Review Essay

DAN MONROE


Once Abraham Lincoln won the election of 1860, he faced a burgeoning secession movement as states in the lower South called conventions to leave the Union. Though bombarded by requests to speak or comment on the unprecedented crisis, Lincoln refused to be baited into issuing a statement directly promising, or even implying, any concessions aimed at placating the South. He remained publicly silent until February 1861 when he gave speeches while enroute to Washington, D.C., for the inaugural ceremonies. A number of historians have dissected and critiqued Lincoln’s seeming passivity in the immediate months preceding his official assumption of the presidency.

David M. Potter published a classic study on the topic in 1942, written in the wake of a strong revisionist movement in Civil War scholarship led by James G. Randall at the University of Illinois. Randall regarded the conflict as the product of the errors of inferior politicians, and he celebrated not the Republican radicals and abolitionists who favored black civil and political rights but Andrew Johnson and the reactionary Southern Democrats who were virulent racists and foes of social revolution in the South. Although Randall still touted Lincoln as a hero and a moderate, the tide of revisionism united with the longstanding Southern antipathy toward the sixteenth president and produced a somewhat more critical view of the president. The change may have been driven in part by an intellectual climate more favorable to the Jim Crow South, since reactionary Southern Democrats made up an important part of the majority coalition that gave Franklin D. Roosevelt repeated election victories and the Democrats control of the federal government. Potter’s study reflected the new paradigm.

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“The Lincoln legend has obscured the shortcomings of the man, and has glossed over the periods of his life during which he groped and blundered,” Potter declared.¹

Potter found meritorious the compromise proposals that Kentucky senator John J. Crittenden put forward in an effort to stave off the war. Crittenden proposed a series of constitutional amendments specifically designed to pacify the South. The highlights included a guarantee against interference with slavery in the South, extending the old Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific Coast and allowing slavery in all territory south of it, including territory acquired in the future, and federal compensation to slaveholders for escaped slaves. Potter condemned Lincoln for failing to recognize the serious-ness of the secession crisis, for believing, as did many Republicans, that the South’s secession talk was all bluster, a mere bold front to extract concessions from the Republicans, the repetition of an oft-used Southern political tactic. Since Lincoln erroneously thought that secession was a bluff, he refused to countenance the kind of sweeping compromise legislation Crittenden proposed, which was an effort that followed the tradition of grand union-saving legislative deals epitomized by Lincoln’s political beau ideal, Henry Clay. Potter had internalized Randall’s “blundering generation” critique, that the war was preventable if only politicians had acted properly. Lincoln, in Potter’s telling, was a blundering politician.

The problem with the revisionist critique, a problem Potter acknowledged in a revised preface to his classic study, was that the revisionists ignored or discounted the moral dimension of slavery. Lincoln had plainly declared his willingness to tolerate the existence of slavery in the South. What he refused to accept was the expansion of slavery because he wanted the institution to be confined and thereby placed on a path to extinction. Such had been the will of the Founding Fathers, as Lincoln repeatedly argued in the 1858 debates with Stephen A. Douglas and in the famed Cooper Union speech of February 1860. Throughout the crisis Lincoln refused to issue any statement to reassure or placate the South, though bombarded by requests to do so. He also worked to forestall any compromise in Republican congressional ranks. Slavery was morally wrong, Lincoln had declared, and should not be permitted a new lease on life by allowing its expansion. To do so would also harm the political coalition that made up the Republican Party, as resistance to the expansion

of slavery was a unifying issue. Crittenden’s proposal to extend the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific would have opened millions of acres of territory to slavery. Worse still, Lincoln thought that such a concession might lead to the expansion of slavery into Mexico and Central America, as the South, blocked to the North, would simply move in the opposite direction.

More recently, Daniel Crofts has offered a variation on Potter’s critique. Crofts views William H. Seward as the hero of the secession winter. While Lincoln remained silent in Springfield and exerted his influence against compromise behind the scenes, Seward attempted to head off secession. His strategy was to play for time, to keep the border states satisfied and thus prevent growth in the membership of the Southern Confederacy. Seward believed that without additional states, the seceded states would in time recognize the folly and impossibility of establishing themselves as a new country and return to the Union. He was willing to countenance concessions on the territorial issue and even the surrender of federal forts in the South to keep the border states contented and thereby maintain the status quo. Crofts believes that Seward’s strategy, which many of the post-World War II generation of historians condemned as appeasement of the distasteful Confederate regime, deserves more respect and had real possibilities as an alternative to destructive war. Yet the prospects for compromise were always dim. Both Potter and Crofts give more credence to the possibility of compromise than may be warranted and thereby condemn Lincoln for his intransigence on resisting slavery in the territories. It must be remembered that after the Compromise of 1850, Southern fire-eaters, such as William Lowndes Yancey, spent the ensuing decade continually denouncing the North and further political compromise. Yancey and his ilk warned the Southern people that political union with Northern states was inherently harmful to the South and Southern rights. By 1860 events seemed to have confirmed the validity of Yancey’s arguments. After the Compromise of 1850 personal liberty laws in Northern states effectively thwarted the enforcement of the reinvigorated Fugitive Slave Act, and in addition, there were dramatic instances of resistance to the return of escaped slaves. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, open warfare and murder in Kansas, violence on the Senate floor, the Brown Raid—fire-eaters presented each crisis to Southerners as proof of the dangerousness of political union with Northern states. Secession amounted to the culmination of a decade of separatist agitation. It was not a transitory phenomenon, a mere overreaction to Lincoln’s election. Both Crofts and Potter faulted Lincoln and other Republicans for overestimating the extent of Southern union sentiment, yet they too seem to make the same misjudgment in arguing that a compromise,
brokered by Seward or Crittenden, remained possible in the months prior to Lincoln’s inaugural.2

