notions of compromise.

HH: Yes, he does probe a bit on the idea of a war against Mexico [as a means of uniting the North and South against a common foe], for example, and as he gets closer and closer to the departure date for Washington he says there will be no absolutely no extension into Mexico. He had been told by advisors that Mexico was so arid and inhospitable for the kind of crops that slaves harvested that slavery would never take there. It was always his theory that slavery would have perpetuated everywhere in the United States if the climate had been hospitable, but he said that in a way that was meant to suggest that northerners should not think that they had a spiritual high position. It was one that had been developed because of the nature of the climate and no one was entitled to moral superiority because slavery still existed in the country. It's an interesting stand, and an interesting side note. And it was a rather magnanimous approach that was meant to assuage southerners. Lincoln is willing to say things about enforcing the fugitive slave laws which were found repugnant by many people. That said, there are certain dividing lines that Lincoln would not cross. He drew a line in the sand and would not expand slavery to the Pacific and would not change the Missouri Compromise. And he especially rejected the idea of acquiring territories for the expansion of slavery, places like Mexico, lower California, and Cuba—seen by some southerners as free fertile ground for slavery expansion. This also meant perpetuation of southern dominance in the nation's political institutions, which Lincoln was not going to accept.

CWBR: How did people perceive Lincoln's handlings of affairs related to organizing his administration and in showing he was up to the task? You make an argument in this book that Lincoln is really up to this task and he is an astute politician. Do you have any evidence about how people perceived him in this transition?

HH: The three avenues to public perception and to understanding the perception of the transition come through correspondents and recollection, friendly (Republican) newspapers, and opposition newspapers. These opposition newspapers are not only Democratic but also southern. I think you see denunciatory commentary editorializing by the Democrats and by southerners that believe he is acting in a tyrannical and controlling or hapless fashion—but that’s all politics. That’s the way politics has been covered in the country since the Jacksonian era. Things are very partisan and very over the top and actually a lot of fun to read. I always remind people who say that politics in the press is too slanted today—that Fox News and MSNBC, respectively are too slanted toward the Republicans and the Democrats—that they should read the *New York Tribune* and the *New York World* from the 1860s. Those papers were slanted, undisguised, and unfettered partisan journalism. It’s almost more fun to see it work that way out in the open rather than the covert partisanship that exists now.

During the transition, Lincoln remains something of a mystery to the majority of the public. There’s enormous excitement among the Republican faithful, and they are very excited about the campaign in much the same way we watched President-elect Obama—and as we speak here today still President-elect—making some very brilliant moves out there. The incoming administration is hinting at his legislative agenda, but no one really knows how his administration will unfold. Both parties hope for the best. It was not different in 1860 and 1861; Lincoln was getting his message out through surrogates. But Lincoln also had to craft his image. After the humiliation of the journey into Washington on the night train, he knew he would be criticized. After seeing the unflattering report in the *New York Times* of his journey, he gets into his most beautiful suit and he goes to Alexander Gardner’s studio to have his photograph taken. He sits in the most austere, dignified photograph that he would ever sit for in his entire presidency. The portrait was copied and sent out to the whole country and also overseas, giving the inspiration for many foreign adaptations and the printing of lithographs of that portrait. He knows just what he’s doing by using his physical stature and his unusual appearance to help encourage the idea that people can rely on him.

CWBR: You meticulously narrate Lincoln’s trip to Washington and recount one of the most fascinating and yet enigmatic parts of that journey—the assassination plot in Baltimore. You reveal what seems to be a fairly well planned plot against the president-elect. Just how real a threat did Lincoln face

and how prominent were the conspirators?

HH: I wouldn't say I revealed it, for I relied on several scholars who have worked on this, particularly the work of Edward Steers, Jr., whose *Blood on the Moon* is the most scrupulously researched and reasonably argued book on the Lincoln assassination plot of 1865. In that book, he turns to 1861 and looks at it very carefully as a prelude to Booth's assassination plot. He sees Baltimore as an incubator, as violent disloyalty to the Union, and I think that that's accurate. Was it organized? Well it doesn't take much of a cell of violent opposition to create chaos as we've seen in the 21st century. I think the plot was credible enough at the time, even though it may seem a little operatic to us, but Lincoln heard it from two different sources on the same night in Philadelphia, both from Allen Pinkerton and from William Seward and Winfield Scott and others sending him the same message from Washington. And I think I found convincing evidence that he as well as those around him had heard about it briefly in New York. I don't think he had much choice but to take the threat seriously. Of course when he got to Washington he said it was a terrible mistake—probably a smart political thing to say.

CWBR: At its heart, the book is a narrative history—as you've already said—of Lincoln's movements during the secession crisis. In many places you recall some very important scenes; for example, the president elect's last visit with his law partner William Herndon, which is very touching scene. How did you go about recreating conversations between Lincoln and others and how did you attempt to piece together those conversations from what must have been a variety of sources?

HH: That's a good question. I try to be a very good sourcer. I think I write too many footnotes. I don't like to let a conversation or reference go by without attributing appropriately and I also don't like to always use conversations without reminding the readers there are several versions. So I do give some exculpatory reminders that not all of the conversations were written precisely at the time when they took place, but I do think I have the responsibility to the reader to create the atmosphere of the moment. In terms of the visit of Herndon, we have two alleged witnesses. Certainly the visit to his stepmother was a little harder to construct because there were four or five people who had pieces of that moment, including his own stepmother who was interviewed about five years later. It's a real challenge; I work very hard at creating those scenes. And I have to tell you that I like when people say, "you've given me more than just that in

terms of his capability and his understanding of this period. You've given me something more to think about than just compromise and how far he was supposed to go." But if someone says to me, "I felt like they was there on the journey" or "I felt like I was there when he got to Washington," that is the highest compliment I can get because I really try to make that my goal.

CWBR: Thank you.