Review Essay

WARD M. McAFEE


By the summer of 1864, Abraham Lincoln had apparently found a general who could bring the Civil War to a successful conclusion. However, high hopes soon turned into despair. Grant’s strategy of engaging Lee in wholesale slaughter had the potential of making the war intolerable immediately before a presidential election. Unlike Jefferson Davis, who enjoyed a six-year term under the Confederate constitution, Lincoln had to stand for reelection in 1864, and his chances at that critical moment were doubtful. In late August, Lincoln concluded that the Democratic Party, calling for a negotiated settlement with the Confederacy, would carry the day in November. That point, truly Lincoln’s darkest hour, is where William C. Harris begins his book.

Tempted to abandon emancipation in one last desperate attempt to save the Union, Lincoln’s characteristic pragmatism was pushed to the brink of opportunism. But he stepped back, resolving to lose the election rather than forfeit emancipation. Harris highlights that moment as defining the Lincoln presidency as firmly grounded upon moral principle (16). Subsequently, the mood in the North changed radically with Sherman’s taking of Atlanta in early September. Lincoln was reelected, and after that the ultimate success of the Union cause was clear. By selecting the last nine months of Lincoln’s life for his study, Harris takes the president from the brink of ruin to his apotheosis as the greatest American statesman. It is a familiar portrait, filled with contrasting dark hues and brilliant highlights.

For some, a presidency characterized by moral principle conjures up an image of a charismatic leader carrying his countrymen forward by force of personal will. Harris reminds his readers that Lincoln did not impress his contemporaries that way. Radicals in his own party commonly regarded the president as lacking in nerve and decisiveness. Senator Charles Sumner wrote that “Lincoln had ‘no instinct or
inspiration' for leadership” (19). But in the end, the Radicals had no other choice, unless they wanted (by their desertion of Lincoln) to ensure the election of Democratic Party nominee George B. McClellan, who promised that if elected he would revoke the Emancipation Proclamation (21).

Most of the time, Harris reveals Lincoln to be a crafty democratic leader reviled as too cautious and lacking in moral courage. Lincoln seemed to know instinctively the limits of democratic leadership and how a president with an idealistic vision and persistence could best achieve results in a political environment that by its very nature was out of control. Too many commentators on Lincoln’s performance as president unconsciously accept his demigod status in American folklore and express shock and disappointment when recalling that he did not “leap tall buildings at a single bound.” By contrast, Harris describes and analyzes a man who was not superhuman and achieved great deeds precisely because of his ability to lead mortals habitually pulling in contrary directions.

If Lincoln’s reelection in 1864 began the process of elevating his status, his assassination the following April permanently hardened a once-fluid sense of high appreciation into immortal national iconography. As for Lincoln, he cared only for carrying his agenda forward in an ever-changing democratic process. His reelection meant that he had finally achieved a heightened ability to influence the course of events. Early in the war, he was well aware that winning the presidency with slightly less than 40 percent of the popular vote limited his effectiveness. He described himself as a “minority president,” whereas some of his underachieving generals enjoyed far more popularity. Following his reelection, many who had earlier belittled his leadership looked to Lincoln for cues as to where they should go. Lincoln was the master of presidential patronage—which Harris rightly terms “the lifeblood of nineteenth-century politics”—and his electoral victory translated into enormous political power over reconstruction of the Southern states (6, 123–24).

There were reasons for doubting whether Lincoln was up to the challenges that awaited him in his second term. His political associates agreed that the president conducted his administration without any apparent system. He allowed subordinates to run their own departments with minimal interference. He favored an open-door policy, which tended to exhaust him but kept him in touch with the pulse of democratic life. He generally avoided calling special cabinet meetings, preferring to act one-on-one with a limited number of associates (66). And while gregarious, regularly sharing stories and
jokes in uproarious laughter, Lincoln was an intensely private man who kept his own counsel (68). Not even his closest friends knew the workings of his mind, a fact that leaves historians in the interesting quandary of whether to take his presidential actions and statements at face value.

