The year 1863 was an important turning point for the Union war effort. The passage of the Emancipation Proclamation coincided with the rise of Federal success on the battlefield, as the Union armies braved the loss at Fredericksburg and the rout at Chancellorsville and emerged victorious at Vicksburg and Gettysburg. By the end of the year, Lincoln’s armies were poised on the precipice of victory—a drastic shift in fortunes over the course of a few short months. It was, as Harold Holzer states, a “watershed year” and, in the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, was certainly deserving an extended analysis. In this collection the authors tackle an impressive array of topics to expound on the social, political, and military events that occurred during this critical year. Despite the Union successes, Holzer notes, “victory and its resulting blessings were by no means assured” (7). By placing Lincoln and his policies at the center of the war effort, this collection provides readers with an important analytical framework from which they may better judge the intersection of presidential decisions and events on the battlefield and at home during 1863.

Thematically, this collection can broadly be divided into three main areas of focus. Essays by Craig Symonds, John Marszalek, Michael Ballard, and William C. Davis speak to the Union’s military situation during the third year of the war. Edna Greene Medford, Frank J. Williams, and Barnet Schecter expound on the political situation North and South, in particular the implications of emancipation and the draft on the Union war effort. Catherine Clinton, Bob Zeller, Orville Vernon Burton, and Harold Holzer discuss the social implications of 1863, both during the war and as part of the historical memory of America’s greatest conflict.

Edna Greene Medford confronts, in “The Day of Jubilee,” the true implications of the Emancipation Proclamation in the South. Although southerners initially believed that Lincoln’s proclamation would have
little impact on their way of life, Medford argues that “almost immediately, residents of the Confederacy found themselves facing an alternate reality. Their bound labor force had deserted plantation and farm, the able-bodied men among them had found dignity and self-worth in the ranks of the Union military, and those who chose to remain at home were facilitating the destruction of slavery from within” (9). For Lincoln, though, the decision to free slaves in the South was not an easy one. Had it backfired, it would have “served as the deathblow to the Northern cause” (10). Perhaps Medford’s most important contribution here, however, is her analysis of the impact of the Emancipation Proclamation and, by proxy, the legacy of Abraham Lincoln on the African American community in the United States. Celebrations broke out throughout the South as the newly freed population embraced the “the greatest event in our nation’s history” (13). Lincoln’s decision to free the slaves had, according to Medford, far greater implications for the Union war effort. Men and women fled the plantations, crippling the Confederate economy and convincing southerners that their labor force was in “full-scale rebellion” (16). Providing an ideological reason to fight, the Emancipation Proclamation further proved to be the impetus for African American enlistment through which freedmen were able to both prove their worth on the battlefield and fight “battlefield prejudice and discrimination behind Union lines [which ultimately allowed those at home to] press for an extension of their rights as well” (19).

Frank Williams’s piece, “Under the Cover of Liberty,” further discusses the legacy of Emancipation—placing Lincoln’s pivotal decision within the context of the political climate of 1863. Emancipation, as a war goal, Williams argues, was “replete with legal, political, and cultural significance” but was nevertheless balanced by Lincoln’s own belief that “he was constitutionally bound, as president, to take no action against the ‘peculiar institution’ of slavery” (23). How, then, do we understand Lincoln’s choice to make what ultimately became the most important political decision of the nineteenth century? The political and legal justification for this act rested within Lincoln’s belief that “necessity warranted emancipation” (25). As Williams asserts, “the Emancipation Proclamation may be the single most significant statement of policy issued by a governing authority in the history of the United States” and was a document that Lincoln passionately defended against his political foes (26). Nevertheless, Williams points out that emancipation was only one of many constitutional controversies that occurred during 1863. The notion of wartime necessity that Lincoln asserted when freeing the slaves in the Confederacy was also applied
to General Order No. 38, which allowed the military to intervene in cases where civilians “declared ‘sympathies for the enemy’” (28) and to the “Lieber Code,” which formed military tribunals to deal with partisan soldiers and political dissenters (38). While the military trial of Clement Vallandigham was perhaps the most notable example of military necessity trumping the civilian court system, these measures nevertheless provide insight into the way Lincoln utilized legal justifications to enact major social and political decisions, “when in cases of rebellion or invasion, [and] the public safety requires them” (39).

