Lincoln the Dwarf: Lyon Gardiner Tyler’s War on the Mythical Lincoln

DAN MONROE

In 1917 Lyon Gardiner Tyler picked up a copy of the *New York Times* and grew angry. What so incensed Tyler was an editorial suggesting that Southern slaveowners were akin to the Hohenzollern autocrats then plaguing the world. The editorial insisted that slaveowners were arbitrary and oppressive and that they had sought to extend slavery. When the North and the Republican Party resisted, the South declared war, characterizing it as defensive, just as the Hohenzollerns described their aggression as defensive in nature. Tyler responded that it was Abraham Lincoln who more closely resembled Prussian militarists in his grotesque flaunting of the Constitution while offering the excuse that necessity forced him to act in a dictatorial manner. Eleven years later, Tyler was provoked again when the Virginia House of Delegates decided to honor Lincoln’s birthday by adjourning, for Tyler contended that Lincoln was no hero and did not merit the honor. *Time* magazine fired back that Tyler’s father, President John Tyler, was a dwarf in stature and accomplishments compared to Lincoln; in response, Tyler wrote a pamphlet calling Lincoln a dwarf.1

Lyon Tyler was the fourteenth child of John Tyler, the tenth president, who had more children than any other Oval Office occu-


© 2003 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois
Dan Monroe

Pant—sixteen in all. Educated at the University of Virginia, Lyon Tyler had a varied career as a teacher, school principal, lawyer, college president, and state legislator. In the latter role, he sponsored legislation in 1888 that reopened the moribund College of William and Mary, an act that resulted in his election as the college’s president. Thirty-one years later he retired, having helped found the *William and Mary Quarterly* and having restored the fortunes of that venerable institution of learning. He spent much of his retirement years on a crusade to demythologize Abraham Lincoln, filling the pages of his own journal, *Tyler’s Quarterly and Genealogical Magazine*, with pieces highly critical of thesixteenth president.²

Quoting Pocahontas, who purportedly told John Smith that “Your countrymen will lie much,” Tyler argued that Abraham Lincoln had been eulogized, lauded, and propagandized into something that bore little relation to the truth. “The deification of Lincoln commenced with his assassination,” Tyler stated, “and has assumed all the forms of hero worship, without any regard for truth or even probability.” Lincoln had become a god-like being of no faults, blemishes, or failures, a superhuman who could even bear comparison to Christ. Lincoln’s stellar reputation, claimed Tyler, rested on dubious pillars—his tragic death by an assassin’s hand, the North’s need for a hero, his ability with words, and heaps of pro-Lincoln propaganda.³

Tyler’s indictment of Lincoln was that, while he possessed some good qualities, the deficiencies of his character far outweighed these, and so Lincoln did not merit the status he had assumed in death. Describing Lincoln’s virtues, Tyler conceded that he was “a man of ability and originality . . . tactful and resourceful,” who was “unwilling to resort to extreme measures when milder measures would suffice.” Lincoln was also not as venomous and did not hate the South with the same passion as other Republicans. That was as far as Tyler was willing to praise Lincoln, and he capped the


praise with the barbed conclusion that none of those attributes rendered Lincoln “an ideal person in history.”

Tyler catalogued Lincoln’s crippling deficiencies: He was coarse, too coarse to be a hero; his reputation for kindness and humanity was grossly overblown; he was an overrated statesman, a vacillator who had trouble making decisions. He was too deferential to his cabinet, indeed was dominated by its stronger personalities. He started the war, then meddled in its conduct, prolonging the bloodshed, was a poor judge of generals, and allowed political expediency to guide his appointments. In constructing his argument Tyler relied as much as possible on sources he considered unimpeachable, such as Lincoln’s friends Ward Hill Lamon and William H. Herndon and distinguished Northerners like Charles Francis Adams.

In Tyler’s opinion, coarseness could never be associated with idealism, and Lincoln was “a very coarse man.” Tyler drew on Lincoln’s old Eighth Judicial Circuit colleague Ward Hill Lamon, who had written that Lincoln loved to tell gross stories, and on his former law partner William H. Herndon, who concurred. General George McClellan said that Lincoln’s stories were “seldom refined.”