Harris has written at length on Lincoln’s Reconstruction policy in his prize-winning With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union. In that work, he treats Lincoln’s Reconstruction policy at face value, which he does again in Lincoln’s Last Months (93–100). Lincoln appeared to offer the South a soft peace, something about which Radicals in Congress protested by passing the Wade-Davis Bill, which was rejected by the president. He relates that Lincoln desperately wanted the rebels to quit the fight and that his Reconstruction policy was guided toward this end, but he rejects speculation that this policy was intentionally designed as wartime propaganda. Harris regards his wartime policy as revealing his true expectations regarding what could achieve peace and justice in the post-war era: “By not imposing more than the minimum guarantees of loyalty and emancipation upon the South,” says Harris of Lincoln’s wartime plan of Reconstruction, “he hoped to secure an early restoration of the southern states to the Union.”

On the face of it, that’s what his policy looked like. It is revealed in “the facts.” Nevertheless, Lincoln’s Reconstruction policy had been fashioned within a general military strategy to bring the war to an end as rapidly as possible. The Wade-Davis Bill, having the potential to keep the South in a colonial status for a generation, did not suit that end and so was pocket-vetoed by the president. In the president’s statement explaining the veto, he explained that as long as the war continued he was not ready “to be inflexibly committed to any single plan of restoration.” It is unknown how Lincoln’s peacetime Reconstruction policy might have evolved. His ultimate pledge of “malice toward none, with charity for all” suggested both leniency toward the defeated white South and fairness toward emancipated blacks. Were these two purposes achievable with the state-centered processes that characterized Lincoln’s wartime Reconstruction policy? Probably not.

Professor Harris shows how Lincoln personally lobbied House Democrats to achieve the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment, yet he notes that Lincoln did not personally lobby congressional Republi-

cans to seat men elected from his presidentially reconstructed states. He left that job for others who lacked both his ability and exalted title (101, 127–28). Indeed, it was not in Lincoln’s political self-interest to see his own wartime Reconstruction policy completed, as he wanted to make sure that the defeated South had been reformed before possibly undermining his party’s control of Congress, which would be a by-product of seating Southern representatives and senators. This by itself suggests that his Reconstruction policy was intended as something only preparatory for a later, more mature result.

It cannot be disputed that Lincoln’s real purposes were not based on vengeance. He believed that both North and South were responsible for engrafting slavery onto American life (119). In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln revealed his idea that the bloody cosmic struggle was deserved punishment for a sinful nation, not merely a sinful section of that nation. Upon this dark presidential theology, he based his happy concluding remarks that his Reconstruction policy was devoted to malice toward none and charity for all.

Up to the end of his life, Lincoln wanted to reimburse the defeated South for the loss of slave property entailed in emancipation, believing that could bring about the white acceptance without which any Reconstruction policy would inevitably fail (120–21). He was willing to try almost anything. His policy was experimental by nature, suggesting that it was still in a process of evolution. As he stated in his last speech, he did not have any final blueprint for Reconstruction at war’s end. One of his favorite aphorisms was that one cannot plan how to cross a river until it is reached and its contours can be observed. At the end of his life, Lincoln was just approaching that unknown river. He stated that his Reconstruction policy up to that point might possibly prove to be a bad promise that is later better broken than kept. Near the end of that speech, he characterized the Reconstruction government that he had established in Louisiana as only an “egg,” not a fully matured “fowl.” The conservative New York World reported that the president did not present his Reconstruction policy in a manner to inspire confidence but rather “like a traveler in an unknown country without a map.”

The realities of post-war America would have severely challenged Lincoln’s presidential Reconstruction. He might have continued to advocate a simple restoration with negative consequences for black freedom, or he may have gravitated toward a more thoroughgoing Reconstruction. In the crafting of historical literature, facts rarely speak for themselves. Conjecture often shapes written history at least as

much as hard evidence. Before Eric McKitrick’s *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (1960), Lincoln’s and Johnson’s Reconstruction policies were commonly thought to be from the same conservative cloth. With McKitrick’s analysis came a new view, which four decades later Harris has done much to revise. Harris has led historians once again to view Lincoln as bound to a relatively fixed conservative Reconstruction policy, perhaps not as rigid as Andrew Johnson’s own constitutional stance but firmly state-centered nonetheless.

My own view of Lincoln’s policy of Reconstruction is based on the premise that “Honest Abe” had a streak of deceit in him, albeit always for a good cause. Harris is appreciative that Lincoln regularly masked his true intentions. Every skillful politician must have this ability. In recounting Lincoln’s negotiations with the Confederate commissioners at Hampton Roads, he writes: “Despite his well-deserved reputation for honesty, Lincoln occasionally stretched the truth when much was at stake.” Contemporaries did not regard him as dishonest when he engaged in what they termed “shrewd handling” of difficult situations (132). In fact, throughout his entire presidency “much was at stake” much of the time.

