Review Essay

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Gifted, young, and hailing from a once-great political family soon to fade from any significant presence on the national stage, Henry Adams acted as his father’s secretary over the secession winter, that awful interval between Abraham Lincoln’s election as president on November 6, 1860, and his inauguration the following March. Henry’s father, Charles Francis Adams, led the charge in Congress along with William H. Seward to blunt the secession movement and retain the waiving Border States through legislation designed to placate an aroused South. The elder Adams was later savagely critical of president-elect Lincoln for doing nothing to further his efforts that gloomy winter, compounding the mistake with a series of ill-chosen remarks on the presidential train trip to Washington, D.C., in February, comments that Adams felt undercut the compromisers.

Henry offered his opinion in an article written in the wake of these portentous events and not published until the early twentieth century. He described the compromisers’ philosophy as “to prevent a separation in order to keep the slave power more effectually under control, until its power for harm should be gradually exhausted, and, its whole fabric gently and peacefully sapped away.” Presumably, this placid draining away of the self-righteous fury that animated the secession movement would be induced by admitting New Mexico under the failed policy of popular sovereignty, as Charles Francis Adams proposed, or by extending the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific coast, as John J. Crittenden had offered.

William H. Seward, the cagey New York senator, emerged as the hero in Henry’s after-action account. Seward was “virtually the ruler

of the country” and possessed “cool wisdom” and “philosophical self-control,” compliments that came easily to Henry given Seward’s admiration for the Adams family legacy, an affinity that prompted Seward to insist on appointing Charles Francis as minister to Great Britain.\(^3\) Un fortunately, according to Henry, Lincoln did nothing to aid his father and Seward, remaining silent in Springfield, which permitted “doubtful rumors” that undercut the compromisers.\(^4\) In the end, Lincoln’s refusal to appoint a leading politician from Maryland or Virginia to the cabinet doomed the Seward-Adams venture, Henry argued, which was most unfortunate, because if Seward had continued, he would have abandoned both of the vulnerable federal forts—Sumter and Pickens—and thereby fueled a resurgence of pro-Union sentiment that would have destroyed the secession movement without recourse to war.\(^5\)

Hence Adams believed that the war might have been prevented and that Lincoln failed his first and perhaps most important test of leadership when he neither endorsed nor otherwise materially assisted compromise that secession winter. Such criticism of Lincoln’s actions has found a ready echo in the historiography of the Civil War in the succeeding 150 years. As Daniel Crofts noted, a commonplace argument among Southerners was that Lincoln had artfully maneuvered the South into opening hostilities, that he had always intended to end slavery, even through sanguinary war if necessary.\(^6\) In the mythology of the Lost Cause, a secret and malicious design prompted Lincoln to undermine compromise efforts. After the horrific casualties of the First World War and the subsequent work in the 1930s of the Nye Committee—the Senate committee that blamed arms manufacturers for duping the United States into the Great War—many intellectuals considered all wars mere futile bloodbaths that no cause, however noble, could justify. James G. Randall echoed that argument in his seminal essay “The Blundering Generation,” published in 1940.\(^7\) Viewed in that intellectual and cultural environment, Lincoln’s unwillingness to surrender Republican principles, such as the party’s refusal to countenance the expansion of slavery to assuage Southern anger, seemed either positively bloody-minded or a blunder.

3. Henry Adams, 678.
4. Ibid., 682.
5. Ibid., 683–84.
Criticism of Lincoln’s actions during the run-up to the inauguration was reflected in David Potter’s fine 1942 book, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, and was part of a broader and more critical trend in Lincoln studies that began with Albert Beveridge’s biography, published in 1928. After World War Two, the triumphalism that reigned in the nation that had defeated Nazism led to works by Kenneth Stampp, among others, that defended Lincoln’s resistance to concessions; veterans of the late war thought there were “good” wars and that entering one, wittingly or unwittingly, was not necessarily proof of blundering or obtuseness or imbecility.8

