Review

JOHN F. MARSZALEK


The sesquicentennial of the Civil War witnessed a splurge of symposia and volumes discussing all aspects of the conflict. It is not surprising that many of these events and publications concerned Abraham Lincoln. The president who is regularly listed as the nation’s outstanding chief executive has been the subject of more books than anyone other than Jesus Christ. One cannot understand the Civil War, the pivotal event in American history, without knowing Lincoln’s central role in it.

With so many works already published, how is it possible to say much that is new about Lincoln and the war? In fact, there never seems to be a lack of topics about Lincoln to explore—shelves groaning under the ever expanding number of books about him. Not all such publications are outstanding, but they keep coming, and our insights into Lincoln continue to percolate.

The book under review here is multiauthored and the result of an annual meeting at Florida Atlantic University: the Alan B. Larkin Symposium on the American Presidency. Chaired by Stephen D. Engle, the symposia regularly bring together important scholars to discuss one of the nation’s past chief executives. The symposium that produced this book was titled “Abraham Lincoln’s Presidency and the Civil War.”

Much of the work presented at the Lincoln symposium is in this book, which consists of nine chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. The ten authors are all well-known historians—experts in the field of Abraham Lincoln historiography. Orville Burton wrote a major biography of Lincoln. Richard Carwardine won the Lincoln Prize for his Lincoln volume, as did Michael Burlingame when he wrote his two-volume biography. Mark Neely won the Pulitzer Prize on the occasion of his book on Lincoln and civil liberties during the war. Brooks Simpson and Mark Grimsley are leading military historians. Howard Jones is a major diplomatic historian, and J. Matthew
Gallman, Jennifer Weber, and Kate Masur are among some of the leading lights in the field. The editor, Stephen D. Engle, is himself a prominent scholar of Civil War history.

This book is reminiscent of the many such monographs long produced under the auspices of the Lincoln Forum and edited by the likes of Harold Holzer, the late John Y. Simon, Craig Symonds, and Frank J. Williams. Their books, like the one under review here, are the products of leading Lincoln scholars, first presented orally to the public and then prepared for publication as monographs. Like this book, they present cutting-edge scholarship by major scholars in the field in deeply researched and readable format.

The strength of such multiauthored anthologies is their ability to present chapter-length investigations into a variety of topics, each study done by an expert in that aspect of Lincoln’s role in the Civil War. Because of their brevity and their presentation by an expert on the topic, such books present important insights for scholars, students in college courses, and the general reading public. In an age of increasing publication costs, books like this one give the reader a solid “bang for the buck.”

An essential necessity for any book such as this one is a perceptive introduction that ties together the varied essays. This book has such an introduction, which demonstrates the talents and insights of its editor. Stephen Engle clearly shows the care that went into its organization and just what the authors are hoping to produce.

Engle points out that these essays investigate not only the varied aspects of Lincoln as president and leader of the federal effort to preserve the Union but also how the North reacted to the combat, the political situation, and the society of that time. This collection indicates how Lincoln led the war and how he tried to teach the North about all its twists and turns. He came to understand that he had to lead the effort to save the Union, but to do so he had to convince the nation that slavery had to be eradicated. He also had to lead the changed nation into the postwar years, basing his leadership on the original concepts of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It was not enough to preserve the Union; Lincoln had to ensure that it was preserved under the age-old principles of the nation’s founding and the new insights of union and liberty that the conflict brought to the fore.

To aid the reader in understanding Lincoln and the Civil War, Engle organizes the essays under three themes. The first theme covers a section that describes how the nation plunged into the conflict over slavery during the antebellum period and how Lincoln used the power
of his office to teach the public about what it all meant and what he was doing to direct the war. The second theme of this book builds on the first. Having discussed Lincoln’s role as president, the authors look at northern society and how it accommodated itself to the conflict. Finally, the third theme includes essays that evaluate how Lincoln managed the war and all its ramifications. The authors show how Lincoln used a strong hand on all the domestic events he faced, the gigantic diplomatic problems, and his role as commander in chief of the military effort. Engle’s introduction therefore does an excellent job of explaining the themes of this entire book, but it is the essays themselves that portray Lincoln’s strengths and weaknesses.

Orville Burton, formerly of the University of Illinois and presently an endowed professor at Clemson University, opens the book with a clearly reasoned description of American society from 1830 to the clash of war. He emphasizes the evolution of the United States from the agrarian society of its early years to the more sophisticated economy of the nineteenth century. The nation had seemingly agreed that slavery had a major role to play in the early agrarian society, but over time the free-soil economy of industrial and farm laborers came to see slavery as an evil. As Lincoln said, the nation came to understand that it could not exist half slave and half free, and it began to split along that fault line. Lincoln believed in liberty and union as being intertwined, so slavery’s expansion had to be halted, and the common agreement on slavery with the South therefore disappeared into the cauldron of war.

J. Matthew Gallman of the University of Florida sees Lincoln during the Civil War as a teacher exploring the meaning of citizenship during wartime. Lincoln did not require all that much from his fellow Americans; basically, though, he believed his job as president was to aid citizens to make informed decisions that would prove helpful in advancing the Union’s war effort. Yet he rarely called on his fellow man to make difficult sacrifices. As Gallman says in the last sentence of his essay, “patriotic citizenship alone . . . involved very few special rights or responsibilities in time of war” (54).