Lincoln had not been transparently “honest” as he moved toward emancipation. On the eve of issuing his famous decree freeing slaves, he had toyed with the naïve Horace Greeley who publicly chastised the president for not proclaiming an emancipation proclamation. In fact, Lincoln had already determined to act as Greeley demanded but was secretly keeping his new policy under wraps until he could reveal it after a military victory. On that occasion, Lincoln replied to Greeley in a most conservative way designed to maximize eventual white acceptance for emancipation. Later, Lincoln again engaged in “shrewd handling” of Greeley’s impulse to negotiate peace with Confederate agents in Canada during the hard summer of 1864. And in fashioning his Reconstruction policy after the war, Lincoln would have continued to exhibit this trait of effective presidential leadership. In the sense of having noble purposes, Lincoln was an honest man. His decision-making was neither ego-driven nor based on personal attachments. He was a calculating leader, rewarding or removing a conservative at one moment and a radical the next, taking into account how each action fit into the overall context of what he wanted to achieve. He was a master of his craft, which punishes politicians who are too self-revealing (78–80).

Lincoln managed emancipation in the same cautious style that later came to characterize his wartime Reconstruction policy. In late 1861 and the early months of 1862, Lincoln used the arts of persuasion, political influence, and presidential encouragement in an attempt to
get slaveholding border states to enact voluntarily a state-initiated emancipation, sweetened with the prospects of federal compensation. Lincoln played out that conservative approach until the summer of 1862, when he decided that it was bankrupt. Then, he moved closer to the Radicals and intervened with the full force of federal power, all the while couching his new radical behavior in conservative rhetoric designed to convert fence sitters.

Harris describes Lincoln’s emancipation policy as changing constitutional understandings: “Under the careful, step-by-step management of Abraham Lincoln, the Constitution had been changed to a document of freedom” (134). Might something similar have occurred in the management of his peacetime Reconstruction policy? On occasion, Lincoln shared with Charles Sumner the truth that they held the same vision regarding emancipation, telling the Massachusetts Radical that the only difference between them was a question of timing.3 Lincoln was a far shrewder and more dissimulating politician than Sumner, who took great pride in wearing his heart on his sleeve.

Harris imagines that had Lincoln lived, he and Sumner would have drifted farther apart on Reconstruction (134–35). It is a valid speculation. Sumner was given to envisioning publicly a post-war nation in which the defeated Southern states had no real existence as states. Lincoln could never have abided that result (214). However, valuing a traditional balance of state-federal relations, as Lincoln did, does not necessarily make him into a states-rights ideologue. From the very beginning of his presidency, when Lincoln denied the writ of habeas corpus in order to thwart the popular will of Maryland, he displayed no fastidious concern for states rights. Then again, in Kentucky he allowed a relatively free hand, anticipating that in that particular instance federal respect for local self-determination was eventually most likely to bear good fruit. A reading of Lincoln’s constitutional preferences within the context of his entire presidency indicates that he was a pragmatist, willing to range from left to right and back again as the situation required.4

Eric McKittrick’s Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction emphasizes that Lincoln held a much different constitutional understanding than did President Johnson, who came to fit the mold of a states-rights ideologue. McKittrick’s Lincoln lived by the standard that “the looseness of any and all plans had to be preserved with much care; all policy must be protected from rigidity.” Lincoln’s view of Reconstruction, McKit-

rick wrote, was characterized by “practical flexibility and theoretical vagueness” and set “an example not of precision but of indeterminacy.”  

It is reasonable to conjecture that had Lincoln lived he would have moved gradually toward federal solutions to Reconstruction, albeit without ever accepting Sumner’s constitutional extremes that reduced states to the status of counties. Harris disparages such speculation as “counterfactual history,” but he engages in it nonetheless. In truth, it cannot be avoided. A history of Lincoln’s last months must be written with assumptions about what he might have done had he lived into the post-war period.

Harris imagines that had Lincoln lived he would not have duplicated Johnson’s rigid direction of presidential reconstruction:

Faced with the suppression of black freedom, perhaps he would have grasped the reality of the situation for the former slaves. Rather than intervene with federal power, he might have used his formidable political influence to sustain Unionists in the South and to insist that they protect black freedom in their states, policies that his successor, Andrew Johnson, did not pursue. In this way, Lincoln might have prevented the early return of former Confederates to power and their enactment of anti-black laws, known as Black Codes, that, until an outraged Congress intervened in 1866–1867, restored a form of slavery.