While recent scholarship has begun to stress James Buchanan’s culpability in the dismemberment of the Union and the advent of war (Jean Baker’s short biography of Buchanan, for example), Lincoln’s actions in the secession winter remain a subject of much scholarship and debate.9 Harold Holzer, author of outstanding studies of Lincoln’s Cooper Union speech and of the Lincoln image, has produced an exhaustive study of Lincoln’s actions that terrible winter of 1860–61. Holzer, in his introduction, promises “a week-by-week exploration of Lincoln’s own evolving thoughts” as he awaited the inauguration in March (6). Indeed, Holzer rivals reference works such as *Lincoln Day-by-Day* in his attention to detail and comprehensive accounting of Lincoln’s activities. Although such detail can be stifling at times, all the sifting of source chaff can yield anecdotal wheat; folksy anecdotes are one of the book’s strengths, such as an account of Lincoln playfully tossing a little boy in the air in Chicago after the lad shouted “Hurray for Uncle Abe!” (101)

The book opens with a lovely description of Lincoln in Springfield on the eve of the presidential election, in his stovepipe hat greeting supporters, voting after carefully removing his own electors from the ballot, and waiting pensively for news of his election or defeat. Holzer even provides an explication of how a person voted in 1860, complete with a photograph of an actual ballot.

And what of criticism that Lincoln, ensconced in the Springfield bubble, never understood the severity of the crisis, placed excessive faith in the rejuvenatory powers of Southern Unionism, and should have done more to aid compromise efforts? Holzer supports Lincoln’s decision to remain publicly silent; as president-elect, he had no constitutional power, and a wrong move might have upset the meeting of presidential electors in February that would formalize his election. However,

8. Crofts, xi.
Holzer’s account is of a president-elect who is anything but passive or ignorant of the secession movement. Lincoln embraced his public role and projected confidence to all who saw him. He never looked or acted like a man beset or exhausted, unlike the desiccated incumbent James Buchanan. Further, behind the scenes, Lincoln was a veritable beehive of activity: he anonymously wrote editorials for Springfield newspapers, wrote large portions of a speech Lyman Trumbull gave at a Republican victory celebration in November, and actively embraced the time-consuming process of cabinet selection and staffing the federal government. Most notably, Holzer argues that Lincoln “forcefully interjected himself into the congressional debate,” a decidedly un-Whiggish act, to personally derail any Republican compromise legislation that permitted the extension of slavery (158). Lincoln opposed extending the old Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific coast or reviving the discredited doctrine of popular sovereignty. The president-elect was willing to reaffirm federal enforcement of the much-loathed Fugitive Slave Act and endorse legislation repealing state personal liberty laws, so Lincoln did offer concessions to the South. The problem was, as Lincoln had pensively noted in his Cooper Union address earlier in the year, the South had ceased to listen.

Holzer’s detailed account should put to rest any claims of unconscionable inactivity on Lincoln’s part as the country disintegrated. Quite the contrary, the president-elect was so active that he excited the resentment of appeasers like Adams and Seward whose legislative concessions to the South were undercut by Lincoln’s opposition. Taking on Henry and Charles Francis Adams directly, as well as those who followed them, Holzer notes that the Adamses were utterly mistaken: What they perceived as the president-elect’s silence “in fact masked Lincoln’s adroit behind-the-scenes maneuvering to scotch compromises that would extend slavery” (193). Holzer does concede that Lincoln “believed longer—and more strongly—than most Republicans” that secession advocates were a lunatic fringe and that the Southern majority was bound to return to the Union (95).

As the preceding suggests, Holzer does criticize Lincoln when he believes that criticism is merited. He argues that Lincoln delivered clumsy and contradictory remarks on the train journey to the national capital in February 1861. Specifically, Holzer contends that Lincoln was too belligerent when, at Indianapolis, he questioned the right of secession and affirmed the federal government’s prerogative to retain its property. Lincoln compounded the error at the Ohio state capital when he blithely assured the audience that there was noth-
ing to worry about, that the crisis was fictive. Holzer concludes that Lincoln was guilty of “meandering and conflicting remarks,” though his take on the totality of Lincoln’s train tour is much more positive (338). In addition, Holzer rightfully condemns Lincoln’s maladroit handling of Simon Cameron’s appointment, first offering the notoriously corrupt Pennsylvanian a cabinet post, then rescinding the offer; just as his political mentor Henry Clay did in the election campaign of 1844, Lincoln wrote too many letters during his on-again, off-again courtship of Cameron.

