
Book Reviews

Abraham Lincoln's Presidency: Leadership at the Highest Level

by Nancy Spannaus and Stuart Rosenblatt

Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln

by Doris Kearns Goodwin
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005
915 pages, hardcover, \$35.00

Lincoln's War: The Untold Story of America's Greatest President as Commander-in-Chief

by Geoffrey Perret
New York: Random House, 2004
470 pages, hardcover, \$35.00

Contrary to the pseudo-psychiatric drivel which often passes for Lincoln scholarship these days, these two books make a significant contribution to elaborating the kind of leadership President Abraham Lincoln provided to our nation. We recommend them both to those looking to understand the qualities, and the mission, of our nation's greatest President, and especially to those elected to leadership in the U.S. Congress.

In an article published in *EIR* shortly after his death, in August 2003, historian H. Graham Lowry set a standard for defining the principle of leadership which Lincoln represented, not just for the United States, but for the world as a whole.¹ Lincoln was a leader, Lowry wrote, who not only represented a commitment to the mission of defending the only republic in the history of the world: a constitutional republic, that had as its principle, the sacred creative potential of each individual citizen, but one who was capable of inspiring his fellow citizens to find the resources in themselves to fight for that same mission. Lincoln was willing to give his

1. H. Graham Lowry, "Re-creating the Republic: How Abraham Lincoln Organized Victory for the Union," *EIR*, Aug. 29, 2003.

life to fulfill that mission, because he knew that the very future of both his nation, and mankind as a whole, depended upon its success.

Lowry substantiated his thesis by recounting episodes from Lincoln's life which gave the reader sensuous insight into Lincoln's mind, allowing the reader to relive or participate in his process of thought. While surely he would have provided further elaboration to this article, if he had lived to complete it himself, the point is effectively made, especially in Lowry's recounting of Lincoln's relations with the army.

Team of Rivals

When read with Lowry's thesis in mind, the well-documented tome by Doris Kearns Goodwin is a very effective presentation of Lincoln's ascent to the Presidency, and his operation of a government dominated by those who had been his rivals for that post. Specifically, Goodwin had compiled the letters and histories of William Seward, Salmon Chase, and Edward Bates, all of whom Lincoln had brought into his government, as Secretary of State, Secretary of the Treasury, and Attorney General, respectively. She thus chronicles Lincoln's fight for the Presidency, and to save the Union, from the standpoint of how he is distinguished from these men, and how he chooses to deal with them for the benefit of the nation.

Why Lincoln became President, instead of his much more celebrated and politically established rivals, is the first question which Goodwin tackles. Without saying so in so many words, she establishes without a doubt that Lincoln was the only candidate who did not attempt to radically change his political "image," in order to win the nomination. Not that Lincoln was not ambitious; he surely was. And a more thorough ward-heeler style of politician, knowing every section of his district like the back of his hand, and how to get its voters to the polls, could hardly be found. But Lincoln had a strength of character, and an ability to read and work with the character of others, without egoism and without compromising principle, that helped him build a machine for victory.



National Archives

In the process of searching for generals who could, and would, fight, Lincoln became a keen military commander himself. Instead of suicidally fixating on taking Richmond, Lincoln implemented a classic flanking attack, cutting the Confederacy in two. Here, Lincoln and his son Tad are shown walking through Richmond, on April 4, 1865, five days before the South surrendered.

Even more engrossing is Goodwin's discussion of how Lincoln handled the Presidency, in the face of the worst crisis which the young republic had ever faced. Unlike all too many biographers of Lincoln today, she refuses to get caught up in this or that statement which Lincoln made about slavery, but instead, chronicles his strategic approach to the issue from the standpoint which he had maintained throughout his entire life: that slavery was an abomination to human freedom, and had ultimately to be eliminated. It is particularly useful to see her juxtaposing the judgments of Frederick Douglass—in the end, one of the President's greatest defenders—to the actions which Lincoln took, or refused to take, on this defining issue. Douglass's judgment stands the test of time: Lincoln may not always do what you want him to do, or take the most courageous action when you want it to be done, but he will stand by his word, and he eventually came through.

