Review Essay

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Few American presidents have attracted as much attention from historians as Abraham Lincoln. Despite a burgeoning historical literature on the sixteenth president, historians press on, continuing to explore new perspectives and new angles of interpretation for the nation’s most popular president. The recent works of Douglas L. Wilson, Allen C. Guelzo, Harry V. Jaffa, and Matthew Pinsker (to name just a few) provide evidence that the Lincoln theme, while played often, has not been played out. Though Gabor Boritt’s 1992 Lincoln the War President drew a number of scholars together to analyze Lincoln’s leadership during the Civil War, Geoffrey Perret’s monograph purports to be the first study that is exclusively devoted to Lincoln’s role as commander in chief. A writer of several biographies of presidents and generals, Perret seems an obvious candidate for such an undertaking.

The United States had fought two wars against foreign nations prior the Civil War, but only Abraham Lincoln, Perret maintains, seriously examined and explored the president’s constitutional powers as commander in chief. Inheriting a nation in the midst of a constitutional crisis, the militarily inexpert Lincoln stumbled and struggled throughout the early stages of the conflict, partly because he had few firm historical precedents to guide him, partly because of inexperience. Abraham Lincoln was an unlikely candidate to successfully lead


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the young republic through the most tumultuous event in American history. Part of the Illinois Republican’s struggle, Perret observes, was that the Constitution says little about the specific powers of the president as commander in chief. To further complicate matters, the American republic had created the position of general-in-chief, but “was he merely the president’s chief military adviser or did he command all the armies?” (324). During the Civil War, four generals held the position of general-in-chief: Winfield Scott, George B. McClellan, Henry W. Halleck, and Ulysses S. Grant. In the early stages of the conflict, Lincoln struggled to define how the nation’s chief executive related to the nation’s highest general. With McClellan, for instance, Lincoln initially deferred to the general and told cabinet officers that he did not think he should compel McClellan to reveal his military plans. McClellan, Perret notes, believed that professionally trained officers, like himself, did not have the obligation to inform civilian leaders about secret military plans.

Perret’s narrative then tells the story of how Lincoln slowly gained experience, developed a sophisticated understanding of military matters and strategic ideas, and eventually, through cooperative and able generals like Grant and William T. Sherman, successfully directed the North to victory over the Confederacy. It is also a story about how Lincoln expanded the constitutional powers of the presidency in a number of important and significant ways. Radical Republicans agitated for the abolition of slavery, but Lincoln demurred, believing that it was unconstitutional for the federal government to abolish slavery. However, when war department counsel William Whiting developed an argument that emancipation was consistent with the war powers of the presidency, Lincoln was persuaded, according to Perret, and the Emancipation Proclamation was the eventual outcome.

Lincoln’s sometime flagrant behavior with respect to civil liberties, observes Perret, was another example of how Lincoln expanded the wartime powers of the presidency. Beginning with his initial suspension of the writ of habeas corpus for limited areas of the country, the sixteenth president, during the course of the war, took a number of controversial actions that seemed to violate constitutionally guaranteed civil rights. On a number of occasions, Perret notes, Lincoln jailed individuals suspected of disloyalty on the grounds that some rights had to be temporarily sacrificed for the survival of the Union. Lincoln’s actions with respect to constitutional liberties created a powerful precedent for future war presidents. “Imprisonment by executive fiat and trial of civilians by the military continued till the end of the war. The powers Lincoln assumed or created to make the president a
Jailer of enemies real or presumed,” writes Perret, “would be passed intact to all his successors” (305).

Quite obviously, discussions on emancipation and civil liberties in the Lincoln literature are not original, and one does not find in Perret’s analysis much more than one would find in the biographies of David Herbert Donald, Reinhold Luthin, Stephen Oates, Philip Shaw Paludan, Benjamin Thomas, and numerous other Lincoln biographers. Indeed much of the book’s contents are not “untold,” as the title suggests, but rather well-known episodes in the Lincoln chronicles. At the same time, Perret’s narrative does provide an interesting discussion about Lincoln’s fascination with new weapons, particularly with breach-loading and multiple-shot rifles. These passages are both enlightening and informative. Equally informative is Perret’s account of how Lincoln fought the Department of Ordnance, which was directed by the backward looking James W. Ripley. Looking for innovative weapons that would give Union forces an advantage on the field of battle, the president personally intervened on numerous occasions to ensure that the skeptical Ripley ordered promising new weapons for Union armies.

According to Perret, Lincoln created the role of war president and was consumed by that role. Using the president’s role as commander in chief to expand executive authority, Lincoln created useful precedents for wartime presidents in the twentieth century. At the same time, the role he created was stamped with his own personality, so unorthodox and unique to Lincoln, that it is little wonder that the reader cannot precisely define Lincoln’s notion of commander in chief. “His management style,” notes Perret, “was more idiosyncratic than systematic” (338). Lincoln’s evolution as a war president was uniquely tied to Lincoln’s personality and temperament.

Unfortunately, the usefulness of Perret’s narrative is marred by a number of questionable interpretations as well as numerous factual errors. Questionable, if not downright inaccurate, is Perret’s contention that Lincoln’s war strategy was characterized by an obsession with the capture of the Confederate capital of Richmond. Rejecting Winfield Scott’s Anaconda Plan, which recommended fighting the war from the west to the east and temporarily placing the Army of the Potomac on the strategic defensive, Perret argues that Lincoln favored a military strategy that was narrowly focused on capturing Richmond. While Lincoln, like many Civil War generals and politicians, could rightly be accused of placing more emphasis on the eastern theater, his view of the conflict from almost the war’s beginning was national and not regional. Already in January 1862, Lincoln lectured the cautious and
slow-moving Don Carlos Buell on the importance of simultaneous advances, thus moving against numerically smaller Confederate forces simultaneously to prevent them from taking advantage of interior lines. While premature and probably ill advised at the time, General Order #1, which ordered the advance of all Union armies on February 22, 1862, was written with this military axiom in mind.

