Review Essay

A [Suppressed] Ballot Is Stronger Than the Bullet

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It is difficult to imagine the Civil War ending as it did had Abraham Lincoln not been reelected. And yet, apart from a few lectures and a one-day symposium sponsored by the Lincoln Group of the District of Columbia, the sesquicentennial of the war paid astonishingly little attention to the presidential campaign of 1864. This disregard, however, may say less about the sesquicentennial than it does about the contours of the conventional Civil War narrative. Excepting obligatory references to the so-called blind memorandum, the electoral contest between Lincoln and McClellan has rarely been deemed the stuff of high drama. The returns appear to speak for themselves: the president won reelection by a healthy ten-point margin, pocketing 78 percent of the soldier vote and all but three states (losing only Little Mac’s adopted home state of New Jersey and the border states of Kentucky and Delaware). No close run here. Indeed, for many scholars, Lincoln’s reelection is the self-reassuring story of ideologically motivated soldiers who freely cast ballots for liberty and Union—votes that all but guaranteed more pain, more suffering, more blood. Posing no great interpretive problem, the election of 1864 has afforded historians yet another example of how the war gathered an unmistakable momentum in favor of emancipation.

In his remarkable book, Jonathan W. White boldly and persuasively challenges the received wisdom. He reaches beneath the semblance of unity to render a nuanced portrait of Union armies teeming with
dissent—more often held together by compulsion than by conviction. Historians like James M. McPherson and Earl J. Hess have marveled at the ideology that motivated and sustained Union soldiers; Chandra M. Manning, in her book _What This Cruel War Was Over_ (2007), posited that many Union soldiers quickly realized the wisdom of emancipation (indeed, she contended, much more quickly than many politicians). But White reminds us that the political divisions of the home front—the question of slavery’s demise chief among them—likewise fractured citizen armies. One of the most important achievements of this book, then, is that it restores to view the “range of sentiments exhibited by Union soldiers” (115). A stunning number of the boys in blue, White contends, were caught between the contending parties, unwilling to embrace either Republican radicalism or Democratic despair. They approached the ballot boxes in 1864 less than inspired by either choice, casting votes in a complex, close-run election that put more than two candidates and their competing visions of the war on the ballot. “Historians have failed to account for the myriad reasons that may have caused a soldier to vote for or against Abraham Lincoln,” White writes, concluding that the soldier vote is not “an altogether reliable index of the army’s ideological motivation or political sentiment” (3).

Expertly mining election data and regimental morning reports, White astoundingly concludes that “more than 40 percent of the soldiers who were eligible to vote in 1864 did not vote for re-election” (154). At least one in five Union soldiers withheld their ballots in the election of 1864, and given White’s recovery of the coercion, punishment, and even violence experienced by those soldiers who chose to express either political dissent or opposition to emancipation, it is not hard to understand why. Recounting an at times tedious litany of examples extracted from courts-martial cases, White introduces us to a Lincoln few historians have cared to know: the commander in chief who stamped out disloyalty in the army, who made public examples of soldiers brazen enough to express seditious views, and whose army officers and political operatives “mounted a concerted effort to keep Democratic papers from reaching the troops” (55).

While readers may come away with a less uplifting picture of Lincoln on the question of civil liberties, they will nonetheless gain appreciation for the stubborn challenge that disloyalty posed to the Union cause. So too will they encounter a compelling argument for the president’s crucial leadership on emancipation. In recent years, it has become fashionable to argue on behalf of the “self-emancipation”
thesis—to suggest that slavery’s demise happened on the ground, in a process begun by the slaves but later negotiated by Union soldiers. These arguments, of course, have often been leveled at Lincoln’s expense, but White reminds that a blue uniform did not a slave liberator make. Rather than an “abolitionized” rank and file forcing Lincoln’s hand, it was frequently the president himself who, with swift dismissals and denied promotions, persuaded his foot soldiers to embrace the necessity of emancipation.

Once again, White cautions that a vote for Lincoln’s reelection cannot be considered an endorsement of abolition. Nor, he says, does it demonstrate any wartime baptism in radical waters. This is a much-needed and largely persuasive retort to Manning’s thesis; a wealth of interpretive gems, the book will no doubt inspire much rich and productive debate in graduate seminars.

