Review Essay

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In 1952, T. Harry Williams published what he described in his introduction as “the only work that treats of Lincoln as a war director.” In Lincoln and His Generals, Williams portrayed Lincoln as “a great war president, probably the greatest in our history, and a great natural strategist, a better one than any of his generals.” Williams thus brought to a climax the trend toward the favorable reinterpretation of Lincoln’s military reputation that had begun after the First World War with Colin R. Ballard, The Military Genius of Abraham Lincoln (1926), and Frederick Maurice, Statesmen and Soldiers of the Civil War: A Study of the Conduct of the War (1926). While previous writers had praised Lincoln as superior to all of his generals until he found Ulysses S. Grant, for whom he wisely stepped aside, Williams went a step farther and argued that even Grant was second to the president, “who, by his larger strategy, did more than Grant or any general to win the war for the Union.”

Williams’s book was a popular success, selected by the Book of the Month Club, and its interpretation of Lincoln as a brilliant commander in chief has prevailed for almost sixty years.

To write a book that invites comparison with the quality and influence of Lincoln and His Generals is no small task, but that is what Craig L. Symonds has done with Lincoln and His Admirals. To make the connection clear, Symonds begins his introduction with a discussion of Williams’s work, in which he notes that Williams (in common with James McPherson and everyone else who has since written about Lincoln as commander in chief) essentially ignored Lincoln’s role as commander of the United States Navy. Where Williams claimed to be the first to write about “Lincoln as a war director,” Symonds is the first to use Lincoln’s management of the naval war to illustrate “the emergence and growth of Abraham Lincoln as a wartime commander

2. See, for example, James M. McPherson, Trial by Fire: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief (New York: Penguin, 2009).
in chief” (ix). Considering the thousands of titles that have appeared about Lincoln since 1952, one imagines that the author, a noted naval historian with a longstanding interest in Lincoln, must have pinched himself more than once during the writing of this book at the thought that no one else had yet addressed such an obvious topic.

Of course, the reason why we don’t already have a shelf full of books on Lincoln as a navy man is that Lincoln did not spend every day of his administration consumed with naval matters, as he did with the fate of the Union’s armies. Symonds gets around this difficulty in two ways. The first is to concentrate on those episodes in the war when naval operations did take center stage. He begins with a chapter on Fort Sumter that shows Lincoln blundering his way forward into the unfamiliar responsibilities of a commander in chief, creating confusion by disregarding the chain of command, and encountering a complete and astonishing lack of cooperation and communication between the army and navy. At the same time, Symonds presents Lincoln as displaying the patience and flexibility that would continue to serve him well throughout the war. In subsequent chapters dealing with the institution of the blockade and the Trent affair, Symonds emphasizes Lincoln’s willingness to listen to advisors and to adjust his course according to circumstances. As Ballard and Maurice wrote favorably of Lincoln’s insistence on civilian control of the military in the aftermath of World War One (when war had been left to the generals with disastrous results), and as Williams wrote in the shadow of World War Two and another great war president, so it is possible to see in Symonds’s praise of Lincoln’s pragmatism a subtle criticism of the more ideologically driven decision-making of administrations in our time.

Symonds’s second strategy for writing a comprehensive narrative of Lincoln’s growth as a commander, when naval matters were not always foremost in his mind, is to tease out some less obvious ways in which naval events influenced Lincoln’s thinking. The most prominent example of this is the Emancipation Proclamation, the central act of Lincoln’s administration. What did Lincoln’s admirals have to do with it? Symonds shows that the navy provided a model of African Americans serving their country alongside sailors of European descent; he describes the refugee camps that formed along the coast wherever the navy established a beachhead, particularly in the Carolinas and Georgia, creating pressures that led Lincoln simultaneously to consider emancipation and colonization of the slaves (to strategic places where navy ships could fill their coal bunkers, not incidentally); and he details the role of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, along
with other cabinet members, in the timing of the proclamation. Taken together, these elements are not enough to persuade the reader that emancipation would not have happened but for the navy (nor does Symonds ever claim that to be the case), but they are enough to keep the narrative moving, showing how Lincoln came to make the key decision of his presidency without entirely losing the nautical focus of the book. Symonds wisely does not push the strategy beyond its limits, as there are some aspects of Lincoln’s presidency that Symonds simply describes (for example Lincoln’s wartime Reconstruction policies) with no pretense that they were somehow connected to naval affairs.

