

Two Against Lincoln: Reverdy Johnson And Horatio Seymour, Champions Of The Loyal Opposition

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Review

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Harris, William C. *Two Against Lincoln: Reverdy Johnson and Horatio Seymour, Champions of the Loyal Opposition.* University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 9780700624126

Remembering the Loyal Opposition

How should historians treat those who were on the wrong side of history? How much attention should be paid to them? How should we evaluate historical figures who we might disagree with?

These are among the many important questions raised by William C. Harris's remarkably well-researched and elegantly written work of political history, *Two Against Lincoln: Reverdy Johnson and Horatio Seymour, Champions of the Loyal Opposition*.

Harris, Professor Emeritus of History at North Carolina State University and a prolific author of the Civil War Era, focuses on two loyal Democrats (as opposed to Copperheads or anti-war Democrats)—one a senator from Maryland, the other the governor of New York—during the Civil War, who, as the “loyal opposition” (5), were opposed to emancipation and what they saw as the Republicans’ threat to civil liberties, wanted “immediate Southern restoration to the Union after the war” (5), and who firmly opposed the Republicans’ plans for Reconstruction.

Part One is entitled Reverdy Johnson: Conservative Unionist, and is in many ways a history of the Senate during the Civil War.

In chapter one, Harris recounts the background of how Maryland’s Johnson became one of the Nation’s leading lawyers, and how he soon “blamed the sectional crisis on antislavery agitation” (10). Harris recounts Johnson’s break

with the Whigs over his support of the Mexican War; his role as Attorney General under the brief Taylor administration; his rise as a lawyer; his views on the *Dred Scott* case and the Kansas-Nebraska bill and other issues of the 1850s; and his attraction to the Democratic Party and his subsequent effort to unify the party. Johnson would shortly “be at the center of the struggle to preserve the Union while defending civil liberties and constitutional rights against the federal government” (29).

In chapter two, we see the start of Johnson’s clash with Lincoln over the president’s suspension of the writ of habeas corpus; over the tension, as Harris notes, “between ‘treason’ and the loyal opposition” (34); and over the role that the anti-slavery movement should have in the conflict. By 1861, Johnson, who as a prominent politician from a border state (and soon to become a U.S. senator), Lincoln was eager to court, “had become increasingly concerned by the government’s resort to martial law to suppress dissension” (43). Most of all, Johnson and Lincoln clashed over slavery, as Johnson did not want the Union’s military to meddle with it. Harris discusses at length Johnson’s dealings with General Butler and his legal efforts regarding the court marshal of General Fitz John Porter.

In chapter three, we see the tensions with Lincoln escalate, as, among other issues, Johnson believed that “the states had never really left the union ... only individuals in the South ... had rebelled” (59). Harris also discusses Johnson’s complex views on race and slavery. Johnson would openly defend several Northern generals, and even “charged that President Lincoln himself was directly to blame for the battlefield failures” (69). Above all, Johnson “faulted both the anti-slavery militants in the North and the secessionist conspirators in the South for the delay in ending slavery” (72). Johnson would come to avidly support McClellan’s 1864 presidential campaign, severely attacking Lincoln in the process, going so far as to charge that Lincoln had shown “utter unfitness for the presidency” (80).

In the fourth and final chapter of Part One, Harris examines Johnson’s post-war career, where he defended Mary Surratt; continuously clashed with Sumner and the radicals; supported the Sherman, or Military Reconstruction bill; spoke out, using rather appalling language by today’s standards, against universal suffrage (98); argued over how exactly the 14th and 15th Amendments should be interpreted; played a leading role in Andrew Johnson’s impeachment trial; got involved in diplomatic relations with Great Britain; and clashed with

Grant's tough approach to the Ku Klux Klan.

Part Two is entitled Horatio Seymour: Democratic Party Leader.

In chapter one, Harris briefly charts the rise of the future New York Governor before turning to his involvement with the fractured politics of the early 1860s, where he shared many of Reverdy Johnson's views, especially the blame he placed on the anti-slavery movement for the war. Seymour was an enormously powerful force; in the words of one Lincoln cabinet member, there was "no man in the country better equipped for the presidency" (123). Against his wishes, he was nominated for governor, an election he won, riding a Democratic wave in 1862. At the end of this section, Harris is especially critical of the way that Seymour distorted the positions of the abolitionists.

