Review

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Is there really anything new to say about Abraham Lincoln? However one may feel about that question in light of all the literature that has appeared and continues to appear on the sixteenth president—the most substantial (in weight and thoroughness, if nothing else!) recent entry being Michael Burlingame’s monumental two-volume study *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*—it is not difficult to make a case for short monographic studies that retell the Lincoln story and particular aspects of it in ways that are accessible to a broad readership. Southern Illinois University Press has provided such studies with its new Concise Lincoln Library series, of which this admirably constructed volume is a part.

Of course, in light of Burlingame’s long career researching and writing on Lincoln, it is by no means an exaggeration to say that anything he has to say about the Great Emancipator is worthy of attention. In *Lincoln and the Civil War*, he provides an efficient and satisfyingly thorough account of Lincoln’s presidency and his ultimately successful effort to lead the North to victory. It is a first-rate work that general readers and those new to the subject will find of considerable value and interest, while serious students of Lincoln and the war will find it a useful tool for refreshing their knowledge of both.

While Lincoln’s personal story is a captivating and important one, it was, of course, the Civil War that makes him such a pivotal and compelling figure in American history. Moreover, Lincoln’s leadership of the Union war effort often has been cited as a model for wartime presidents to follow. Perhaps the best known and most important works in the long line of studies that have advanced the legend of Lincoln’s leadership as commander-in-chief are T. Harry Williams’s *Lincoln and his Generals* and Kenneth P. Williams’s multi-volume work,


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Carrying and developing a line of thought that was already well-established in Civil War studies by the time they published those works and writing in an era where the virtues of a vigorous wartime president seemed particularly worthy of documentation, Williams and Williams provided compelling portraits of Lincoln as a great war leader. Lincoln was, they argued, not just an effective political leader but a far-sighted, natural military strategist as well, who, through common sense and force of intellect, developed a degree of military acumen that put to shame the sorry series of generals that fate burdened him with. Even Ulysses S. Grant, whose many virtues included his recognition of Lincoln’s wisdom and willingness to accept his guidance, paled in comparison. Despite significant questions raised by students of the war about certain aspects of Lincoln’s wartime leadership (for instance, in recent works revisiting the military careers of Grant and George B. McClellan), the image of Lincoln’s wartime leadership as magnificently wise and benevolent remains the dominant one in both the popular mind and scholarship. Nearly all recent studies of Lincoln’s wartime leadership, including Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals*, James M. McPherson’s *Tried By War*, and Eric Foner’s *Fiery Trial*, have followed.

Burlingame’s *Lincoln and the Civil War* fits comfortably into that tradition. Burlingame opens by arguing that, despite all the advantages the North possessed, the Union cause was the underdog in the Civil War, with Union victory made possible by Lincoln’s leadership. To be sure, as Burlingame acknowledges by citing the words and works of such previous scholars as David M. Potter and James G. Randall, these are hardly original arguments. That Lincoln was able to provide the Northern war effort with the leadership it needed, Burlingame contends, was a consequence of a profound maturation that he experienced during the 1850s, which instilled in him the character traits necessary to do this.

Burlingame is clearly an admirer of Lincoln and, if there was a flaw in Lincoln’s leadership during the war or he made a wrong move


of any real significance in dealing with the challenge defeating the Confederacy posed, it is difficult to find mention of it here. (There is, though, some rather curious criticism of the language in the April 1861 proclamation calling for troops, with Burlingame suggesting that the Upper South might not have seceded had Lincoln just pledged that the troops would be used solely for defensive purposes. Given the circumstances, however, it is hard to see how anyone in that situation could have given such assurances or believed they would have been taken seriously.)

What of those who disagreed with Lincoln’s conduct of the war? If there were politicians or generals other than Grant who were on balance anything other than a burden to the Northern war effort, they are few and far between here. To be sure, in such a short book it would have been difficult to examine all of the complexities of mid-nineteenth century warfare and the military conduct of Civil War to provide a truly full and balanced assessment of the conduct of Lincoln’s generals. Yet it is not impossible, as Brooks D. Simpson notably demonstrated a decade ago in his even shorter, yet impressively thoughtful and too-often-overlooked Abraham Lincoln, the Gettysburg Campaign, and the War in the East.5

Still, in presenting an admiring portrait of Lincoln’s handling of the challenges and crises that he confronted as the man in charge of the Union war effort, Burlingame is at no time unreasonable in doing so. After all, under Lincoln’s leadership the North did overcome a not-inconsiderable set of obstacles to win the war and kill the institution of slavery, making it eminently easier to find more to admire than criticize in Lincoln’s life and career—though that has not precluded the emergence of a band of (largely) neo-Confederate, right-wing cranks who have argued otherwise.6 Indeed, that Lincoln was a figure worthy of admiration is without doubt a major reason why there is such a massive body of scholarship on the man. This impressive book and the series of which it is a part are worthy additions to it.

6. The most prominent writer in this school recently has been Thomas J. DiLorenzo, author of The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War (Roseville, Calif.: Prima Publishing, 2002) and Lincoln Unmasked: What You’re Not Supposed to Know About Dishonest Abe (New York: Crown Forum, 2006). The latter work was characterized by one reviewer as “like a monkey throwing feces in a zoo.” Review by John Deppen in Civil War News (January 2009).