

Lincoln's Darkest Year: the War in 1862

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Review

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The Brutal Year of 1862

Certainly more books have been written about Napoleon than Abraham Lincoln, but Civil War historians are doing their best to catch up. This year, the two hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth (1809-1865), has seen a marked increase in the number of books about the sixteenth president.

Civil War historian William Marvel's latest book, *Lincoln's Darkest Year*, the second volume in his planned four-book series, follows his acclaimed *Mr. Lincoln Goes to War* (2007). This is Marvel's twelfth Civil War history, having already written about Andersonville, Appomattox, Petersburg, naval warfare, and other Civil War subjects. He is an award-winning author, earning the Lincoln Prize, the Bell Award, and the Douglas Southall Freeman Award.

Marvel's purpose here is to tell "the common story of a war growing completely out of hand and overwhelming the people who started it," focusing on Lincoln, lost opportunities, blunders, and the Union's stunning ability to repeatedly snatch defeat from the jaws of victory (xi).

A fellow Civil War author, George Rable, calls Marvel "the leading contrarian historian of the American Civil War," and perhaps he is right, for Marvel cleverly asserts that Lincoln was not the brilliantly flawless statesman so beloved by generations. Instead, he reveals Lincoln to be a well-intentioned but "disingenuous politician" who made as many bad decisions in 1862 as good ones, to the extreme point that even the Union Army, the public, and his own party disliked him. And, of course, the South hated him.

Marvel makes a strong case that 1862 could only be described as Amateur Hour, as politicians, armies, generals, bureaucrats, and leaders fumbled and stumbled at the deadly business of war. In this book, he focuses on Lincoln and the Union, highlighting all the reasons why the Union should have won the war quickly in 1862, but didn't.

Marvel is a masterful storyteller, offering details and colorful descriptions of people, places, and events; the clear result of talent and meticulous research. He tells vividly of major battles like Shiloh, Second Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg, as well as lesser known fights at Perryville and South Mountain. His combat narratives are chillingly stark, awash with battlefield blood and carnage.

Best, however, are his sharp portrayals of military and political events and decisions that lost battles, costs lives and treasure, lost public confidence, and created feuds among generals, Lincoln's cabinet, abolitionists, and Radical Republicans. He tells of Union corruption, greed, and wasteful spending, and how unchecked mobilization resulted in "reckless extravagance," how Lincoln manipulated state governors to raise more regiments using a sneaky scheme sneeringly known as "Father Abraham's Call," as well as the curious Confiscation Act of 1862 which was a thinly disguised ploy to free slaves, and how the ill-conceived draft nearly tore the Union apart (30, 88).

Marvel also spends a great deal of verbiage describing the Union Army's shameful behavior of looting, pillaging, and wanton destruction of civilian property, as well as the army's seemingly high rate of desertion and cowardice under fire. Oddly, he barely mentions any such Southern excesses.

Still, he does a solid job of explaining why 1862 was such a miserable year for Lincoln and the Union (with much of the blame falling on Lincoln), how people "fell into despondency over the perpetual replacement of commanding generals, repeated defeats, costly but indecisive battles, continuing congressional wrangling over freedom and freedmen, the financial panic, the revelation of a December cabinet crisis, and 'the going-to-hell-tending to everything'" (321).

This is a grim portrayal of a deadly struggle that would only become more ruthless, vicious, and gruesome as the year went on, showing just how close the Union came to actually losing the war in 1862.

For more interesting reading about events in 1862, see *The Raiders of 1862* by James D. Brewer (1997) and *Joseph E. Johnston and the Defense of Richmond* by Steven H. Newton (1998).

William D. Bushnell, a retired Marine Corps colonel, is a professional book reviewer with more than 1700 reviews published in thirty-five magazines and newspapers, is a member of the National Book Critics Circle, and is an instructor at the University of Southern Maine. He lives on an island on the coast of Maine.