

# Look At Lincoln: Stanton: Demythologized

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## Feature Essay

Winter 2018

*Look at Lincoln: Stanton: Demythologized.*

**Stanton: Lincoln's War Secretary** By Stahr, Walter **Publisher:**Simon & Schuster **Retail Price:**\$35.00 **ISBN: 9781476739304**

Biographies of Lincoln's cantankerous but able lawyer who served as his Secretary of War are controversial. That's what makes Stahr – himself a lawyer – a promising choice for the latest biography on Edwin McMasters Stanton.

Two years before this in-depth study, William Marvel authored *Lincoln's Autocrat*. In contrast, Stahr's book offers a broader context for Stanton's actions during the Civil War with his many faults apparent. Stanton was an advocate and often a cajoling manipulator. Initially, Stanton did not like Lincoln, but he became a useful tool as the President's "no" man. When Lincoln did not wish to be bothered or wanted to deny another innumerable request, he sent the seeker to Stanton who would rudely deny requests.

Overall, Stanton proved to be a terrific administrator who helped the North and Lincoln win the war. He mastered the use of telegraphs and railroads to provide men and material to combat areas.

By the 1850s, Stanton was a self-made lawyer and disputatious advocate in court. The author addresses legends and apocryphal stories. While some have attributed anti-slavery credentials to Stanton's career, Stahr notes that Stanton had friends on both sides of the issue and remained loyal to the Democratic Party. At the end of James Buchanan's presidential term, he appointed Stanton his Attorney General. Stanton objected strenuously to sending arms to the South before the war commenced and argued against secession.

While Stanton was aggressive in efforts to recruit freed African Americans to the Union army and navy, supporting black suffrage quicker than most, Stahr faults him for disregard of civil liberties. "Mars" as Lincoln called him, authorized an increasing number of military tribunals for civilians (over 4,200)

and used powers delegated to him by the president to close disloyal newspapers, as well as arrest journalists and editors. Yet Stahr puts these acts in the context of horrific losses and disunion.

Stahr quickly exonerates Stanton from involvement in conspiracy to murder Lincoln and leaders in the government that have been espoused since the 1930s by Otto Eisenschiml and most recently repeated by Bill O'Reilly. Parenthetically, if Mr. O'Reilly had shared his manuscript with many knowledgeable people of the Lincoln assassination, he would have avoided many errors.

Stahr questions the legend surrounding his subject; that he disinterred his late daughter and had her remains in his parlor because there was a rumor that the cemetery would be relocated and disturb her casket; that while he may have been rude, Stahr says he had always been that way; and that he did not terminate Lincoln as local counsel in a patent infringement case that initially was to be tried in Illinois. Regardless, Lincoln was impressed with Stanton's legal skills.

Stanton always sought a judicial career, especially a seat on the Supreme Court of the United States. President Ulysses S. Grant, who had an ambivalent relationship with Stanton, finally nominated him to succeed Associate Justice Robert C. Grier who was resigning. Though the nomination was easily confirmed by the Senate and Stanton signed his acceptance to the confirmation, he died before taking the oath. It was a sad ending to a controversial yet productive life.

*Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Presidential Library, and regular Civil War Book Review columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.*