

### Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief

Michael Fellman

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## Review

Fellman, Michael

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**McPherson, James M.** *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*. The Penguin Press, \$35.00 hardcover ISBN 9781594201912

### Commander in Chief Lincoln

Only in part because 2009 is the bicentennial of his birth, the hunger for books about Abraham Lincoln shows no sign of slowing down with the rest of book publishing during the current deep recession. Indeed one might surmise that the precipitous downturn stimulates the demand to read about the grandest American hero saving the nation from its greatest crisis. Recently, in *Team of Rivals* (2005), Doris Kearns Goodwin has proclaimed Lincoln's superhumanity right in the subtitle of her book, *The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. This book is said to have influenced Barack Obama about taking his erstwhile rival Hillary Clinton as the head officer of his cabinet a la Lincoln and Seward. Several other recent books have analyzed Lincoln as orator and writer, two at least focusing on the Second Inaugural Address, the shortest in American history. Three recent books examine the friendship of Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, who met each other three times. It would be a full time scholarly occupation to keep up with the seemingly inexhaustible mantras of Lincolnialia.

Of the recent flood of books, perhaps the most original is Joshua Wolf Shenk's *Lincoln's Melancholy* (2005), a study of the effects of the deep depression in which Lincoln lived almost all the time, a condition Lincoln himself acknowledged but which few historians have fully factored into their reckoning of his personality. However, even the subtitle of Shenk's subtle and rich study demonstrates the adulatory nature of this entire genre: *How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*. Except for a bitter and marginal squad of neo-Confederates, nearly every Lincoln book is elegiac to the point of worshipfulness. Myth and man are fully united; critical analysis is subordinated to celebration.

*Tried by War*, written by the best-selling James McPherson with his customary clarity of prose, depth of detail, and force of narrative, is yet another full-bore contribution to this flood of hero-worship. Depicting Lincoln as national savior right on his dust jacket, McPherson (or the copy writer whose prose he approved), tells us that Lincoln invented the idea of commander-in-chief, and that he stepped beyond the narrow constitutional definition of the presidency and that this was a “good thing too, because his strategic insight and will to fight changed the course of history and saved the Union.”

What follows inside the book will be familiar to readers of McPherson’s full studies of the Civil War, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) and *Ordeal by Fire* (1982). Those works contextualized Lincoln’s role, while this tome revises nothing but abstracts it from its broader surrounds, the better to emphasize Lincoln’s unique genius. Lincoln read up on military strategy early in the war and thereafter continually urged his commanders to swifter and more decisive action, a position that McPherson subscribes to as a great strategic insight. Although McPherson does not put it this way, in many respects it appears that Lincoln still believed that one decisive battle would annihilate the enemy and end the war, the Napoleonic fantasy that propelled many generals into battles of indecisive slaughter.

As readers of McPherson’s earlier work will recognize, George McClellan remains the *bete noir* of his argument. McClellan is of course an easy and customary target for modern historians: here as elsewhere in the McPherson oeuvre he serves as the perfect foil, the near-traitorous advocate of limited war whose slowness to attack proved Lincoln’s vastly superior wisdom.

Ambrose Burnside and Joseph Hooker, the two subsequent generals in the East, heard Lincoln loud and clear, and at his bequest launched aggressive attacks leading to massive and enormously demoralizing Union defeats. McPherson chalks up these catastrophes to poor generalship, ignoring the fact that in the Civil War those fighting tactically defensive battles rarely lost. Aggressive assaults deriving from the Napoleonic smoothbore era almost never won in the new day of the far more effective firepower of the recently evolved rifle. Pushing his commanders to attack as aggressively as possible was quite often the recipe for disaster.

McPherson also repeats several times Lincoln's oft-stated dictum that the enemy army and not enemy territory was the chief objective and takes this as further proof of his strategic genius. Therefore Lincoln opposed both Grant's Vicksburg campaign and Sherman's March to the Sea for risking Union armies in unorthodox ways and by tactically moving away from enemy armies, and in the case of Sherman, placing the decimation of civilian material and morale well ahead of military engagement. As McPherson illustrates, Lincoln was humble enough to apologize to both generals after they ignored his advice and followed their own tactical insights.

Although counter-imperial apologies such as this are both rare and attractive in a commander-in-chief, these cases hardly prove Lincoln's omniscience. In addition the Union effort in the west was essentially uncontrolled by Washington, a major example of the disorganized nature of this war, something that rarely appears as an important factor in tales of presidential triumph, including this one. Lincoln's hand was effectively absent from this theater almost all of the time.