Similar to the rest of the scholarly community, Harris is torn in not knowing. He believes that Lincoln would have resisted intervening in Reconstruction processes with federal power, but he cannot peer too far beyond the historical moment of Lincoln’s assassination with any confidence. He is the kind of careful historian who likes to focus as much as possible on what his historical subject actually did, rather than speculate about what he might have done as conditions changed. Unfortunately, an overly tight focus in this regard easily suggests that had Lincoln lived, the president would have not ventured far from his initial wartime Reconstruction policy. Indeed, this is the major conclusion drawn from his earlier work on the subject. And yet, Harris’s suggests that he is open to different scenarios.

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6. Harris’s concluding paragraph in *With Charity for All* proffers a scenario more radical than any given in *Lincoln’s Last Months*. In that earlier work, he has a post-war Lincoln possibly abandoning “his aversion to the use of federal power to insure a true and lasting Union settlement in the South.” Nevertheless, the strong suggestion left by both this earlier work and the book under review here is that a Lincoln living on into a second term would have worked mightily to continue his wartime policy of “self-reconstruction” and conservative “restoration.”
Harris acknowledges that Lincoln’s early conservative Reconstruction effort, more appropriately termed restoration, probably would have proven ineffective had he lived to pursue it. And he imagines that Lincoln would have adjusted by applying more personal influence to save a failing situation. But what if that had not worked? Then might he have redefined Radical insistence on federal intervention as the true conservative position necessary to guarantee a republican form of government in the Southern states as called for in the Constitution’s Article IV, Section 4? This is what the congressional leaders that instituted Military Reconstruction in 1867 essentially did. They did not base their Reconstruction policy on either Thaddeus Stevens’ “Conquered Provinces Theory” or Charles Sumner’s “State Suicide Theory,” but rather relied upon the Constitution’s Guarantee Clause, which had undergirded Lincoln’s own wartime Reconstruction policy. The Congress of 1867 did not hold the South in a colonial status for a generation but rather attempted to achieve justice in a one-to-three-year quickie makeover of Southern state governments. Near the end of Lincoln’s Last Months, Professor Harris agrees that later Radical Reconstruction was really not very radical at all: “Constitutional reconstruction proved remarkably mild.” It “did not produce a political or social revolution in the South” (233). When forced to by Southern obstructionism, the so-called Radical Republican Congress exercised the modicum of federal power that was necessary in any legitimate attempt to create a meaningful freedom for the black South. And even that was not sufficient for the end sought. I can imagine Lincoln following somewhat the same measured course.

Civil War historians should disagree on essential points in hopes of getting to deeper understandings of what “the facts” can only superficially reveal. This review of Harris’s handling of Reconstruction should not be taken as a complaint but rather as my own intellectual stirrings engendered by this excellent book. William C. Harris is a Civil War historian of the first rank. He makes his points carefully, based on sound research. He provides scholars with grist for such debates.

In a chapter entitled “Beyond the Battlefield,” concerning Lincoln’s handling of foreign relations and developments with Indian tribes, Harris shows a president keeping his attention tightly focused on the main prize—winning the Civil War. In this same chapter, he reveals Lincoln condoning what we can see today was a slippery slope toward the greedy speculation and corruption that came to characterize the Gilded Age. The president encouraged and facilitated Northern speculators trading with the enemy in cotton while the war continued. Lincoln rationalized this as helping to relieve cotton shortages while
at the same time bolstering Union finances (180). Harris notes that some have criticized Lincoln’s “poor judgment” in that matter (189). Recounting this sleazy side of Lincoln’s last months helps the reader recall that Lincoln’s “honesty” was not the sort that can easily be taught in Sunday school lessons. This president did not always play the game of politics with his hands in clear view and was willing to engage in multiple questionable activities that he saw as necessary for concluding the war successfully. He became America’s premier statesman only after becoming America’s premier politician.

This is a book that can be appreciated by both readers with little prior understanding of the issues and scholars alike. Professor Harris writes easily comprehended prose, demonstrating a skill that unfortunately is rare among academics. The continuing popularity of Civil War historical literature owes much to this thorough researcher and gifted writer.