Review


NICOLE ETCHESON

William C. Harris is the prolific author of books on the Civil War era that possess both scholarly merit and broad popular appeal. His new book, *Lincoln and the Border States*, is co-winner of the 2012 Lincoln Prize for the best book on the Civil War. It offers a new understanding of Abraham Lincoln as a practical politician as well as insists that Lincoln was sincerely committed to emancipation. Harris emphasizes Lincoln’s pragmatism and, as a pragmatist, Lincoln could only advance race relations as much as the country would allow. He was also keenly aware of the importance of the border states, whose Unionists had to be dragged kicking (and usually screaming) towards emancipation.

Harris is not the first to recognize the importance of the slaveholding states that remained in the Union. He quotes, and acknowledges that all historians of the Civil War quote, Lincoln’s comment that he would like to have God on his side, but he had to have Kentucky. William W. Freehling has highlighted the importance of the border South in helping the Union to win the war. By failing to bring the border slaveholding states into the Confederacy, the South lost access to men and resources that might have made their cause successful.¹ Harris’s focus on the relationship between Lincoln and the governors of the border states invites comparison to William B. Hesseltine’s *Lincoln and the War Governors*, an older work that described Lincoln’s mastery over northern governors who sought to maintain state control over the military effort. In Hesseltine’s view, Lincoln was the superior politician to chief executives of the states. More importantly, the Lincoln administration centralized control of the war effort despite the northern governors’ important role in raising and outfitting troops.²

Like Hesseltine, Harris is interested in Lincoln’s skill in handling the diverse political interests of the border states and what it reveals of federal-state relations during the war. Unlike Hesseltine’s northern governors, who were often Republicans, Lincoln dealt with border state politicians who frequently were slaveowners and protective of southern rights. Harris’s focus is unique. His is the only work I know of that examines all of the slaveholding Union states for patterns in their experiences during the Civil War.

Many aspects of Harris’s story are well known. Maryland’s location abutting the national capital made its adherence to the Union truly a matter of national security. Northern troops had to pass through the state to reach the capital, but a riot in Baltimore immediately after the war’s outbreak temporarily blocked their movement. Lincoln’s critics condemn his suspension of the writ of habeas corpus in Maryland and intimidation of state legislators, but Harris balances this “ominous price for civil liberties” (67) against the administration’s desperate need to control the state. Kentuckians thought they could declare their state neutral. Maryland tried that also, but respecting Kentucky’s strategic location, Lincoln indulged the Kentuckians in a delusion that was never allowed to take root in Maryland. In the fall of 1861, however, Confederate troops moved into the state, ending the pretense of neutrality. At the outset of the war, Missouri Governor Claiborne Fox Jackson favored the South, though a state convention sided with the Union, creating a provisional state government when the governor fled to the Confederacy. At Wilson’s Creek, Missouri, federal forces lost a battle just two weeks after the Union defeat at First Bull Run in Virginia. Missouri quickly descended into a vicious guerrilla war. All of the border states, except Delaware, were invaded by Confederate forces during the war.

Ironically, although Lincoln was born in Kentucky and raised so close to it—in southern Indiana—that he can be said to be a son of the border states, even Unionists in the border South did not trust him. Harris recounts Lincoln’s distress during his 1858 senatorial race in Illinois to find that John J. Crittenden, heir to Henry Clay’s mantle as the leader of the Kentucky Whigs, favored his opponent Democrat Stephen A. Douglas and lent his prestige to impede Lincoln’s election. Lincoln won none of the border slaveholding states in the 1860 election, and only Missouri and Maryland in 1864. In that election, opponents of the Lincoln administration in several of the border states complained that the presence of troops to maintain order interfered with voters’ choice at the ballot box.
Federal authorities in the border states faced the same problem that outsiders confront in many wars: How to tell who your enemies are. Who is a villager and who is Viet Cong? Who is merely a shepherd caught in the wrong place at the wrong time and who is Al Qaeda? Union military authorities in particular might not know that a man identified as a Confederate sympathizer was merely the victim of overzealous Unionists or had earlier earned the enmity of someone trusted by Union authorities. Military commanders were apt to be suspicious. The reader sympathizes with their dilemmas, for many a border state man walked a fine line between supporting the Union and condemning the Lincoln administration. Border state residents felt that, as American citizens, they had the right to speak out against the Republicans for their violations of civil liberties, failure to win the war, and advocacy of black rights. But their often overheated rhetoric excited suspicions. By focusing on the border states, Harris brings home just how much reason federal authorities had for distrust, particularly in the early days of the war. Simon Bolivar Buckner, who as a Confederate brigadier general surrendered Fort Donelson to Ulysses Grant in February 1862, was commander of Kentucky’s State Guard when the war began. He took many of his troops with him when he defected to the Confederacy. Governor Jackson of Missouri not only initially refused Lincoln’s call for troops but later joined the Confederacy. Governor Beriah Magoffin of Kentucky refused the request just as angrily, calling its intent to subdue “sister Southern states” “wicked” (39). Maryland and Delaware’s governors also demurred. But only Jackson ultimately betrayed the Union. How was the Lincoln administration to know a Jackson from a Magoffin? Of course, Lincoln could not until each individual showed his true colors.

