Review

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Lincoln in Washington City is of interest to many more people than is Lincoln in Illinois. Yet the number of books about Washington itself in Lincoln’s time is small. Notable among them are Margaret Leech’s old nugget *Reveille in Washington* (1941), nicely written but without notes, focusing on the upper echelons during the Civil War. Ernest Furgerson’s much stronger *Freedom Rising* (2004) has notes but a jump-cutting style made for drama. Constance McLaughlin Green’s architectural and social history *Washington* (2 vols., 1962), is top-notch but covers all of 1800 to 1950. For books that put the key figures at center stage and capture the voices in and around the Executive Mansion, James B. Conroy’s *Lincoln’s White House* (co-winner of the Lincoln Prize in 2016) and Burt Solomon’s *The Murder of Willie Lincoln* (2016, though fiction) will not soon be surpassed.

Kenneth Winkle’s analysis of the city’s shifting demographics, military beehive, and overwhelmed services—mostly a result of Lincoln’s policies—provides a highly useful wider view. If Lincoln or his family and cohorts occasionally disappear from the narrative for many pages at a time, the salutary implication is that no president of a republic is an island, despite what much Lincolnolatry tries to show. The more explicit statement is that the revolution of Civil War changed how and where huge numbers of people lived.

One measure made by some readers and reviewers is to count the pages in a book about Lincoln devoted to the prepresidential years as against those about the presidential years. Better books, some have said, divide the two dramas about evenly. Professor Winkle’s book need not do so: he devotes sixty-four pages to the congressional years, with needful background, and 343 pages to what may be considered the greatest national drama yet. His thesis, that “Washington was a microcosm of the Civil War” (xv) is sensible and well borne out. That uneasy condition did not begin, though, in 1861. In those congressional years for the Whig from Illinois’s seventh district, an astonishing
series of crimes and fight-backs was occurring. Lincoln’s residence in what was dubbed “Abolition House” with Joshua Giddings and other radicals may be symbolically heroic, but when two days after Lincoln’s “spot resolution” speech in 1848 a free black waiter at the house, Henry Wilson, was snatched from its doorway (35), a more palpable and premonitory event had occurred. In the same years, a ship known as the Pearl, which ought to be as well known as the Amistad, leads Winkle to hold that the Pearl, “along with its bitter reverberations in Congress and its legacy of heightened discrimination against African Americans, may well have provoked a change in Lincoln’s personal perspective on how best to undermine slavery” (46).

The author’s points are not drilled thematically; they emerge by accretion. The twenty chapter titles are evocative, “‘I Was Slow to Adopt the Strong Measures’: Loyalty and Disloyalty,” for one. Winkle makes regular use of new scholarship on details (by Kate Masur on Washington’s streetcar laws, and Michael Conlin on lectures at the Smithsonian, for example) and, perhaps just as important, of old sources. He read deeply in the several local newspapers, in the semiprofessional Records of the Columbia Historical Society, and in the redoubtable Philadelphia Christian Recorder, which covered much about African American and missionary life. From the National Archives, the General Accounting Office records bear excellent evidence of weekly and monthly shifts of the emancipated. Why go into so much recent research in urban health statistics, food supply, laundry, wages, engineering, and, the sine qua non of a war zone, defense—or should we say “all forms of defense”? Because every one of those features of life fell under the army’s or militia’s wings now and again, particularly when the city wrestled with an influx of variously able and sickly refugees from plantations and towns. The 1860 census showed that about 20 percent of the city’s seventy-five thousand residents were African American, most of them free. By April 1862 all were in effect free, though the status of the hundreds or thousands arriving each week actuated much of the famous high-level political conversation, which is also well covered here. Gradually, some became part of the defenses. It was no coincidence that contrabands appeared in the city as tandem hordes with wounded Union soldiers, for warfare smashes through physical and psychological gates, and all involved got splintered.

