

Lincoln and His Admirals

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Review

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Symonds, Craig L. *Lincoln and His Admirals*. Oxford University Press, \$27.95 hardcover ISBN 9780195310221

Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. Navy, and the Civil War

One expects great things from a monograph whose title so consciously asks its readers to compare it to T. Harry Williams' classic *Lincoln and His Generals* (1952), and Professor Symonds ably delivers. There is no dearth of recent books that expand our knowledge of the Union Navy and its sailors, but there is none that so capably explores the relationship between President Abraham Lincoln, the navy's civilian and military leadership, and the evolution of Union strategy.

Symonds's thesis is reminiscent of Williams's seminal work. He argues that Lincoln was forced by circumstances to be an active and involved commander in chief. The scale and scope of the war overwhelmed the navy just as it had the army, forcing Lincoln to become an active participant in strategic planning. The impact of naval events extended beyond the battlefield to the diplomatic sphere, most famously expressed through the *Trent* affair, which created continuous tension not only within the service but also between the navy and the State Department. Navigating this bureaucratic minefield required regular presidential intervention.

Symonds characterizes Lincoln as a "reluctant" commander-in-chief. However, he makes it clear that "reluctance" should not be confused with temerity or indecision. Lincoln's great contribution to the conduct of the war was his constant focus on the war's end result. He was willing, as Symonds repeatedly demonstrates, to be flexible about how the Union's war aims were achieved. Actions that might be interpreted as indecisive or dithering were, in fact, Lincoln allowing events to unfold to see if a particular situation might resolve itself without his intervention. Sometimes that happened as naval officers or cabinet secretaries rose to the challenge. When it did not, Lincoln exerted his

command authority at all levels, interjecting himself into campaign planning, diplomatic affairs, the conduct of the war on the western rivers, and promotion decisions for key officers. Symonds argues, as Williams did before him for the army, that Lincoln became less active as a trustworthy and competent naval command structure took shape.

Lincoln and His Admirals is solidly researched, well argued, and engagingly written. What really makes the book stand out, however, is the insight that Symonds provides into the minds and actions of the key players. Readers will quickly understand that the author has devoted a lot of time trying to figure out exactly who these people were, what motivated them, and how their individual personalities affected the conduct and outcome of the naval war. The almost continuous tension between Gideon Welles and William Seward is a regular theme, but one also gains a better understanding of the importance of Gustavus Vasa Fox, the political machinations of the Blair family, the impetuosity of Charles Wilkes and William Porter, the periodic indecision that seemed to plague Samuel Francis Du Pont, Samuel Phillips Lee and Louis Goldsborough, and the recurring problem of John Dahlgren's promotion. The book is far richer as a result, especially when it links these personalities to larger discussions of Union strategy.

The book provides solid coverage of naval policy throughout, which makes one omission puzzling. Symonds discusses the navy's rapid expansion at the beginning of the war in some detail, linking the policy and practical ramifications of an effective blockade with a dysfunctional bureaucracy ill-suited for conducting war on this scale. However, there is no corresponding discussion of the reduction in ships that began well before the end of hostilities. Given Symonds's keen analysis of the interplay between policy and action throughout *Lincoln and His Admirals*, it would have been nice to have seen the same applied here.

In the end, one has to return to the long shadow cast by T. Harry Williams and ask if Professor Symonds has met the challenge imposed by his own title. The answer, this reviewer thinks, is a resounding yes. The navy was, without a doubt, the junior partner in a predominantly terrestrial war. However, it played an important role in the ultimate defeat of the Confederacy, which requires historians to better understand how naval policy was formulated and implemented, both in of itself and in the context of the larger war effort. This book provides that insight and therefore belongs in the collection of every

serious historian of the Civil War.

Kurt Hackemer is a professor of history at the University of South Dakota. His books include The U.S. Navy and the Origins of the Military-Industrial Complex, 1847-1883 (2001) and "To Rescue My Native Land": The Civil War Letters of William T. Shepherd, First Illinois Light Artillery (2005).