Reanalyzing Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Orville Vernon Burton helps contextualize this short speech as a vital part of a war that “posed in a crucial way what clearly became persistent themes in American history: the character of the nation and the fate of African Americans” (138). Lincoln gave his speech at the Gettysburg battlefield when victory could still be stymied by a reluctant northern public. Therefore, Burton suggests, the “Gettysburg Address was suited within a political environment in which Abraham Lincoln sought to defend the Civil War . . . by linking the current struggle to the revolutionary tradition” (138). His visit to Gettysburg provided the president with the opportunity to “speak honestly and directly with the American people about the struggle that remained,” which he did in a way that reflected his own political heritage and deep commitment to the notions of liberty instilled by the founders in the Declaration of Independence (140–41). This speech, Burton argues, illustrates how “Lincoln’s understanding of liberty became the greatest legacy of the Civil War and the age of Lincoln” (145). But, Burton reminds the reader, the Gettysburg Address went hand in hand with the Emancipation Proclamation—a document that actually implemented the “new birth of freedom” that the president spoke so eloquently of in November 1863. At Gettysburg, Lincoln “wanted to capture the heart of the whole country, to move beyond a war measure, a legal document proclaiming that slavery was no more. He wanted to redefine the meaning of that freedom” (149). The importance of the Gettysburg Address is, according to Burton, profound. It is “the voice of mankind dispossessed. . . . There is no statement more revolutionary and more conservative since the Bible” (152). Furthermore, while Burton’s analysis of Lincoln’s ideology is eloquent, within the context of the collection perhaps his most interesting contribution is his use of “word clouds” to visually display the shifts in the president’s rhetoric over time and help illustrate his broader argument.

Expanding on Federal policy, Barnet Schecter explores the impact of conscription on the northern home front during the period. In
language similar to that used to justify emancipation and the suspension of habeas corpus, Lincoln argued that “his goal was to be ‘just and constitutional; yet practical, in performing the important duty . . . of maintaining the unity, and the free principles of our common country’” (57). Conscription, according to Schecter, “marked a watershed in Lincoln’s presidency and in American history” as, for the first time, the “hallowed notion of the homegrown militia as the bulwark against tyranny by a centralized power” was replaced by compulsory military service (58). Yet the passage of this act and, in particular, the $300 commutation fee became a rallying cry for Democrats, who “link[ed] the draft to Lincoln’s most revolutionary act, the Emancipation Proclamation” (58). Ultimately, Lincoln’s decision to implement conscription led to the New York City Draft Riots, which began on July 12 and “escalated horrifically, becoming a vicious racial pogrom targeting the city’s free black community” that appeared to further solidify the link between these two Federal policies (61). While New York burned, many Republicans called on Lincoln to enact martial law in the city. Democrats deemed this solution to be a “last resort,” but Republicans believed only the firm hand of the federal government could completely quell the political questions of state authority raised during the riot (64–65). Eventually, legal challenges to the Conscription Act arose in many northern states, all of which Lincoln successfully weathered. Ultimately, Schecter argues, Lincoln’s reaction to the draft riots yielded two contradictory outcomes. Although the president successfully withstood the violent test of authority, his failure to punish the rioters and their political leaders “opened the door for the Democratic resurgence that unfolded over the next decade and a half” (69). Schecter concludes that the president was in an untenable situation, for had Lincoln chosen to meet the rioters head on with bullet and bayonet, he “might have given credence to the Democrats’ cries that he was indeed a military dictator who had destroyed the free government he had sworn to preserve” (69). The failure to utilize federal power to quell the rioters was, however, indicative of the future of Reconstruction and the unwillingness of Republicans to enforce a “program of freedom and equality” in the postwar era (70).

Political and military events of 1863 consumed Lincoln’s days and ultimately secured his place in history. Yet, as Catherine Clinton shows, his wife, Mary Todd, was equally vested in the preservation “of her husband’s legacy, and her smallest gestures were meant to promote Lincoln’s historical place, to cement his deeds into fitting memorialization” (73). According to Clinton, Mary Lincoln played two vital public roles during this year: as a crusader for soldiers and
as the protector of her husband—both of which she excelled in, despite personal issues that stemmed from the death of her son Willie. As Lincoln “launched a major revolution,” Mary’s public shift toward radical opposition to slavery and her growing friendship with Radical Republicans “reflected a shift undertaken to court favor” as support for emancipation became a “litmus test for Washington’s abolitionist elite” (77). Nevertheless, Washington visits by two of Mary’s half-sisters, southern sympathizers Emilie Todd Helm and Martha Todd White, “unbalanced the high-wire act Mr. Lincoln had struggled to maintain” and, along with her efforts to keep her son Robert out of the army, revitalized questions surrounding the First Lady’s loyalties. As Clinton illustrates, the intersection of the personal and public lives of the Lincolns played an important role in the public and private perceptions of the president during this year.

When Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, there was no guarantee that this document would accomplish anything. With Union military defeats in the winter of 1862 at Fredericksburg, Chickasaw Bayou, and Stones River, it was increasingly unclear whether the Emancipation Proclamation was a statement of victory or “an indication of the desperation of the United States and its president” (91). These defeats contributed to, in part, a swing of fifty congressional seats, as Democrats capitalized on growing discontent on the home front. John Marszalek and Michael Ballard provide a compelling overview of the shifting Federal fortunes during 1863, with particular emphasis on the dual victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, which “had an enormous impact on the Union psyche” and “demonstrated that the Federals had found the general to lead their armies to victory” (98). With Union victories in all theaters and Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia defeated for the first time on the fields of Pennsylvania, the war had finally and decisively shifted in Lincoln’s favor. While the battles of 1863 “produced the two military men who would conclusively lead the Union forces to military success,” Federal advances, according to Marszalek and Ballard, also provided the opportunity for Union forces to implement emancipation in the newly occupied South (99–100). “After 1863,” the authors conclude, “the Confederacy really had no hope of military survival” (100).

William C. Davis’s “The General Tide” further expands on the military situation in 1863, with an emphasis on the impact of command changes on the Union military effort. Like other authors, Davis points out that, without military victory, the Emancipation Proclamation “would be pointless, one of history’s cruel and embarrassing jokes” (123). Lincoln spent the winter of 1862–63 “contending with
depressing manifestations of his problem commanders,” especially Ambrose Burnside, who, fresh off his devastating defeat at Fredericksburg, informed his commander in chief that he had lost the confidence of his senior commanders. Furthermore, he stated, the “rank and file” of the Army of the Potomac “had lost confidence in Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, in General-in-Chief Henry Wager Halleck, and worst of all in Burnside himself” (124). Outside Washington, however, the tide was beginning to turn in the Union’s favor. In Arkansas, Major General Samuel Curtis had, with his victory at Prairie Grove, secured for Lincoln most of Missouri and Arkansas. In the spring, Nathaniel Banks “actually succeeded at something” when he captured Baton Rouge and Port Hudson, thereby giving the Union control over the lower portion of the Mississippi River (125–26). Grant’s capture of Vicksburg secured the entire waterway and effectively divided the Confederacy in half. Grant’s leadership potential lay not only in his understanding of strategy but also in his “good eye for talent in his subordinates” (129). Quick to promote talented men to command positions, Grant was also willing to relieve men he saw to be incompetent, thereby stabilizing the Union high command. In this way, men such as William T. Sherman, George H. Thomas, and Philip H. Sheridan rose to vital command positions and ultimately contributed significantly to the defeat of the Confederacy. The failures of Burnside, Hooker, and Meade in the eastern theater propelled Grant into the limelight as “the indisputable premier commander of the Union,” and as 1863 turned into 1864 “the ebb in the Union’s fortunes seemed replaced by a rising tide” and Lincoln “could look ahead with some confidence” that victory would be assured and emancipation enacted (135).

Craig Symonds tackles the history of Lincoln’s involvement in the naval actions of 1863. As “the only person in the government . . . who had simultaneous command authority over both the army and the navy,” the president was “necessarily drawn into those aspects of the war where those two services had to cooperate” (43). Naval affairs in 1863 focused on two primary objectives: Vicksburg and Charleston, though Lincoln’s direct involvement differed considerably in the planning and execution of these campaigns. Symonds asserts that Lincoln’s involvement in the western campaign was limited due to geography (it being impractical for the president to visit the western theater), delays in communication, and confidence in the leadership of David Dixon Porter and Ulysses S. Grant. While the president was “skeptical of much of Grant’s fruitless maneuvering” during the winter and spring of the year, he was quick to admit to his general that his concern had been misplaced (46). The planned campaign against Charleston
was an altogether different matter, one that forced Lincoln’s involvement. Both Lincoln and his admiral, Samuel F. Du Pont, favored a direct approach to the capture of the strategically and symbolically important southern port city, with Union ships steaming “boldly into the harbor and seiz[ing] the city without involving—or even informing—the local army commander” (47). Yet Du Pont’s hesitancy, similar to that of George McClellan the year before on the Peninsula, caused Lincoln considerable angst and forced him to play an ever greater role as manager of affairs along the South Carolina coast. As an insight into the lesser-known role of the commander in chief in 1863, Symonds illustrates that, although Lincoln’s involvement in naval affairs was rather limited, his leadership nevertheless “reflected his notion of the proper role of a commander in chief” in which “he had to bear the slings and arrows of public disappointments about the progress of the war, about emancipation, and, occasionally, about the naval war as well” (54).