Unfortunately, Larry D. Mansch’s book on the secession crisis adds little to the current understanding of these events. Although subtitled “The Four Critical Months from Election to Inauguration,” it is actually a biography of Lincoln up to the inauguration; the first four chapters deal with Lincoln’s life in New Salem, his courtship of Mary Todd, and his early political career, among other biographical incidents, none of which seems relevant to the topic at hand—the success or failure of Lincoln’s handling of secession as president-elect. On the events between November 1860 and March 1861, Mansch provides a straightforward narrative, paying particular attention to the details of Lincoln’s life as he prepared to take the oath and assume the presidency at what proved to be a most unpropitious moment. Not much in the way of commentary is offered on Lincoln’s actions or lack of action. Mansch does include long, verbatim transcripts of the speeches Lincoln delivered on his trip from Springfield to Washington, D.C., in February 1861, a meandering tour of key states that left Lincoln exhausted from receptions and mass hand-shaking and ended with his ignominious nighttime train ride to the national capital. He had agreed to the latter to avoid an assassination attempt in Baltimore that Allan Pinkerton had warned against.

It is interesting to read Lincoln’s road-to-inauguration speeches, though they are available elsewhere, and his statements often consisted of little more than prounion pablum. Still, Charles Francis Adams felt that Lincoln’s remarks derailed the compromise efforts of himself and William Seward, and he bitterly denounced Lincoln in the pages of his diary; like his father, John Quincy Adams, the son had a penchant for personal vitriol in diary entries. Adams wrote of Lincoln’s remarks: “They betray a person unconscious of his own position as well as of the nature of the contest around him. Good-natured, kindly, honest, but frivolous and uncertain.” Mansch does not attempt to refute or endorse Adams’s criticism. He also offers no comment on Lincoln’s extraordinary promise to Virginia congressmen to abandon Fort Sumter if Virginia would agree to remain in the Union. That remarkable offer suggests that Lincoln may have been willing, under the imminent threat of civil war, to countenance previously unthinkable measures.3

Hans L. Trefousse is a distinguished historian with a long and suc-

cessful publishing record. In his latest book, Trefousse has argued that Lincoln was a popular president throughout his term of office, despite the obvious animosity directed at him from a variety of quarters amidst civil war. The standard interpretation has been that Lincoln was an unpopular president until his martyrdom and the passage of time resulted in a growing and overwhelmingly positive historical verdict on both him and his presidency. In fact, Trefousse argues, Lincoln was popular while in office, and what would today be called his favorable rating remained high through the vicissitudes of Union defeats and the controversial emancipation of the nation’s slaves. Lincoln’s reputation, then, did not dramatically change after the war but was always positive and remained so after his death. Trefousse bases his conclusions on solid research in manuscript collections and key period newspapers, sources that seem to validate his conclusions. No theoretical construct fogs the manuscript, which is also free of jargon and cant.

Still, even if one dismisses the partisan criticism of Democrats and the South, as Trefousse does, it is hard to ignore the evidence that Lincoln did endure at least periodic bouts of unpopularity. Abolitionists repeatedly condemned Lincoln for moving too slowly to emancipate the slaves, with Horace Greeley denouncing the president in a famed editorial, “The Prayer of Twenty Millions.” Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote an essay criticizing Lincoln, in which she parodied Lincoln’s response to Greeley; the president had written that he would save the Union above all things, freeing all, some, or none of the slaves to serve that paramount objective. Stowe placed Lincoln’s words in the mouth of Jesus Christ and suggested that Christ would have done whatever was necessary to free the slaves, regardless of the fate of the Union. (Stowe later met Lincoln and found his sense of humor irresistible.) William Lloyd Garrison said that Lincoln was “nothing better than a wet rag.” After the disastrous battle of Fredericksburg, in which thousands of Union troops were killed or wounded in futile frontal assaults on well-defended Confederate positions—perhaps because Lincoln had pressured the commanding Union general, Ambrose Burnside, to take the offensive—the Northern press demanded an end to repeated military catastrophes. Harper’s Weekly editorialized: “We are indulging in no hyperbole when we say that these events are rapidly filling the heart of the loyal North with sickness, disgust, and despair. Party lines are becoming effaced by such unequivocal evidences of administrative imbecility . . . the Government is unfit for its office.” Lincoln as commander-in-chief shouldered his share of the blame for Fredericksburg and other military fiascoes. In August 1864, after Grant and Meade’s spring campaign in Virginia ended in stalemate with the loss of the
equivalent in Union casualties of the entire opposing Confederate army, Lincoln himself acknowledged public disapproval of him. The president called a cabinet meeting and asked the assembled officials to sign, unread, a memo he had prepared in which they collectively pledged to end the rebellion before a new president took the oath. “This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected,” the memo began. Such a pessimistic assessment of Lincoln’s reelection prospects amounted to a stark acknowledgment of his unpopularity.4

Trefousse’s book illustrates that the Lincoln presidency continues to be reinterpreted, even by veteran historians. Of particular interest is the period between Lincoln’s election and his taking of the oath, as Larry Mansch recognizes. From November 1860 to April 1861 the country drifted into civil war, and whether Lincoln acted properly is still an open question. The president-elect’s decision to remain publicly silent while privately deprecating any compromise that abandoned Republican opposition to the expansion of slavery in the territories, remains a subject worthy of historiographic debate.