Review

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Civil wars seldom end at the peace table. Only 20 percent of those fought during the Cold War were settled through diplomacy. Victory usually happens on the battlefield.¹ The odds of settling the American Civil War through negotiations were never good. The South’s attempt to create a separate nation and the North’s refusal to recognize that nationhood could not be reconciled. Battles would decide the war’s outcome. No leader on either side of the conflict understood this stark scenario better than the war’s respective presidents, Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis. Both men were appalled by the war’s terrible toll but remained extremely skeptical of any proposed peace negotiations that promised anything less than victory. Skepticism did not mean rejection, however. By 1865 the increasing likelihood of Union victory and Confederate defeat pushed both leaders to authorize talks. The resulting Hampton Roads Peace Conference was a diplomatic dead end but an important destination for what it reveals about Lincoln’s presidential leadership in the last months of his life. James B. Conroy’s study is a detailed and lively account of the nation’s journey to Hampton Roads and Lincoln’s management of the peace process.

Given that the journey began more than 150 years ago, it is difficult to recapture the atmosphere of uncertainty, excitement, and hope that the peace initiative created among soldiers and civilians on both sides during January and early February 1865. The war was approaching its fourth year and the carnage continued. Yes, the Union stood poised to finish off the Confederacy, but thousands were sure to die in the final battles. A negotiated peace would end the fighting before more troops entered the ranks of the dead. Conroy ably describes the longing for peace among the frontline soldiers as news spread of the comings

and goings of the Union’s leading peace feeler, Francis Preston Blair Sr., and the Confederate peace commissioners, Alexander Stephens, John A. Campbell, and Robert M. T. Hunter. Personality plays an important role in any diplomatic discussion. One of the strengths of Conroy’s work is his ability to flesh out the principal players in the Hampton Roads drama through an extensive use of dialogue based on a large number of contemporary sources, including letters, diaries, and reports. It is clear that Conroy has command of the material available to present a reliable reconstruction of the events leading up to Hampton Roads, the meeting itself, and the aftermath of the talks. What is less clear from the selected bibliography is whether Conroy was able to utilize the Campbell Family Papers at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, which contain information about the conference.

Campbell and the other Confederate commissioners were ready to make peace. They were led by Alexander Stephens, the Confederate vice president and one of the South’s leading critics of Davis’s leadership and the continuation of a lost war. Stephens, besides Lincoln, is the most intriguing character in Conway’s account. Inhabiting a crippled, sickly, and seemingly disintegrating body—Stephens weighed ninety pounds on a good day—the Georgian had one of the most agile political minds in the South. As brought to the big screen in Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln*, Stephens and Lincoln conversed easily and familiarly at Hampton Roads, having known each other since 1847, when Lincoln began his term in Congress. It is curious that Conroy makes no mention of the *Lincoln* movie, given that a large part of the film is devoted to the conference. Spielberg’s film premiered in 2012, and Conroy’s book came out in 2014. It is likely that more people have heard of the conference through the movie than from any other source. As for Stephens, the movie may be the only time that “Little Alec” has been portrayed on film.

Although on friendly terms, Lincoln and Stephens had little chance of making a breakthrough for peace on February 3, 1865, the day of the conference. Besides an African American steward, only five men participated in the conference, which was held aboard the *River Queen*, a Union steamer anchored about a mile off Fortress Monroe on Hampton Roads. With the three Confederate commissioners and Lincoln was Secretary of State William H. Seward, who assured the participants that no notes were being taken. The absence of a written record, while vexing to historians, allowed the men to speak freely and reinforced Lincoln and Seward’s insistence that the meeting was an informal gathering, not a negotiation. Lincoln and Davis’s prior exchange of
communications through Blair made it clear that no negotiation was possible without one side agreeing to the fundamental demand of the other. For Lincoln this demand meant that the South must agree that it was part of “one common county,” (94) not a separate nation, while Davis would work only to “secure peace to the two countries” (89). Conroy takes the standard view that Davis was never serious about the peace talks. The southern president allowed them to go forward with the expectation that failure would only confirm his contention in the minds of the press and the public that Lincoln was determined to crush the Confederacy and see the South submit unconditionally; the South had no choice but to fight on for independence.

Davis was correct that Lincoln was not willing to hedge on reunion. Going back to the dark days of the summer of 1864, when terrible Union casualties in Virginia and a seeming stalemate outside Atlanta produced a drumbeat of defeatism and appeasement across large segments of the North, Lincoln insisted that peace could come only when the South laid down its arms and returned to the authority of the federal government. After Atlanta’s fall, Lincoln’s reelection, and further Union victories, Blair believed that despondency in the South and growing peace sentiment in such states as Georgia and North Carolina created an opportunity to bring the war to an early end. Although Lincoln dismissed Blair’s idea that French intrusion in Mexico provided an excuse for North and South to unite to expel Napoleon III from Mexico in defense of the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. president did believe that Unionist sentiment was growing in the South and hoped that individual states and leaders other than Jefferson Davis would be willing to accept defeat if they knew the North would be lenient in victory. Conroy captures Lincoln’s flexibility on issues of reconstruction, the most controversial being the future status of enslaved persons. While Lincoln made clear that he would not backtrack on emancipation and that abolition was inevitable, he held out the possibility that if the South stopped fighting and reaffirmed loyalty to the Union, southern states would have a say in the speed and implementation of emancipation as well as an expectation of compensation for loss of property.

Conroy’s portrayal of the discussions at Hampton Roads is the strongest aspect of his work. He deftly sets the scene on board the River Queen and captures the drama of the give-and-take between the two parties. He also displays encyclopedic knowledge of the personalities involved in the peace process. This biographic information is especially helpful for readers unfamiliar with such lesser-known figures as Hunter, Campbell, and even Blair, who, although well known to Civil
War historians and scholars of the early republic, is not a personality readily available to the public. At the beginning of the book, Conroy identifies the individuals relevant to the forthcoming narrative. The first section, “Friends in Power,” intertwines the lives of the most important players with the events that brought them to the threshold of peace talks at the end of 1864. An epilogue contains biographical portraits of the postwar lives of the many principal characters.

An important drawback of an encyclopedic narrative, however, no matter how well written, is the tendency to provide information without much analysis. Conroy’s work would have benefited from an introduction laying out his arguments for the significance of the conference for the Civil War and Lincoln’s biography. Some discussion of how Lincoln handled relations with Britain and France might have provided the reader with useful insights into Lincoln’s diplomatic game previous to his talks with the enemy. The post–Hampton Roads portion of the book would have been more intriguing had Conroy devoted some of it to how the conference shed light on Lincoln’s attitudes toward reconstruction. Conroy ably narrates the participants’ discussion of slavery, emancipation, compensation, and reunion during the four-hour meeting, but the importance of those conversations lend themselves to an analysis of their importance to the narrative of the Reconstruction era. He devotes much of the last section of the book to the tentative arrangement of a meeting between Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, and the familiar chain of events that marked the final weeks of war. More emphasis on reconstruction issues would have made more productive use of those pages.

Despite these issues, Conroy’s study is a fast-paced, informative narrative about a long overlooked aspect of the war. Like most civil wars, the American one was decided on the battlefield, not at the conference table. Therefore it makes sense that most Civil War studies are devoted to military matters. While the Hampton Roads Conference was a brief interlude in that struggle, understanding the conference and Lincoln’s role in it fills a gap in the ever widening expanse of Civil War literature.