At no time did Lincoln place the capture of Richmond over the destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia. After the battles of Antietam and Gettysburg, Lincoln’s frustration with such Union generals as McClellan and George Meade had nothing to do with their failure to capture Richmond; it was that their lackadaisical pursuit prevented engagement and possible destruction of the retreating rebel army. Lincoln’s disappointment after the battle of Gettysburg was focused on Meade’s failure to destroy Lee’s army. It had nothing to do with the capture of the Confederate capital. Indeed, Perret’s statements on this subject are often confused and even contradictory. When Joseph Hooker recommended seizing Richmond in response to Lee’s northward movement after the battle of Chancellorsville, Lincoln quickly corrected him, telling him Lee’s army was his principal objective. Perret explains this away by arguing that Lincoln knew that Hooker would struggle taking Richmond, even if lightly defended, while Lee might, in Hooker’s absence, take Washington. However, this explanation is tortured and simply does not square with the many statements that Lincoln made during the course of the war that focused on the defeat of rebel armies as the key to victory—not merely conquering cities and occupying strategic points.

Equally unconvincing is Perret’s account of the evolution of Lincoln’s thinking on the use of black troops. While Lincoln and many of his contemporaries initially had doubts about the fighting spirit of African-American soldiers, Perret argues that Lincoln became a convert to arming African-Americans largely through his exposure to a pamphlet written by George Livermore, an obscure Boston merchant. Livermore’s lecture to the Massachusetts Historical Society in July 1862 was published as a pamphlet. Charles Sumner presented Lincoln with a copy, and, according to Perret, Lincoln read it and was “deeply impressed” (292). Perhaps. But where Perret derives his evidence for this claim is a mystery to this reviewer. There is no citation provided in the paragraph for this assertion. One wonders how such a significant influence on the thought of Lincoln could have been overlooked by such Lincoln biographers as Thomas, Luthin, Oates, Paludan, and Donald. Yet George Livermore appears nowhere in these standard biographies. Without evidence, Perret’s contention is mere conjecture.
Undoubtedly the most disappointing feature of this study is the sheer number of errors. Some mistakes are simple factual inaccuracies. For instance, Perret characterized Edward Bates, Lincoln’s attorney general, as a former Democrat, when, in fact, he was well known as the leading Whig political figure in the state of Missouri prior to the emergence of the Republican Party. Perret states that Frank Blair was a West Point graduate, when it was his brother, Montgomery, who attended the academy. Ben Wade is identified as a “devout Christian,” though the Ohio Republican rejected the religious teaching of his parents, adopted deistic beliefs, and was legendary for his fits of profanity. Perret locates Paducah, Kentucky, on the Mississippi River instead of the Ohio River. He misidentifies Major John J. Key as a member of McClellan’s staff. In fact, John J. Key, who was dismissed from the army by Lincoln for controversial comments after the battle of Antietam, was a member of Henry Halleck’s staff. His brother, Thomas Key, was a Cincinnati judge and a member of George McClellan’s staff. Perret states that the Committee on the Conduct of the War was reappointed in March 1864. In reality it was reappointed in January 1864 and was already in the midst of its investigation of the Army of the Potomac by March. Finally, Perret’s discussion of the Enrollment Act is chronologically confused, as he does not seem to distinguish between the Enrollment Act of 1863 and the earlier Militia Draft of 1862. Even the best historians occasionally make mistakes. But the volume of errors is inexcusable. Inexperienced readers will be misled and misinformed; veteran scholars will lose sight of Perret’s larger points.

Perret’s study is also plagued by numerous mischaracterizations and ambiguities. Here the problem is not the simple misstatement of fact, but assertions that create misconceptions and confusion in the mind of the reader. According to Perret, “the northern press was almost ecstatic in its approval” of the preliminary emancipation proclamation (219). This was certainly true for most Republican papers; yet, Perret seems to forget that there were Democratic papers throughout the North that denounced the proclamation in the most unflattering terms. In commenting on the formation of the Committee on the Conduct of the War, Perret states, “the committee represented a paradigm shift in relations between Congress and the executive branch. Congress was asserting a right to oversee operations of the executive branch, something that had never been claimed before . . .” (97). It was certainly true that the formation of the committee represented an attempt to limit and direct executive power; however, it was not the first time that Congress claimed the right to oversee executive operations. In
fact, as early as 1792, Congress demanded and received information from the executive branch. In that particular instance, the information pertained to the failed military expedition of General Arthur St. Clair. Perret consistently mischaracterizes politicians as abolitionist without providing context for his assertions. Thus, Edward Everett, the conservative Whig orator and political figure who was the vice presidential nominee of the equally conservative Constitutional Union Party, hardly warrants the abolitionist label that Perret applies to him. Although Everett did support the Republican Party and the reelection of Abraham Lincoln in 1864, to describe him as an abolitionist is misleading and demonstrates a lack of attention to the historical context.

Although rich in detail and written in a lively style, *Lincoln’s War* is a disappointment. While Perret’s goals for the narrative are lofty, the interpretive and factual errors of the narrative limit its usefulness. The topic is significant and its treatment much needed. Indeed a factually rigorous study would be a welcome addition to Lincoln studies. *Lincoln’s War* is worth reading. However, because of its numerous shortcomings, readers are well advised to proceed with caution.