In one of the best treatments of the episode, Holzer correctly recognizes what a political disaster Lincoln’s ignominious clandestine entry into Washington, D.C., was via the night train in a crude disguise, an act that opened him to charges of cowardice at the very moment he desperately needed to personify courage and resolve. Angered at being left behind and not allowed to accompany the president-elect, the New York Times correspondent filed a fraudulent report of Lincoln exiting the train in a Scotch hat and cloak, creating an unflattering myth of Lincoln’s attire that became fodder for newspaper images. But the truth was just as damning, and Lincoln quickly realized how disappointing his entrance on the national stage had been. Holzer notes that Lincoln restored his public face through a “feverish” and “highly visible” schedule, meanwhile embracing a new set of Washington-based advisors, leaving his old Illinois political cronies figuratively and literally (420). Holzer concludes that Lincoln’s concerns for his safety were well founded given the subsequent attack on the Sixth Massachusetts Infantry as it marched near the train depot in Baltimore in mid-April.

While there is much to recommend this book, a reviewer has a duty to quibble with the author. First, Holzer is occasionally guilty of conclusions that seem overblown, as when he suggests that Lincoln’s decision to grow a beard after the election was a gambit to change the national conversation from whether the president-elect should give a concession-laden speech to mollify the South to the new phenomenon of Lincoln’s own bewhiskered face. Did anyone beyond Grace Bedell really give a damn about Lincoln’s pending beard amidst fears of secession and civil war? Holzer also at times employs sources that need to be handled carefully, if used at all. For example, Holzer relies on David Rankin Barbee to condemn William Wood, the man responsible for organizing Lincoln’s often disorganized train trip in February 1861. Yet Barbee was a boorish Lincoln critic who published in Tyler’s Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine, a
journal published by Lincoln hater Lyon Gardiner Tyler and regularly filled with scurrilous anti-Lincoln articles. Should Barbee be relied upon for anything beyond the attitudes of an unreconstructed Southerner in the Depression era? And again, Holzer leans heavily on New York Herald correspondent Henry Villard, whom he describes as “the most astute of all the observers of Lincoln during that bitter secession winter” (367). Villard often filed acerbic pieces on Lincoln, reports that reflected his politics and prejudices. Villard had worked as a hack for the Stephen A. Douglas campaign in 1858 and later left journalism for a career in the railroad industry that was notable for his shady promotion of business schemes. He seems partisan and unprincipled. This is not to suggest that Lincoln critics have no role in a Lincoln study, rather that a historian must note their biases and use them with care and caution.

Still in all, this is a fine study and a potent antidote to the often bitter criticism of Lincoln’s conduct as he waited to take the oath of office, attacks personified in then young Henry Adams’s essay. Holzer has refuted young Henry, offering a portrait of a confident president-elect vigorously influencing events despite his lack of constitutional authority and vow of public silence. From the time of his election it is clear that Lincoln, despite occasional missteps, was intellectually engaged and up to the very real challenges that secession presented.

There are two true villains in the secession winter, and Lincoln is neither. First, the secession movement which, as Charles Dew has conclusively shown, was principally animated by a desire to preserve slavery and white supremacy—a morally abhorrent slaveocracy—and chose Lincoln’s election as a grievance around which to rally race-conscious Southern whites. Second, James Buchanan, whose combination of pro-Southern sympathies and feckless leadership led him to commit numerous stupidities and misjudgments as the
country came apart, as when he provided a rationale for secession in his December 1860 message to Congress, this at a time when the nation looked to him for a Jacksonian rebuke to the fire-eating seceders. Buchanan left Lincoln a country torn asunder, a national government and capital surrounded, and an ongoing crisis, Fort Sumter, simmering at a low intensity and apt to boil over into war at any moment. Historians searching for someone to blame for the chaos and despair of the winter of 1860–61 might look to those culprits rather than to Abraham Lincoln.