The essay by Ohio State University’s Mark Grimsley is the one most critical of Lincoln. Taking a position that is rare among Civil War historians, Grimsley argues that Lincoln blundered significantly when, during McClellan’s Peninsular Campaign, he kept Irwin McDowell’s corps back to protect Washington despite McClellan’s protest. Throughout the essay, Grimsley defends McClellan (remaining generally silent about his refusal to press forward). He believes historians have so much disdain for McClellan and so much respect for Lincoln that their military vision is clouded. Surely the point is arguable, but
then Grimsley ends his essay by citing the theories of a Jungian psychologist and a mythologist that he believes affect historians’ views of McClellan. Historians see McClellan as “the High Chair Tyrant”—the little child banging his spoon on his high chair tray and screaming for attention. Grimsley says historians allow their analysis of McClellan to slip into this archetype. Thus, Grimsley says, Lincoln’s response to McClellan’s campaign should accurately be seen “as a well intentioned but misguided military adventure” (84).

The next two essays deal with home front affairs. Jennifer Weber of the University of Kansas does an excellent job in summarizing her well-regarded book on northern politicians who opposed the war—the so-called Copperheads. She points out that these dissenters called for the war to end immediately because they believed the South would then immediately reenter the Union. Most Copperheads were racists and states’ righters who believed Lincoln was a big-government villain. They were confident that Lincoln would lose the election of 1864, but they became noticeably silent when he won. In fact, though, they had never had wide public support anyway.

Award-winning historian Mark Neely, now an emeritus professor at Pennsylvania State University, presents a strongly argued revisionist view of Lincoln and the writ of habeas corpus. He demonstrates clearly that it was Democratic lawyers who created the myth of the great writ—the myth that Lincoln suspended the writ and that it prevented the accused from being confronted with the reason for their arrests. In fact, Neely indicates, the writ allowed soldiers to avoid military service. As Neely phrases it, “From the army’s point of view, it was the Great Writ of Skulking. It was the last refuge of the deserter and the bounty jumper” (119). The writ was not about jailing without stated cause.

The issue of emancipation, like the writ, was a subject of contemporary controversy and later historical interest. Kate Masur of Northwestern University here effectively summarizes her book on emancipation in Washington, D.C. She demonstrates clearly how African Americans in the nation’s capital battled to obtain their rights and how a study of their consistent pressure in Washington provides insight into the topic in the nation as a whole. Washington was “at the leading edge of emancipation,“ she concludes (145).

The essay that most directly investigates Lincoln himself—his leadership style—is written by Richard Carwardine, renowned British Lincoln scholar and most recently president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. With his many years of studying Lincoln, Carwardine deftly shows the president’s magnificent leadership skills. As the title of the essay states it, Lincoln displayed a “visible hand.” He strongly used
the power available to him to effectively govern the nation at war. He had amazing political skills, most significantly “his fatalism and his enterprising activism” (155).

Most Civil War buffs but not scholars pay little attention to American diplomacy during the war. Yet Lincoln’s leadership in this area proved decisive too. Howard Jones, an emeritus professor at the University of Alabama and a leading Civil War diplomatic historian, describes the direct role Lincoln played in preventing the major European powers, England and France, from intervening in America’s war. Lincoln directed his secretary of state, William H. Seward, to make it eminently clear that any European intervention or recognition of the Confederacy would result in war with the United States. Lincoln demonstrated in the management of Federal diplomacy what was obvious in all his Civil War actions—he was a powerful leader.

Brooks Simpson, of Arizona State University and the author of the best book on Ulysses S. Grant as Civil War general, argues that rather than debate the what-ifs of Reconstruction had Lincoln lived, historians should investigate what Lincoln did on the topic during his presidency. Like Carwardine, Simpson shows that Lincoln used a visible hand to tie Reconstruction to the war effort. Like all else he did during his presidency, Lincoln set a mild policy, but then the policy evolved and grew harsher as the war itself became harsher. And Simpson concludes no one really knows what Lincoln would have done during the Reconstruction era had he lived, and predicting it from one’s own attitudes is a waste of time. Lincoln had “a commitment to restore legal civil government complicated by the challenges posed by slavery and the need to secure areas through military occupation” (220).

Finally this insightful book ends with what the editor calls the epilogue. Written by leading Lincoln historian Michael Burlingame of the University of Illinois at Springfield, this essay is titled “Lincoln’s Presidential Legacy: The Last Best Hope.” However, it does not function as a traditional epilogue—that is, it does not bring together the previous essays. There is little evidence that Burlingame is commenting on what had already been said. Rather he muses on Lincoln and concludes, “His presence and his leadership inspired his contemporaries; his life story can do the same for generations to come” (241).

In summary, this book provides both the general reader and the specialist important insight into the pivotal roles that Lincoln played in the Civil War. Although the authors do not place Lincoln into the history of the presidency itself, such a comparative study would make good sense, given the symposium that gave birth to this book. And, no doubt, we can hope for such a monograph in the future.