

### The Great Task Remaining: The Third Year of Lincoln's War

Brooks D. Simpson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Simpson, Brooks D. (2010) "The Great Task Remaining: The Third Year of Lincoln's War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss3/9>

## Review

**Simpson, Brooks D.**

**Summer 2010**

**Marvel, William** *The Great Task Remaining: The Third Year of Lincoln's War*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-618-99064-1

### Reminding Us of the Challenges that Lincoln Faced

On the eve of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, one can look forward to years of celebrating the glory of combat and the sacrifice of soldiers on countless battlefields. One should also anticipate tales of how a wartime president struggled to save the Union and labored to free the slaves, and discussions over what we should remember about the war and how we should remember it. It might be wise for discerning readers to consult William Marvel's multi-volume history of Mr. Lincoln's War before embarking on that journey. In the third volume of that series, *The Great Task Remaining*, Marvel once again reminds us of the grit and grime of grim war, the senseless tragedies, the shoddy dealings, and the price people paid to preserve a union that would be forever transformed by the very effort to preserve it. At a time when most scholars continue to concentrate on divisions within Confederate society and how the Confederate way of waging war ultimately threatened the very things Confederates said they were fighting to protect, Marvel reminds us that internal divisiveness characterized both home fronts, and that, whatever motivated the boys of '61 to enlist, by 1863 it was altogether a different matter as to why one donned a uniform, decided to reenlist, or chose to decline, let alone resist, joining the parade to the front.

One of the prevailing themes in this volume is how resistance to the war effort escalated in the North during 1863, and how the Lincoln administration responded to that dissent. Over the last two decades some historians have tried to defend Lincoln from charges that he cracked down on civil liberties, while others have resurrected the notion that the Copperheads were in fact a serious threat, to the point that they threatened what we today would call homeland security. Marvel describes the ways in which the Lincoln administration quelled dissent

and chilled political debate, even as he dwells on the depth of antipathy and antiwar opposition. Another leitmotif is how northern morale remained shaky throughout 1863: a close reading of the narrative should dissuade anyone who might believe that Gettysburg was in fact a turning point in the conflict, for whatever expressions of joy might have greeted the news of George G. Meade's July victory, by year's end it looked more like a missed opportunity in a continuing strategic stalemate. Indeed, northerners looked to the elevation of Ulysses S. Grant to top command in 1864 with a hope rooted in desperation and exasperation: if the victor of Vicksburg and Chattanooga could not prevail, it was logical to conclude that no one could. One can better understand the war-weariness of 1864 if one recalls that it was a recurring characteristic of northern morale.

Marvel also highlights the underhanded dealings and corrupt actions of northern politicians (including those in high positions) and the mixed motives of many white northerners who came to support emancipation and black enlistment. Perhaps it's well to remember that the political shenanigans usually associated with Reconstruction and the Gilded Age was not exactly new to American politics. There was something to the Democratic observation that the war to save the Union was changing it, and not always in desirable ways. Marvel raises important questions about the nature of the commitment to victory and what price people were willing to pay to gain that triumph. That tale is enriched by his ability to weave material from letters, newspapers, and diaries to recover a story that he can tell from many perspectives. His reliance on primary sources to recapture what people saw at the time offers a striking contrast to those accounts of the war that rehash familiar stories without questioning the underlying assumptions of what some critics term the master narrative. Thus Mine Run gets as much attention as does Gettysburg and Chattanooga, in part because what did not happen can be as important as what did happen if we are to understand the war as it unfolded before the eyes of those who witnessed it.

It is in keeping with that approach that Marvel also recasts our understanding of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address by reminding us of the immediate context in which it was delivered. Whatever the impact of the July triumphs at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, by November things looked grimmer for the Union cause. Lee had proved as active as ever in Virginia, forcing Meade back at one point; in Chattanooga, Grant had yet to move, and to the northeast, Ambrose Burnside seemed hunkered down in Knoxville. Chickamauga suggested that the Confederacy still had plenty of fight left in it. Lincoln wanted

to remind his listeners that to abandon the struggle now would be to admit that those who had made the ultimate sacrifice had done so in vain. To do that seemed unimaginable. The business of saving the Union remained unfinished, the great task remaining before northerners. For all the scholarship about the more timeless meanings of the Gettysburg Address, it is well to remember that it was also a specific response to certain circumstances at a particular moment in time. A week later Grant would be telegraphing news of a great victory, and two weeks later Meade would be looking at another opportunity lost.

If it can be said that at times Marvel looks a bit too lovingly and long at the dark side of things, it must be admitted that most histories of the Civil War skip over these aspects a bit too blithely and never question either means or ends. No doubt some readers will pick at some of the descriptions of battles as not meeting their favorite tales, but then this book is not a blow-by-blow recounting of battlefield maneuvers. Besides, this is a far broader history than that. In a sense it is a people's history of the northern war effort crafted by an artist with a skeptical eye. Even those readers who might not embrace this perspective ought to engage it.

Brooks D. Simpson is ASU Foundation Professor of History at Arizona State University.