Harris also touches, of course, on the familiar theme of divided families. Stephen Berry has written a rollicking account of Lincoln’s in-laws, the Todds, whose men all served in the Confederacy. Amy Murrell Taylor’s The Divided Family in Civil War America is the best overview of the Civil War as a “brothers war.” As she shows, it was also a father/son or even brother/sister war. Harris too has many divided families. John J. Crittenden had sons in the Confederate military. Upon the urging of an informant, General Nathaniel P. Banks arrested a Baltimore police commissioner, Charles Howard. Although

there were those prepared to insist that Howard was a Unionist, it
did not help Howard that he had three sons in the Confederate army
and another who was a militant southern rights newspaper editor.

In addition to the issues of loyalty, Harris develops the movement
toward emancipation in great depth. As is well known, Lincoln coun-
termanded too-hasty emancipation orders by his generals, including
John C. Frémont’s confiscation of rebel slaves in Missouri. Instead, the
president tried to persuade the border states to accept compensated
emancipation. They refused. Lincoln tried first with Delaware, which
had fewer than two thousand slaves in 1860, but the state legislature
rejected Lincoln’s proposal. Even after Congress passed a compensated
emancipation plan and Lincoln encouraged the possibility of coloniza-
tion of the freedmen, the border states rejected the idea. Harris notes
that Lincoln could persuade everyone in the North of the benefits of
compensated emancipation except the border states that held the slaves.
Even after the Emancipation Proclamation, which did not apply to
loyal slave states, it was only with great effort that Marylanders and
Missourians could be made to see the handwriting on the wall and
emancipate their slaves. Residents of Kentucky and Delaware never
saw it. Those states refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, and
emancipation was forced upon them when it became part of the Con-
stitution. Lincoln’s steady insistence on emancipation not only reveals
his commitment to human freedom, says Harris, but also his prag-
matic belief that emancipation would shorten the war by disabusing
Confederates of their belief that the border states would join them in
a slaveowning Confederacy.

Similarly, Lincoln moved cautiously on the issue of black troops
because of border state hostility to the idea. Harris acknowledges that
black men from the border states played a crucial part in the Union war
effort. Slaves in the border states took advantage of the war’s disrup-
tion to seek their freedom. But whites in those states did not accept the
need to use African American desire for freedom to save the Union.
Kentucky Senator Garret Davis argued that a Union that could not be
saved by white men alone could not be saved at all. While all the border
states opposed recruiting black troops, fearing their laborers would
prefer the army to slavery, Kentucky made a failed attempt to nullify
federal recruitment in the state. Ultimately, 57 percent of Kentucky’s
military age black men served in the Union army, a higher percentage
than any other state.

As befits an author of his caliber, Harris writes clearly. He faces the
difficult organizational task of telling the stories of different states with
intersecting themes over the course of the Civil War. He generally
handles this well, although there is some repetition. While Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland receive treatment in individual chapters, tiny Delaware’s story is blended into the larger narrative. Because the loyalty of the border states was most in doubt at the outbreak of the war, Harris spends more time on 1861 than do most Civil War books eager to move on to the major battles. In fact, more discussion of the impact of battles, especially that of Antietam, on the border states would have been welcome. Although Robert E. Lee invaded Maryland in part to liberate it from Lincoln’s despotism, Harris does not discuss how Marylanders responded or how the invasion affected their adherence to the Union. *Lincoln and the Border States* ends rather abruptly. A concluding chapter to sum up Harris’s conclusions and perhaps hint at the post-Civil War period would have been useful. Missouri continued its internecine conflict in both politics and violence—as Harris mentions, outlaw Jesse James got his start as a Civil War guerrilla—into the Reconstruction period. Delaware, despite its small African American population, concocted an ingenious legal method for disfranchising African Americans that worked just as effectively as violence did in the Deep South. Maryland enacted restrictive measures to keep former southern sympathizers and Confederates from voting but abandoned them after a few years. Harris notes the popular saying that Kentucky was a Union state during the war and became a Confederate state afterwards. Tony Horwitz’s classic look at Confederate memory in the modern United States has a chapter on Kentucky, the only non-Confederate state profiled, in which none of the locals seem to realize their state never left the Union. The border states’ liminal status between Union and Confederacy did not end with the Civil War.

Harris has written a very fine book, fully worthy of its eminent award. It is narrative history writing at its best, advancing its argument clearly and fully. Once again, Harris has found the perfect balance between adding to our scholarly knowledge and giving us an enjoyable read.