Tyler noted that Lincoln began the momentous cabinet meeting on the Emancipation Proclamation by reading “foolish things” from humorist Artemus Ward, and that he called for Lamon to sing a bawdy song while on the blood-stained Sharpsburg battlefield. Tyler found particularly offensive Lincoln’s letter to Mrs. Browning in which Lincoln gave vent to some rather indecorous views on marriage and a former love interest.

In that same vein was Tyler’s article, “Are Handkerchiefs Superfluous? Lincoln Thought So.” He recounted a tale from *Blackwood’s Magazine* in which a member of a Virginia deputation meeting with Lincoln on the eve of the Civil War begged the president to use thumb and finger, meaning that he should sign a decree that would prevent war, presumably by ordering Fort Sumter to be abandoned. Lincoln expressed puzzlement, wondering if it was intended that he should blow his nose. At this the deputation “retired in disgust,” and Virginia soon seceded.

Tyler never considered, as have recent scholars, that Lincoln used humor as a safety valve, as a way to ease the intolerable stress of

---

5. Ibid., 11–17.
6. Ibid., 11.
occupying the presidency during bloody civil war, or that humor was the inevitable remedy for melancholia. Lincoln also used stories tactically to illustrate a point or to turn away anger. His humor seemed to Tyler somehow unbecoming his office, as was Lincoln’s frontier upbringing and lack of schooling. Like Andrew Jackson, Lincoln was ill-educated, had scant formal schooling, and struggled with spelling throughout his life. A frontier upbringing was never thought particularly advantageous by the Tyler family, who believed itself one of Virginia’s first families, with ancestors who had plantations on the James River and counted Thomas Jefferson as a friend. Tyler said that it was supposed that the man of low birth was the greater democrat, but Lincoln spoke of the common man and democracy while ruling as a fickle despot. By contrast Lyon’s father, John Tyler, born into a higher social class than Lincoln, preserved the Constitution while president, resisting the dictates of his own political party. Robert Ingersoll said Lincoln went to the “University of Nature.” The Tylers attended William and Mary. One can almost imagine Lyon Tyler shuddering in horror and revulsion when reading Lincoln’s homespun description of the problems of dispensing patronage: “too many pigs for teats.”

As for Lincoln’s humanitarian reputation, Tyler contended that crediting Lincoln for humane conduct for his individual acts of clemency without taking into account his overall handling of the war gave too benign a gloss to his presidency. The charitable notes in various presidential messages were mere words; what Lincoln actually did as president was more meaningful. Lincoln urged his generals to lay waste to the South. Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan were all invited to savage the countryside, driving women and children from their homes and into starvation. He suspended the exchange of prisoners and was immovable in that policy despite the resulting suffering at Andersonville prison. Tyler considered the Emancipation Proclamation a war measure designed to cause a slave insurrection whose likely victims would include Southern women and children.

While the world believed Lincoln a decisive leader and visionary statesman, Tyler averred that he was neither. He drew on

---

Charles Francis Adams’s 1873 eulogy of William H. Seward, in which Adams declared that the country had embarked upon a perilous experiment when it elected the inexperienced Lincoln in 1860 at a time of unprecedented national danger. According to Adams, Lincoln was unsure and lacked confidence in his new presidential role, and the country was saved from chaos by the steadying hand of William H. Seward, who was the true power in the government.10

Expanding upon that point, Tyler argued that Lincoln was utterly dominated by stronger personalities in the cabinet. Lincoln “did not exert his own individuality sufficiently against a lot of impudent secretaries.” He was too deferential to men like Edwin M. Stanton and Seward; no other president had ever submitted to “such vassalage.”11

