Review Essay

Negotiating and Navigating:
Lincoln, the Union Governors, and Reconstruction
ELIZABETH D. LEONARD


For me, reading the volumes in the Concise Lincoln Library series has consistently proved a worthwhile enterprise. Although the individual volumes are brief (each containing about 150 pages of text), they are by no means simplistic overviews of the topics under consideration. The scholars contributing to the series are also adding to our understanding of Abraham Lincoln and the American Civil War. Lincoln and the Union Governors and Lincoln and Reconstruction are no exceptions. Each provides a thoughtful analysis of the relevant sources, as well as a number of fresh insights; each adopts a new approach to what readers may initially assume was a topic about which there was little, or little more, to say.

It may seem obvious that the Union governors played a significant role in “winning the war and preserving the nation.” As William C. Harris points out, however, “modern historians and students of the Civil War” have not given the governors “proper credit” or, one could add, even much consideration at all (1). Harris sets out to redress this error by examining the interplay between the Union governors and the president as it developed from before the firing on Fort Sumter to Lincoln’s death in April 1865. He demonstrates that Lincoln—accused by some scholars of dismissing the governors to consolidate his own power “at the expense of state authority”—actively sought, valued, and needed the governors’ support for his administration, his war policies, and the Union cause (2). Lincoln was fortunate indeed, Harris tells us, that despite the predictable diversity of their “different regional interests,” most of the fifty-nine governors he identifies as...
having served during the war years in the Union states were Republicans or members of the Union party (5).

According to Harris, perhaps the Union governors’ most important contribution to the war effort—especially as the human cost of the war became increasingly evident—was the energy, influence, and authority they repeatedly (if not always cheerfully or expeditiously) lent over four long years to the recruitment and outfitting of soldiers for the Federal army. Even the governors of frontier states like Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Kansas proved reliable on this score, despite having significant security needs of their own, such as “large bodies” of displaced and angry Native Americans, to consider (21). Similarly, the governors of the states with sizable populations of antiwar, anti-Emancipation Democrats ultimately did not disappoint.

Harris also highlights the importance of the September 24, 1862, Altoona (Pennsylvania) Conference—the Loyal War Governors Conference—for Lincoln’s and the Union’s eventual success, although “only about half of the Union governors” actually attended, and only one from the border slave states (74). Taking place about a month after the Sioux Uprising in Minnesota, two days after Lincoln’s announcement of his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, and at a time when, Antietam notwithstanding, Union military fortunes gave limited hope for optimism, the one-day conference “provided a needed boost to public support for the military effort against the rebellion” (76). The widely circulated document the conference yielded, which was eventually endorsed by many of the governors who did not or could not attend, along with the governors’ meeting with the president that followed the conference, spurned the sort of “divisive confrontation” that “could further undermine the Union effort to suppress the rebellion” (60). Instead, the governors opted for confidentiality with respect to the content of their private discussions, and unity in their public representations of the event. As a display of solid support for his administration and his policies—including Emancipation—Harris concludes, “Lincoln could not have asked for more from the Union governors at Altoona,” particularly given the controversy aroused by his suspension of habeas corpus on September 25 (70). Altoona set a fundamental (if not entirely harmonious) tone of “cooperation between the governors and the president” that “continued until the end of the war” and proved essential to Union victory (78).

Faced with the dimensions of the rupture between the Union states and the Confederate states, it is easy to forget that the Union states themselves were diverse and that their leaders did not march
blindly and unquestioningly in lockstep, either with one another or with Lincoln and his administration. Moreover, the magnitude of Lincoln’s own importance as a leader can obscure the contributions of the dozens of men who held positions of executive authority across the North whose guidance and support—and whose criticisms and challenges—helped to mold and uphold Lincoln’s wartime policies. Harris’s book offers a highly useful corrective on this score.

I confess, however, that as I moved through the book I found myself wishing that Harris had defined and explained his terms more clearly, beginning with the term “Union governors.” Did Harris mean to include only the governors who served in those states that existed and did not secede in 1860–61? The answer is no, because he includes the governors of West Virginia, which entered the Union in 1863, and Nevada, which entered in 1864. Did the term include the military governors Lincoln installed during the war in Tennessee and Louisiana? Again, the answer is no, which made me wonder why not. And how might the story have been different if these “Union governors” had also been considered? I wondered as well, did the term “Northern governors” represent the same group of men as the term “Union governors” (4)? It seems not, at least, not consistently. Harris at one point comments that in response to Lincoln’s April 15, 1861, call for troops, “all of the Northern governors reported to the president and Secretary of War Simon Cameron that their people were united in support of Lincoln’s policy to suppress the Southern rebellion and [prepared to] meet his call for troops,” which was certainly not true for Kentucky (15–16). And which state executives did the term “northeastern governors” encompass (5)?

When I reached the end of the book I wished, too, that Harris had chosen to integrate with the text—perhaps in the introduction—more of the useful analytical material he presents in the three-page-long bibliographical essay at the end. Tucked between the endnotes and the index, this essay, which is easy to miss, explains the book’s historiographical context, which in turn enables the reader to discern more easily Harris’s original contributions and insights. Most readers, I suspect, would have benefited from having this sort of “interpretive map” at the start, given that the basic terrain of the book is not very familiar and Harris’s goal is to introduce some of that terrain’s even less well known features. Indeed, providing readers right at the beginning with a clear interpretive map of the terrain ahead is one of the many things that John C. Rodrigue’s *Lincoln and Reconstruction* does so well.
Many of us who teach about the Civil War era have struggled every year to justify to our students why we devote the last two weeks of the semester to Reconstruction. We insist that Reconstruction is an indispensable component of the Civil War story, and that understanding what happened after General Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, Lincoln’s assassination, and Andrew Johnson’s assumption of the presidency is essential to understanding not just the Civil War era but subsequent American history as well. Rodrigue’s book reminds us that, just as it would be wrong to study the Civil War without studying Reconstruction, it would be wrong to think of Reconstruction as a process that began only in mid-April 1865 under Johnson, or even as one that began under Lincoln in December 1863, or when Lincoln appointed his first military governors in 1862.