White’s book likewise offers abundant evidence in support of Gary W. Gallagher’s contention that preserving the Union was the persisting, fundamental aim of northern soldiers. The author hints that many Union soldiers may have cast ballots for Lincoln in an effort to short-circuit real or imagined disloyalty on the northern home front. This is an important insight—especially in light of the relative dearth of scholarship (excepting Steven Ramold’s recent book) about the not infrequently fraught relationship between soldiers and their communities back home. Further, this claim has tremendous implications for the narrative of Reconstruction, for it suggests that the immediate postwar success experienced by the Grand Old Party did not necessarily stem from any coherent consensus about the social, political, and legal consequences of the war. Support for the Republicans during Reconstruction was, perhaps for some, little more than a guttural reproof of disloyalty. Rather than seeking the reasons Republicans “retreated” from their radicalism, perhaps we should be asking if there was fire in their bellies from the start. Recent claims that the drive for reconciliation began before the war ended might not be so unrealistic after all. One hopes that White will fully unravel these threads in future work.

“Like other voters,” White contends, “soldiers felt the highs and lows of the national mood” (127). In short, they were open to a range of alternatives throughout the war. Only the fall of Atlanta on September 2, 1864, finally convinced many soldiers—and the civilians back home—that Lincoln could end the war on northern terms, but some voters were no doubt persuaded by a blizzard of broadsides, newspaper editorials, and cheap campaign keepsakes. Many were
likewise swayed by modestly priced, handsomely printed campaign biographies, the “underappreciated and understudied genre” that the historian Thomas A. Horrocks examines in a recent addition to Southern Illinois University Press’s Concise Lincoln Library (105). In this slender and prolifically illustrated volume, Horrocks parses the sixteen Lincoln campaign biographies produced ahead of the 1860 presidential election, as well as the ten published in 1864. These works, he contends, “both reinforced and shaped readers’ positive assumptions and views concerning Lincoln, introduced him to new voters, and perhaps changed the minds of those who were unsure or wary” of the prairie lawyer from Illinois (106).

Horrocks expertly establishes the nexus of politics and a thriving print culture during the early decades of the nineteenth century. First deployed during the celebrated electoral contest of 1824, campaign biographies were almost formulaic by the time Lincoln made his bid for the presidency. Authors actively repackaged candidates in a way “that would both inspire and instruct” (41). Would-be presidents were—to a man—diligent, “self made,” and without moral taint or blemish. They were likewise self-effacing, classical republicans who, the authors assured, would dexterously steer the ship of state through even choppy waters. Horrocks demonstrates how biographers in 1860 chronicled their “rail-splitting” subject in a way that braced the Republican Party’s adherence to “free labor” ideology. Four years later, campaign biographers had room enough to focus on the president’s resolve and “close relationship with the common soldier” (90). “‘The Rail Splitter,’” Horrocks writes, “had become ‘Father Abraham’” (103).

In 1860 the quantity of pro-Lincoln biographies rivaled the number endorsing all three of his opponents—the Northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, the Southern Democrat John Cabell Breckinridge, and the Constitutional Union party nominee John Bell—combined. As Horrocks concedes, data about the influence of these works is beyond reach. Yet one wonders if, given both the genre’s history and its predictable plot lines, the voting public afforded these works something less than serious consideration. Even biographies of Lincoln’s opponents, for example, touted their subjects as self-made men with the personal background and political experience necessary to salvage the Union—or to win the war. Still, as the author points out, these works provide a portal to understanding the “essential qualities” that nineteenth-century Americans yearned for in a presidential candidate (105).
In the end, both of these excellent books remind us that election results often obscure more than they reveal. Selling a candidate and suppressing the opposition can, at the end of the day, rival the influence of ideology. Elections take snapshots (and not very good ones, at that) of the capriciousness that is public opinion. And if they most certainly have consequences, only seldom do they announce mandates. How much better would our histories read—and how much healthier would our politics be—if only we intuited that lesson?