In his essay “Picturing the War,” Bob Zeller expounds on the social impact of wartime photography and, in particular, the ways in which photography had “grown and matured during the war and laid the groundwork for photojournalism as it is known today” (121). Photography, Zeller shows, was important to a number of different, yet intersecting, components of the war. Photographs of Lincoln, “one of the most frequently photographed human beings on the face of the earth” when the war broke out, “provided a face to the name of the western politician everyone had heard so much about and helped popularize [him] during his presidential campaign” (103–4). Among soldiers, photography was an important component of the war effort, and “nearly every soldier had his photograph taken during the war.” These images were among “the most cherished keepsakes” for families on the home front (105). Photographers who followed the Union armies provided those at home insight into the “terrible reality and earnestness of the war,” as images of the dead on battlefields such as Antietam “shocked New Yorkers like no other photographs ever had” (111). As the war continued, photographers became increasingly interested in preserving the spectacle of war, in part because it was such a lucrative business and because of the desire to capture images of actual combat. As the war moved into its final year, photography became commonplace, culminating in “chronicling one of the final events of the Civil War,” the hanging of the Lincoln conspirators, “almost second by second” and marking the true emergence of photography as a medium of bringing warfare from the front lines to the home front (121).
Harold Holzer concludes the collection with a lengthy discussion of Lincoln’s image and the way the president was conscious of and used photography as a means of preserving history. Although the Emancipation Proclamation “seemed to cry out for revised graphic tributes” of Lincoln, the president “did little to encourage image-makers, providing few fresh photographs” during 1863 (157). Tracing the trials and tribulations of artists seeking to capture the president’s image in print, on canvas, and in stone, Holzer provides fascinating insight to the give-and-take between Lincoln and those who sought to preserve his image for posterity. Yet perhaps most important to this discussion is the author’s assessment of public demand for images of the Great Emancipator. Following Zeller’s discussion of the profitability of photography during this period, Holzer suggests that there seemed to be little to convince “profit minded picture publishers that mass-produced tributes to the document or its author would achieve robust sales,” meaning that, despite Lincoln’s growing prominence, there seemed to be little public interest in securing his image (169). Instead, Holzer argues, Lincoln’s image was used primarily “to address other issues, usually comically and often derisively,” in particular political controversy between Republicans and Democrats (170). That Americans in 1863, the author concludes, “remained bitterly divided was clearly demonstrated by their decidedly mixed reactions” to the image of Lincoln (173).

As a whole, this collection provides valuable insight into Lincoln’s experiences during 1863 and the intersection of political, military, and social issues that ultimately contributed to the lasting memory of the sixteenth president. This collection is, however, not without some issues. The repetitious nature of some of the chapters is particularly problematic, especially in those essays focusing on military events. For example, the goals of the chapter by Marszalek and Ballard and the one by Davis are different. The latter focuses on a broad assessment of the military situation in 1863, whereas the former traces the rise of Lincoln’s key commanders. While they play well off each other, a greater effort could have been made to tie the chapters together, thereby limiting the discussions of battles such as Gettysburg and Vicksburg. A good example of how this could have been done exists in the ways the essays by Medford and Williams are in dialogue with each other—as the social and political issues of emancipation play nicely together for the reader. In regard to the discussion of political issues in 1863, Schecter provides an excellent overview of the political, social, and military climate that contributed to draft resistance. Yet his conclusion, which suggests that Lincoln’s failure to meet draft
resistance in New York with a heavy hand ultimately led to the revival of the Democratic party, the end of Reconstruction, and “ninety more years of Jim Crow,” seems somewhat exaggerated and far-fetched (70). The author makes no concession for the attitudes of War Democrats, who largely rejected the means and motives of the draft rioters, and continues a longstanding but ultimately misguided trend of portraying New York City and the New York City Draft Riots as the barometer for national public opinion.

Finally, the pieces on wartime photography, while interesting and valuable contributions to the history of the Civil War, seem somewhat out of place. Zeller’s contribution, for example, lacks any strong commentary on Lincoln himself—instead inserting the president seemingly at random into his narrative on the advances of photojournalism. For example, while Zeller notes that Lincoln received 195 photographs in 1863 and 1864, there is no commentary regarding what this may mean or why it is at all important to the larger discussion of Lincoln’s role in steering the Union War in 1863 (115). Holzer’s concluding piece on Lincoln’s image is equally captivating and speaks more to Lincoln’s involvement in the emerging field of photography. Yet his assertion that one specific event—the destruction of one picture of the president in the midst of the New York City Draft Riots—was representative of broader divisions within American society is problematic, and this reader would have liked to see more evidence of disdain for Lincoln’s image as support for such a claim (173). These issues, however, are relatively minor and do not significantly detract from the importance of the collection. Holzer and Sara Vaughn Gabbard have compiled a fine overview of events in 1863 that is an excellent read for anyone interested in Lincoln or the Civil War. The array of subjects and extensive insight into Lincoln’s leadership and his involvement in events on the battlefield and the home front truly help contextualize this watershed year within the broader narrative of the Civil War. In sum, the authors conclusively illustrate just how vital Lincoln’s leadership was during this tumultuous period and the ways in which his political ideologies and his role as commander in chief ultimately had far-reaching implications on the future of the United States.