After Grant took command in the east, Lincoln imposed on him the Red River campaign in Texas. This was Lincoln's single major contribution to military campaign planning, upon which he insisted despite Grant's belief that it was at best strategic irrelevancy, and that it would undermine the Union effort to take Mobile, a far more important objective. Under Nathaniel P. Banks, a political crony of Lincoln, this campaign was an unmitigated and wasteful disaster. McPherson doesn't exactly conclude that this was Lincoln's mistake, blaming Banks almost entirely. Because this was the only time that Lincoln was clearly the strategic author of an idea he imposed on his army, it is a rather significant countervailing example to the notion of the ever-brilliant commander in chief.

Of course the Union won the war, and so it is easy enough to select those elements where the Union prevailed and lay them end-to-end as markers on the road to ultimate victory. But it was less the stunning victories and more the cumulative effect of the Union war effort that finally exhausted the southern will and ability to resist. The less disorganized and less impoverished side won over the long run, at enormous human and material costs, rather than in some inevitably unfolding military triumph. A less heroic and personalized version of the Civil War would be more accurate if less inspiring.

We know that Lincoln made far more modest claims on his supposed genius. It was of course he who drew the insightful conclusion, as he wrote a supporter, "I claim not to have controlled events but confess plainly that events have controlled me."

Lincoln was thinking of the limits of his political as well as his military leadership when he wrote this insightful letter. But as is usual with the Lincoln genre, Lincoln appears in this volume as the bestriding genius of both realms. The conventional version mistakes Lincoln's undoubted steadfastness and impressive sense of timing with sole effective authorship of northern political strategy.

During the first year of the war an ever-increasing flood of the enslaved liberated themselves and moved toward Union bases, creating huge numbers of antislavery facts on the ground. At the same time abolitionists as well as congressional radicals pushed relentlessly for emancipation. Lincoln, ever-open to the radicals, moved in their direction. He increasingly shared the compelling nature of their logic that only an antislavery war rather than a war merely for reunion would resolve the fundamental issue that had led to the Confederate revolt.

Here black self-emancipation is ignored and the role of the Radicals is barely mentioned, except as a wrong-headed drag on Lincoln's careful and ever-correct strategizing. The fundamental political dynamic that pushed the war toward emancipation was constructed by forces to the left of Lincoln pushing him to greater political action, forces of which he was perfectly aware and that he increasingly welcomed.

Why has this image of an essentially controlling, ever-unfolding genius triumphed over a more realistic and struggling version of Lincoln? Why does belief in the mythic savior displace contradiction and complexity, making the assertion that Lincoln was a genius suffice as the thesis of endless numbers of books? Such triumphalist special pleading tends to be dehumanizing and in many ways undynamic and ahistorical. But clearly it is urgently desired.

During these dark national times, marked by corruption and reaction among the dominant elements of the society, there is a deep need for simpler stories of heroic times and heroic figures. Indeed one can already sense that Barack Obama, another man from Illinois, is being constructed as a second Lincoln and

FDR, with George Bush as Buchanan/Hoover. Not insignificantly, the extra-constitutional actions of Bush might give one pause about unequivocally celebrating Lincoln's violations of civil liberties. Perhaps they helped save the Union, but used unwisely they can also destroy freedom and induce widespread fear.

In the realm of myth, the construction of an African-American second Lincoln appears as the fulfillment of the emancipation achieved by the Civil War. Beyond that, Americans, almost perpetually at war, want to believe that war can achieve unquestionably moral ends, and that they are worth fighting under the right leadership and for the right goals. Lincoln as the apotheosis of the just leader of the just war remains politically essential as the noblest warrior.

The Copperheads, alongside George McClellan, provide the perfect antithesis to the Lincoln legend. As white supremacists, they opposed abolition, and after the war they supported the destruction of Reconstruction that their southern confreres accomplished through organized political terrorism, creating the apartheid solution to race relations that defined the United States until very recently. Much of the thrust of emancipation was reversed after the war, which makes the Civil War less triumphal when viewed from the vantage point of the society and the values that followed for most of a century. This reaction means that Lincoln was not the all-sufficient culminating figure of American history that Lincoln scholars, and perhaps most Americans want him to be. History is ever complex, ever dark, something Lincoln well understood, as does Barack Obama.

The Civil War is a definitive national victory only if one ignores or considers as secondary the bloodshed and social injustices that color so much of American history at home as well as abroad. The current stakes in the sainted Lincoln legend remain considerable, as we see here from the pen of one of its most skillful practitioners. As a solution it is a problem.

*Michael Fellman is Professor of History Emeritus at Simon Fraser University, and author of In the Name of God and Country: Reconsidering Terrorism in American History, forthcoming from Yale University Press.*