Lincoln was not a decisive statesman. “Throughout the war Lincoln danced from one position to another,” Tyler contended. He was inclined to vacillate, and his presidency was replete with instances of his shifting positions. He did nothing to encourage peace efforts in the interval between his election and inauguration. After assuming office he dithered for a month, his mind “in a kind of maze,” before finally deciding to abandon Fort Sumter. But a meeting with pro-tariff governors of Northern states convinced Lincoln that war was preferable to the establishment of a low-tariff South that would rob the national government of revenue. Thus Tyler believed that Lincoln knuckled under to the tariff interests, who were horrified at the prospect of competing with a free-trade South. His decision to reinforce Fort Sumter was “a confession of bankruptcy in statesmanship.” Lincoln also swung back and forth on whether to issue the momentous Emancipation Proclamation. Were these the actions of a decisive statesman?12

Tyler found Andrew Johnson a much more appealing president, a man of “backbone,” whereas Lincoln was “feeble.” Johnson of course was quite free in granting pardons, and he resolutely opposed Congress’s radical reconstruction plans. Johnson “proved himself incapable, after the war was over, of the meanness of persecuting a defenseless and conquered people.” He was to be com-

mended for dismissing the “truculent Stanton,” an act of courage in the face of a “crazy and malignant Congress.”

Not surprisingly, Tyler disagreed with Gideon Welles, who was so outraged with the contentions put forward by Charles Francis Adams that he wrote an entire book refuting them. Welles, who had been the navy secretary under Lincoln and was present at cabinet meetings (Adams as minister to the Court of St. James was not), authoritatively argued that Lincoln was the master of the cabinet and the controlling intellect of that group of worthies. In fact, not only did Seward not control the president, Lincoln edited Seward’s messages to foreign powers, tempering their warlike hyperbole.

Yet Welles’s vigorous defense did not penetrate Tyler’s partisanship. Tyler recalled that during the Trent crisis, Welles had publicly approved Captain Wilkes’s actions, which Lincoln later disavowed. This disagreement somehow disqualified Welles in Tyler’s mind as a reliable source on the Lincoln presidency.

But Lincoln’s “most fatal change of position” was his “change of the character of the war, after the first year, from such as becomes a civilized nation into a campaign of wholesale riot and general outrage.” Tyler approvingly noted the gingerly manner with which McClellan’s army treated Southern property during the 1862 Peninsula campaign. McClellan had a guard posted on the Tyler property to prevent depredations by marauding soldiers. Later, Secretary of War Stanton, with Lincoln’s blessing but in violation of international law, ordered military commanders to appropriate private property without compensation. When Ulysses Grant’s army invaded Virginia, his troops made off with everything that could be carried and burned what could not. Tyler concluded that “In the cruelty of war thus decreed, Lincoln and his generals put it over the Germans in the World War,” a shocking statement in the 1920s when most could remember German atrocities but a few years removed.

Tyler was forever insisting that the Constitution was a compact among sovereign states that could be sundered at will by the participants. Secession was a completely lawful and peaceful procedure that by itself was no cause for armed conflict. Woodrow Wil-
son had of late reaffirmed the principle of self-determination, and the South fought to uphold that noble principle. Like the revolutionaries who created the United States out of a desire to separate from Great Britain, the men who established the Confederacy simply wished to separate from the North. That parting should have been peaceful and would have been, had Lincoln not given in to pro-tariff pressure. Lincoln started an “unnecessary war” and conducted it “with a ruthlessness which has never been surpassed.”

Lincoln had no military experience beyond the Black Hawk War, yet he constantly used the telegraph to interfere in military operations to the detriment of the Northern war effort. Tyler cited as an example McClellan asking for permission to attack Richmond after Lee moved North to attack Pope and being rebuffed by Lincoln. Even Northern historians like James Ford Rhodes endorsed McClellan’s proposal. Tyler thought Lincoln delayed the war’s conclusion for two years when he refused McClellan permission to attack. Supposedly gifted with “keen insight into human nature,” Lincoln appointed “misfits” like Halleck, Pope, Hooker, and Burnside. Tyler concluded that Lincoln’s incapacity prolonged the war. He believed that a competent president, such as Andrew Johnson, coupled with talented cabinet members like Edward Livingston and William L. Marcy, would have crushed the South in eighteen months.