Chapter two examines Seymour's many clashes with Lincoln in 1863. In Harris's judgment, "Seymour missed the crucial point that the changing nature of the war and the animosities and divisions that it engendered, including the issue of emancipation, made ... a political outcome improbable. The war had to be won on the battlefield before a political settlement for the South could be obtained, or more realistically, imposed" (140). Soon, Seymour becomes perhaps the leading Northern Democrat, and there was even talk that he was a Copperhead, a false charge, for, as Harris notes, "Seymour Democrats wanted no peace short of reunion" (146). Harris proceeds to analyze the Vallandigham affair, followed by a riveting section of the controversy over Seymour's remarks following the July New York City draft riots.

In chapter three, "Democrat Champion, 1864," Seymour ramps up his denunciations of Lincoln and of the future plans for Reconstruction, with the New York governor "issuing an early warning against any federal political requirements on the postwar South" (171). He charged the Lincoln administration with attacking a free press and civil liberties, and, as the North got more and more disillusioned with the war, Seymour's national profile rose. In the fall campaign, he "charged that Lincoln had lost control of national affairs to the radical Republicans" (181), among other outrageous attacks.

Harris then astutely observes that "The Civil War, rather than unifying the North and the border states politically, had contributed to a heightened climate of

partisanship and even paranoia regarding the motives of the opposition” (182).

In the fourth and final chapter of Part Two, Harris examines Seymour’s actions following Lincoln’s assassination and during Reconstruction. His all-encompassing attacks on Republicans, often with “typical hyperbole” (191), only continued, centered often on the topic of race and states’ rights. He even went so far as to call blacks “an ignorant and degraded race” (195). In dramatic fashion, he was soon the Democratic nominee for president in 1868, becoming, as one biographer noted, the only American, before or since, to get “the nomination of a major party against his will” (203). Harris’s study concludes with the vicious 1868 campaign, where a mere “switch of 30,000 votes in targeted states, though an unlikely event, would have won the presidency of the New York Democrat” over Grant (207).

Harris is overall quite critical of many of the positions of both men, yet in his conclusion argues that “Despite the shrillness of their language, Johnson and Seymour pursued a conservative course between that of the Republicans and the Copperheads” (216).

The radical Republicans and their quest for racial justice, as well as, of course, Abraham Lincoln, are so much the heroes in the vast majority of today’s books on the Civil War that one can forget that each had fervent critics and enemies. For admirers of the radical Republicans and Lincoln, this is a tough book to read, as vitriol upon vitriol rain down upon them both. But Harris’s study reminds us how much frustration there was towards Lincoln, regarding both the slow rate of progress in winning the war, as well as the methods Lincoln used to help win the war.

The overt racism of Lincoln’s opponents is especially difficult for today’s reader to slog through. But one of the book’s many strengths is the way Harris gently points out how utterly misleading many of these two men’s statements were, as well as the restraint the author shows in not attacking their often absurd charges.

The format is rather unusual, and I am not sure that it entirely works. The book might have read better had he woven together both men’s political careers chronologically. One other way of doing this study would have been to have

included several other critics of Lincoln, and to have centered the text on the themes that united them.

Harris often strays from his main figures, and instead offers a straight-up history of the Civil War. Indeed, Johnson and Seymour often disappear from the text for several pages; for example, Seymour is absent during Harris's extensive discussion of the Vallandigham affair.

Another problem is that the author often repeats topics in Part Two that had already been discussed in Part One, which distracts the reader. Furthermore, in Part Two he frequently adds to a sentence about Northern Democrats and Conservatives that their positions were also shared by Reverdy Johnson. The book also at times suffers from excessive quotation from the many public remarks, published pamphlets, and written correspondences of Johnson, Seymour, and Lincoln.

Yet this is a very important book, one that contributes an enormous understanding to the forces that drove many to oppose the Union's cause during the Civil War.

Finally, the eloquence of both the written and spoken remarks of Johnson, Seymour, and Lincoln are reminders of how the quality of political discourse has declined in the modern era.

Harris's thoughtful study also makes us remember that extreme political partisanship is nothing new; in fact, it used to be far worse.

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