Indeed, the problem of how to reconstruct the nation arose as soon as South Carolina declared its independence, and Abraham Lincoln’s attempt to find a solution dates back virtually to that moment, months before he became president. Moreover, Rodrigue explains, Lincoln’s thinking on the question of Reconstruction necessarily—and even profoundly—continued to evolve until his death in April 1865. Over the course of the war, Rodrigue writes, “Lincoln was forced to expand his definition of reconstruction, from the mere restoration of the seceded states to the Union to the more fundamental social, economic, and political reordering of those states and of the Union itself” (3–4). We can never know for certain how much more encompassing Lincoln’s definition of Reconstruction might have become had he lived. Rodrigue’s own view—a valuable part of the interpretive map he provides to us in his introduction—is that “the limits” of Lincoln’s views on what Reconstruction must entail “would have been reached not on racial equality . . . but on the social and economic remaking of southern plantation society” (5). The chapters that follow guide readers carefully through the development of Lincoln’s thought from the end of 1860 forward, and through the actions, policies, and documents his expanding vision of Reconstruction produced.

Like “most northerners,” Rodrigue explains, Lincoln initially “went to war to restore the Union,” and with a view of Reconstruction that was “limited to restoring the national authority over the seceded states” (14). At the heart of this view, Rodrigue indicates, was Lincoln’s misguided belief—revealed in his first inaugural address—that most southerners were in fact unionists at heart, whose loyalty had been suppressed by fire-eating secessionists but who would readily respond to the opportunity to join the federal government in reestablishing
national authority over the South. This view fundamentally rejected the notion that the seceded states themselves had ever left the Union; secession was instead the work of small groups of radicals within the states who had gained the upper hand temporarily. Rodrigue examines Lincoln’s July 4, 1861, message to Congress for the new president’s first public statement on Reconstruction. Here Lincoln defined Reconstruction as a process of reestablishing or restoring—by means of military action—the “traditional relations” (17) between the seceded states and the national government, without the national government imposing any sanctions or requiring any adjustments except submission.

Even as Lincoln was addressing Congress in the summer of 1861, however, the situation on the ground was changing, and the vexing question of what to do about southern slavery was becoming “unavoidable” (23). As early as May, slaves had begun finding their way to Union lines and, they hoped, to freedom. Congress was about to pass the First Confiscation Act, and southern unionists were proving far fewer in number than Lincoln had anticipated or hoped. These and future developments inevitably affected Lincoln’s thinking about Reconstruction. By late 1861 or early 1862, his view had expanded to incorporate the possibility of “a United States without slavery,” to be accomplished by suppression of the rebellion, compensated slave emancipation, and perhaps colonization (25). A year later, the Emancipation Proclamation—and the decision to allow black men (including former slaves) to serve in the Union army—indicated that Lincoln’s view had become even more expansive. It now included “the broader transformation of the South’s social and economic relations” that the end of slavery—now indelibly linked to Union victory—would necessarily engender (42). By the spring of 1865 Lincoln’s view of Reconstruction had expanded still further, to include an even more thoroughgoing “remaking of southern society,” perhaps under the supervision of military governors, as Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton recommended at Lincoln’s last cabinet meeting on April 14. “Yet,” Rodrigue emphasizes, while “slaves saw land, and property in general, as essential to a meaningful freedom,” there is “little evidence that Lincoln had begun, even by the end of his life, to conceptualize an approach to the intractable difficulties that would arise from attempting to recast the plantation South along the lines of the free-labor North,” which would require at least some measure of land confiscation and redistribution (101–2).

One of the many interesting features of Rodrigue’s study is the attention he devotes to the dilemmas that the Emancipation Proclamation
created: namely, the remote possibility that some Confederate states (or portions of states) might actually take Lincoln up on his offer of “restoration” with slavery intact, or the more likely scenario that some northern states—especially those with strong Copperhead leanings—might now exert irresistible pressure on him to engage in peace negotiations before Union victory, and permanent black freedom, had been accomplished. Rodrigue expertly explores how Lincoln navigated these dilemmas in the face of other challenges, such as the secession of West Virginia from Confederate Virginia and its application for statehood, the slow (at best) progress of his efforts to restore states like Louisiana and Tennessee to the Union according to his December 1863 “ten percent plan,” and increasing Congressional demand for more input in (if not complete control over) the Reconstruction process, not to mention the ups and downs of the Union’s military fortunes.

Readers will appreciate Rodrigue’s wise reminders throughout about the hazards of endowing historical figures with foreknowledge—or values—that they simply did not have. As Rodrigue points out, any “actions taken” by Lincoln, Congress, and even his generals following his reelection in November 1864 must be understood as having been “based on the assumption not of Lincoln being assassinated in a few short weeks but of his fulfilling a second presidential term” (121). Even more fundamental: despite all the development we can see in Lincoln’s thinking about Reconstruction, even he—a man of his times—almost certainly had limitations when it came to “embracing the kinds of policies that a fundamental transformation of plantation society and the southern social order”—not to mention the United States as a whole—“would have required” to ensure that after the war, African Americans in America would be truly free (145).

Both Lincoln and the Union Governors and Lincoln and Reconstruction are worthy additions to the Concise Lincoln Library series, and will appeal to scholarly, as well as general, audiences.