Contextualizing an array of newspaper reports, unpublished documents, published diaries, and thick new books is not easy, but Winkle etches a clear, full portrait of a city under immense strain. Though providing copious data, he does not dwell in patterns of astonishment.
Of the city’s 127 streets, only one was paved as of 1860, Pennsylvania Avenue (121–22). In a three-mile radius from the Executive Mansion, every military encampment was connected to the War Department by telegraph (165–66). The Baltimore and Ohio Rail Road depot received thirty-three hundred bales of hay each day, and by late 1862 Lincoln banned the export of horses as well as hay from the city, as they were essential to the war effort (171–72). The metropolitan police made seventy thousand arrests during the war (191), denoting dangers at every corner from soldiers, spies, drunks, and vagabonds. Critics then and now, if inclined, could take some of these data to label the Lincoln administration a self-serving hegemon. Others might survey the history of warfare and readily find that to lose the capital is to lose the war—Berlin, Paris, Rome, Richmond.

Mary and the boys, the cabinet, and the secretaries all get covered. It is a nice point to make that in Philadelphia upon being informed of the Baltimore plot, William Seward’s son Frederick went to Robert Lincoln, of all people, to arrange for the first meeting between the fathers who would lead the administration (100). Winkle found five sources for four goodwill trips to hospitals by Mary Lincoln (376). Because eminent men known to Lincoln, like E. E. Ellsworth, E. D. Baker, and J. S. Wadsworth, were killed in war, their friends now “set higher standards for treatment” of the dead. As Lincoln said to John Nicolay, “no man has given himself up to the war with such self-sacrificing patriotism as Gen’l Wadsworth” (364). Winkle’s book appeared before at least two useful additions to the literature. Robert O’Harrow’s study of General Montgomery Meigs (2016), who helped bring water to town by aqueduct, then defended it, and who oversaw the completion of the U.S. Capitol dome by December 1863, is the first to use the recently decoded shorthand diary of this unheralded hero of the war. Walter Stahr’s sturdy Stanton (2017) could be read in parallel with Winkle’s and others’ works to grasp what that other fortress of a man did to save the Union.

This reader spotted extremely few miscues, such as confusion between Robert Owen and his son Robert Dale Owen (351), and the statement that Mary Dines, an escapee from Maryland, was the “only nurse” for the dying Willie Lincoln, for both Senator and Mrs. Browning, experienced parents, also sat for hours with Willie, even as Winkle notes that Rebecca Pomroy appeared the next day to nurse Tad (359). Stating that William P. Wood, warden of the Old Capitol Prison, had “served with Lincoln on the legal team” in the Manny reaper case in 1858 (should be 1855) might somehow be true, but Wood’s name does not appear in the record (199).
These points are insubstantial and evidence no bias. The fairness with which rebel, Union, white, black, poor, rich, native, and foreign peoples are discussed is exemplary. Sincere disagreement among African American leaders, including clergy, on the merits of colonization, is tellingly evinced. So too the conflicting authority between, say, Ward Hill Lamon as marshal of the District of Columbia, still upholding the Fugitive Slave Act in 1862, and the military but especially the political direction of the times, is in itself a cross-section of divided understanding, and of what all Americans should know: that a nation-in-formation, not a nation with definite and translucent laws from day one, papered Lincoln’s desk every morning. Possibly less important to the nation than to the city itself is that those seventy thousand arrests “ended the city’s storied tradition of spontaneous and organized mob actions” (407). Here George McClellan’s Provost Guard gets some credit, but Lincolnolaters could be forgiven for perceiving the realization of Lincoln’s 1838 desideratum that “reverence for the laws” become the “political religion” of the land. Winkle states that Congress “stubbornly underfunded” the police, street repair, sanitation efforts, and housing for forty thousand refugees at peak (409).

Is it coincidence that Winkle chose a title that borrows the name of a leading Southern military academy? The Citadel, still whirring today as a college in Charleston, South Carolina, forged many of the leading rebels of 1861–65. Perhaps it was not a coincidence. After wobbling in April, May, and July 1861, and hearing thunder for two days in July 1864, Lincoln’s “citadel” held back the onslaught, political and military, to become an as yet untouched seat of global power.