Tyler was studiously unimpressed with Lincoln’s most renowned speeches. He pronounced Lincoln a “word juggler” who tried to fool the people with rhetorical tricks and flourishes rather than convince them with dispassionate logic. Words were mere “play things” to Lincoln. Tyler found little good to say about the majestic phrases and the moving economy of language that typify the Gettysburg Address. That address was “a gilded fraud” because its “real nature” was a “bad sophism,” to wit, that if the South won the war, government of, by, and for the people would perish from the earth. In truth, the sole result of secession would have been the replacement of one government by two. The United States would have lost territory, but the American people would have retained their liberties, as British citizens did in the wake of the loss of their American colonies in the eighteenth century.

As for the Second Inaugural Address, a “scandalous misrepresentation” was obvious when the “sophistical rhetoric” was pared away. Tyler abhorred the passage on the war continuing indefinitely if need be to atone for the 250 years of suffering endured by the bondsmen, which he characterized as an insult to Southerners, a base suggestion that they habitually mistreated their slaves. Echoing the antebellum Southern defense of slavery, Tyler contended that the slaves were “the most spoiled domestics in the world.” He stated: “The Southerners took the negro as a barbarian and cannibal, civilized him, supported him, clothed him, and turned him out a better Christian than Abraham Lincoln, who was a free thinker, if not an atheist.” For Lincoln to suggest that the slaves were in any way disadvantaged in their lot was to commit a transgression against a romantic, idealized South that Tyler desperately wished to believe once existed.20

How can we account for Lyon Tyler? First, his war against the Lincoln myth needs to be seen within the context of his times, a period that saw a resurgent Democratic party dominated by Southerners take control of the national government and a reigniting of sectional tensions. In 1910 the Democrats gained control of the United States House of Representatives. The solidly Democratic South had congressmen of longer tenure than other regions. With seniority determining committee leadership, Southern chairmen ran nearly all the important committees.21

Two years later, Woodrow Wilson, a Virginian by birth, was elected president, and the Democrats claimed both Senate and House. Now both bodies were ruled by Southern committee chairmen. Early in his life, Wilson had turned his back on his Southern roots, but he later came to a certain pride in his Virginia origins. He told the American Historical Association in 1896 that there was nothing in their history that Southerners had to apologize for. As president, he appointed five Southern cabinet members and allowed the racist film Birth of a Nation to be shown in the White House in 1915.22

Republicans shouted that the “South was in the Saddle,” a form of waving the bloody shirt, and sectional animosities developed

20. Tyler, Dwarf, 40. Tyler, Confederate Catechism, 26–27.
as a result of perceived Southern influence in Congress and the Wilson administration. There were sectional tensions over the distribution of federal patronage, Southern dominance of congressional committees, the location of military bases, and other issues. A brief period of unity during the war gave way with its successful conclusion to renewed criticism of the South. Fear of the continued dominance of the Congress by Southern reactionaries prompted a revival in Republican unity, with the resultant electoral success returning the House, Senate, and White House to Republican control in 1920.23

This atmosphere of sectional tensions and recriminations within the federal government and the country at large probably spurred Tyler’s sense of Southern grievance and consequent anger at Lincoln’s phenomenal popularity. A further irritant was the internationalization of the heroic Lincoln, as American values became linked with the Allied effort in World War I. Lincoln’s fame was worldwide. “Year after year more printer’s ink was spilled upon Lincoln than any other figure in history except Jesus Christ,” concluded Merrill Peterson. Lincoln monuments were built, including the magnificent Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., dedicated in 1922. A replica of Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s Lincoln statue was raised in London in 1920, with Prime Minister Lloyd George speaking at dedication ceremonies. Buffeted by the twin waves of criticism of Southern involvement in national affairs and international adulation of Abraham Lincoln, Lyon Tyler lashed out from retirement.24

Tyler was also annoyed that Northern history textbooks, which portrayed Lincoln in heroic fashion, were employed in Southern schools. The youth of the South were being fed the Lincoln myth in neighborhood schools! He joined Mildred Lewis Rutherford’s effort to replace pro-Northern and pro-Lincoln texts with works more reflective of the unreconstructed South’s view of Lincoln and the Civil War.25

Tyler thought of himself as a professional historian on a relentless search for the truth, which necessarily entailed deflating the Lincoln myth. He believed that Northerners, as the winners of the Civil War, had written all the resulting history, and had done so in

a fashion that was little more than propaganda that was both inaccurate and painted a distorted image of the South. Lincoln was turned into a saint he never was. Only Lyon Tyler could rescue truth from layers of fiction by scrupulously adhering to the truth. “Real history,” he declared, “cares nothing for the blare of trumpets and the shouts of the propagandists—it cares only for facts.”  

