

The Lincolns in the White House: Four Years That Shattered a Family

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Review

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Packard, Jerrold M. *The Lincolns in the White House: Four Years that Shattered a Family*. St. Martin's Press, \$26.95 hardcover ISBN 312313020

The East Wing in Crisis

Civil Strife in the Presidential Family

The author of a half-dozen popular histories of the Vatican, World War II, the British royalty and the American civil rights movement, Jerrold M. Packard enters the crowded field of Lincoln studies with this book. It's difficult to find a niche since more books have been written about Lincoln than any other political leader in world history, but Packard does a commendable job of portraying the Lincoln household in the Executive Mansion. His work lifts the curtain to reveal the human side of life in the president's family as politics played out on the national stage.

Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln had four sons. Second son Edward died at age four, so the book focuses on the three surviving sons, their parents and the city of Washington, D.C., itself. What emerges is an entertaining account balanced among the family, the capital and the politics of the Lincoln administration.

Packard is unusually sympathetic to Mary Todd Lincoln, who probably has almost as many critics today as during her lifetime. Her reaction to Eddie's death foreshadowed her response to later losses. Following his death on February 1, 1850, she entered a period of prolonged mourning and lack of self-control during an era when childhood death due to disease was common. A dozen years later, in February 1862, the Lincolns' beloved Willie died at age 11. Her mourning lasted two years, and before it ended, Lincoln threatened to institutionalize her.

Prior to Willie's death, Mary Todd Lincoln was among the nation's most active First Ladies since Dolley Madison, managing in her activity to become

her own worst enemy and creating numerous critics. The author notes that presidential secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay did Mary a disservice through their lack of empathy for her. For example, despite her personal difficulties, Mary dutifully visited wounded soldiers at the local hospitals as the Civil War raged, never attempting to gain publicity for her visits.

Packard does not portray Mary negatively for her many excursions with oldest son Robert to New England to escape Washington, D.C., which was built in a swamp and consequently was rampant with offensive smells and deadly diseases, compounded by the agony of a civil war. Considering the filth in the capital and the primitive state of medicine, it is somewhat remarkable that the Lincolns lost only one immediate family member while living in the Executive Mansion. Lincoln himself remained an unusually healthy chief executive, especially compared to Jefferson Davis, although Lincoln lost 30 pounds during the stressful months of the war immediately before his assassination.

Mary's life was a serial tragedy for the 17 years she lived after Lincoln's death. Tad, the Lincolns' youngest son, died in 1871 at age 18. Afterward, the only surviving son, Robert, became convinced of his mother's insanity and had her legally tried. As a result, she was sent to an expensive sanatorium near Chicago. When she died in 1882, mother and son were estranged.

Academic historians may find fault with Packard's account, but the public will appreciate its brevity and readability. This work is a very good introduction to the high personal costs that political life extracts from families. Lincoln restored the broken American family, but his nuclear family did not fare as well after his death.

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