Symonds’s integration of political events into his narrative provides more context than Williams did in his purely military account. Symonds also appears more restrained than Williams in his evaluations of the officers Lincoln had to manage, but he achieves this in part by standing on the shoulders of Williams (and others) in making direct comparisons between many of Lincoln’s admirals and generals. Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont, for example, began the war as a professionally trained, energetic captain with a brilliant reputation who was expected to do great things, but who instead made a habit of calling for reinforcements and proved reluctant to attack in the face of what he perceived as unfavorable odds. By portraying him as the saltwater version of George McClellan, Symonds implicitly attaches to DuPont the same negative baggage that Williams (who was unreservedly critical of McClellan) assigned to the Young Napoleon. Symonds uses the same shorthand to criticize Admiral David Dixon Porter, who “shared many of the same strengths—and weaknesses—of Joe Hooker” (188). When Admiral Charles Wilkes, whose rash actions toward the British-flagged ships Trent and Peterhoff entangled Lincoln in two international crises, tried to plead his case directly to the public in violation of naval procedure, Symonds compares his situation to that of General John A. McClernand in 1863. Admiral David Farragut plays for Symonds the same starring role, as a competent, apolitical, loyal war-winner that Grant did for Williams, although Farragut’s record of holding important commands almost from the start of the war lacks the drama of Grant’s gradual emergence. By the time Symonds describes Admiral Louis M. Goldsborough, who commanded the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron at Hampton Roads in 1862, as “not physically impressive” (148) and acting “as if his primary function was to ensure the efficient maintenance of the fleet rather than to attack the enemy” (156), the reader is tempted to jump up like a game show contestant and shout “Henry Halleck!” sparing the author the need to make that particular comparison explicit.
Symonds also follows Williams in his uniformly favorable interpretation of Lincoln, which in most cases is amply justified by the record. Symonds observes, for example, that under the Constitution Lincoln was the only person in the country who could give orders to both generals and admirals, and that whatever interservice cooperation developed during the war was largely due to his leadership, both by direct command and by example. Symonds credits Lincoln’s visit to the Peninsula in May 1862 as galvanizing both forces into action and leading to the capture of Norfolk and the destruction of the Merrimac, although he discounts the story that Lincoln made a personal reconnaissance of the enemy shoreline, noting that the only eyewitness account of this alleged adventure was written sixteen years later and not corroborated by anyone else who would have been there. At times, however, the book could benefit from more critical distance. When David Hunter proclaimed freedom for slaves in South Carolina in 1862, Symonds contradicts himself by writing that “Lincoln saw that he had no choice” but to void the order, “although not everyone in the Cabinet agreed” (162). Lincoln may have been in a difficult position, but he clearly had a choice. Later, Symonds does a splendid job of untangling the complexities of the controversial reopening of the cotton trade late in the war, showing how naval officers became involved with treasury agents and private entrepreneurs, but he assigns Lincoln no blame for the ill-fated Red River expedition that followed, in contrast to the enthusiasm with which he lauds Lincoln for his role on the Peninsula. Like Williams before him, Symonds portrays a Lincoln who overcomes a few early missteps and thereafter can do no wrong.

The ultimate question regarding a book called *Lincoln and His Admirals* has to be whether it lives up to the classic reputation of *Lincoln and His Generals*. The quality of its writing certainly approaches the extraordinarily high standard set by Williams (with the exception of the repeated misuse of the word “bemuse”). In terms of the conceptual sophistication with which it integrates political and naval affairs, it clearly surpasses its distinguished predecessor. It has more and better maps. As Williams did, Symonds stays true to his focus on personnel and policies, not operations (the promotion to rear admiral of Samuel Phillips Lee occupies most of a chapter, while the battle of Mobile Bay and the sinking of the *Alabama* get one paragraph apiece).

3. See pages 67, 299, 325, and 348. Recently this malapropism has become alarmingly common among scholars as well as students. See, for example, Joan Waugh, *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 16.
Both authors found a new approach to the Lincoln story, but Williams had the advantage of writing almost sixty years (and thousands of Lincoln books) earlier, when untouched topics were easier to come by, so the point goes to Symonds.

On the other hand, interpretively Symonds breaks no new ground; he shows Lincoln dealing with a different cast of characters, in a different setting (for example, getting seasick on a voyage through Chesapeake Bay to Fort Monroe), but encountering the same kinds of challenges and exercising the same excellent judgment that Williams described. Symonds succeeds in telling a comprehensive story of Lincoln’s growth as commander in chief, but to do so he at times has to stray from his naval theme; the use of nautical phrases as section titles (from “1861: Getting Under Way” to “1865: Final Harbor”) ultimately does not conceal the fact that there wasn’t always something happening at sea or on the Western rivers to engage Lincoln’s attention continuously throughout the war. Still, there has been a need for a full-length treatment of Lincoln’s conduct of the naval side of the Civil War, and this fine book definitively fills that need. If it does not eventually achieve the classic status of Lincoln and His Generals, it will only be because Lincoln himself was a landlubber and the Civil War ultimately a land war.