But Tyler’s fact-finding consisted of cobbling together every negative Lincoln fragment, anecdote, tale, and story he unearthed, without any sense of balance or critical weighing of veracity. He may have thought he was a truth-seeker, but he was really a polemicist. Tyler was not interested in a truer and therefore stronger and more impressive version of Lincoln’s life. He sought only to destroy, to vilify, to tear down, and in this endeavor his zealotry damaged his own reputation. His use of only those sources in which Lincoln appears in a poor light, while excluding or ignoring those that were positive, made him the very thing he professed to abhor—a propagandist. He descended into the ridiculous, as when he compared John Brown to Sacco and Vanzetti, suggested that the North’s violence against the South was analogous to anarchist violence in the 1920s. And Tyler accused the North and Lincoln of responsibility for World War I.  

Others had sought a more realistic portrait of Lincoln. William H. Herndon, for example, thought that his warts-and-all Lincoln was an even more heroic figure than the sanitized versions of biographers like Josiah Holland. However tainted by vitriol, selective use of sources, and the bitterness of an unreconstructed Southerner, Tyler was correct to conclude that some praise of Lincoln, the comparisons of Lincoln to Christ for example, was over the top. The real man—the politician and war leader—was being obscured by a cloud of hagiography. Tyler did wish for a franker assessment of Lincoln, a more candid evaluation of his strengths and weaknesses. In a way, his willingness to lash out at the saintly Lincoln presaged later revisionist treatments.  

Tyler’s own personal prejudices rendered him incapable of sober judgment on Lincoln. He never could have produced a balanced treatment of the Lincoln presidency. Tyler had created his own myth, an imaginary Old South in which happy slaves sang in the heat as they bent over the cotton plant while the benevolent

27. Tyler’s Quarterly, vol. 9 (October 1927): 76–77; Tyler, Confederate Catechism, 6; Davis, Image of Lincoln, 132.
and beloved master read Cicero in the shade of a veranda, freed from labor to pursue the life of the mind. This idealized South, the South of Margaret Mitchell’s great novel, never existed except in the minds of those like Tyler who so desperately wished to believe the best of their ancestors. As Tyler wrote, “the present generation of Southern men . . . see no reason to be ashamed of the conduct of their ancestors.” The mythical Lincoln was an open affront to the Lost Cause Tyler spent a lifetime nurturing. “The Lincoln myth,” declared Merrill Peterson, “endangered the Confederate myth.” For that reason most of all, Tyler had to assail Lincoln’s god-like postmortem reputation.28

Tyler’s last years were eventful. Like his father, he married a much younger second wife late in life. His choice reflected his convictions. Sue Ruffin, a descendant of the virulent secessionist Edmund Ruffin, was thirty-five when united in matrimony with seventy-year-old Lyon. During their twelve years together she bore him two sons, leading Time magazine to remark on the “potent . . . Tylers of Virginia.” When Tyler finally died, the New York Times described him as a “pervasive political thinker” who was nonetheless a kind and pleasant man, the latter traits he shared with his father the president. The Times declared that Tyler had contended for a vision of the Union that was impossible, but it could not help but admire the tenacity with which he clung to that vision.29

The date of Tyler’s death gives pause. Merrill Peterson wondered if the gods were laughing when they decreed the end of Tyler’s earthly existence. Had he known when his hour of reckoning was to come, Tyler would have been chagrined. For Lyon Gardiner Tyler, former president of William and Mary, died on February 12, 1935, the 126th birthday of his archnemesis, Abraham Lincoln.30