And, he will treat you like a worthwhile human being. This quality of Lincoln's comes through again and again through the story of his Presidency, not only in his well-known gentle handling of supplicants to the White House, but, less well known, in his handling of his Cabinet. Lincoln found himself embroiled in constant brawls, on both policy and personal conflicts, with his disparate Cabinet members. In some cases, he would find himself totally outnumbered, in terms of a strategic decision on the war. But, Goodwin shows that Lincoln not only took responsibility for making the final decisions himself (and for mastering the body of knowledge required to do so), but for making his Cabinet argue the issue through, and understand his reasoning. On one occasion, Lin-

coln presided over an all-night meeting, after which a consensus on his original judgment was finally reached.

Ultimately, what is great about this book, is the fact that it provides such a live picture of the sublime Lincoln himself. Goodwin does not attempt to provide the history of the American System economic tradition from which Lincoln comes—a definite weakness.² But by presenting the fullness of his Presidency, Goodwin does include the relevant economic measures which he took, and certainly his commitment to the core principles of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, which he—as did the leading Founding Fathers—understood as *one unit*. And Lincoln's character, as a leader with empathy, humor, humility, anguish, and great intellectual and moral strength, comes shining through.

Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief

Perret's book is more narrowly defined, as it addresses Lincoln's role as commander of the Civil War, and specifically the way in which he expanded Presidential power during the course of that war. This focus makes the book particularly timely, if not a hot potato, since the current Bush Administration is attempting to mis-use Lincoln's war leadership as a model for its actions today. Anyone who pays close attention

2. See Nancy Spannaus and Christopher White, eds., *The Political Economy of the American Revolution*, second edition (Washington, D.C.: EIR News Service, 1996); W. Allen Salisbury, *The Civil War and the American System: America's Battle with Britain, 1860-1876* second edition (Washington, D.C.: EIR News Service, 1992).

to Perret's argument, however, would have to dismiss the Bush-Cheney assertion as the sophistry it is.

Like Goodwin, Perret fails to identify the American System tradition as the source of Lincoln's outlook. But he does show how Lincoln changed over the course of his Presidency, making one breakthrough after another, in comprehending and executing military strategy; in waging the legal and political battles necessary to getting the war powers he needed; in deepening his understanding of the central role of emancipation in the struggle; and in his self-conscious appreciation of his own identity as a willful actor in history.

Perret concentrates on six command decisions which Lincoln made: his controversial suspension of the writ of habeas corpus; his banning of all literature sympathetic to the Rebels; the blockade against Southern ports; the Emancipation Proclamation; the issuance of Greenbacks, and the military draft. Every change was initiated by Lincoln under his expanded conception of the war powers embedded in Article II of the Constitution, and most were ultimately ratified by Federal courts or the U.S. Congress.

Habeas Corpus

From April to July of 1861, with Congress out of session, the rebellion broke out at Fort Sumter, and Lincoln was forced to act. Lincoln carried out a series of emergency actions to preserve the Union, that would be authorized during the Summer by the Congress. He deployed 40,000 men for the Army and Navy; summoned up 42,000 three-year volunteers; appropriated money to purchase weapons; instituted a blockade of all Southern ports; and suspended the writ of habeas corpus.

According to the Constitution, the power to suspend the writ lies in the hands of Congress, but in the emergency, with Congress out of session, Lincoln argued that the President has the power to take this action. This provoked howls of protest throughout the war. The writ was suspended several times, and ultimately up to 30,000 individuals were incarcerated.

Despite various legal cases, Lincoln felt compelled to publicly defend his action, and did so in his "Letter to Erastus Corning and Others," in June of 1863. Lincoln developed his reasoning, highlighting the difference between constitutional protections afforded the citizens under conditions of rebellion, and those during peacetime. Lincoln sharply differentiated between those two circumstances, expounded at length on the plottings that had been going on to overthrow the Union prior to the outbreak of insurrection, and concluded that he had probably made too few arrests, not too many!

In the course of the letter, the President also addressed his very controversial jailing of Ohio Congressman Clement Vallandigham, who was openly agitating against prosecution of the war. As Perret tells it:

"He [Lincoln] argued that the Constitution's barrier to arbitrary arrests was a danger 'if arrests shall never be made until defined crimes have been committed.' What people no-

ticed most in this lengthy reply was a single, cleverly crafted sentence: 'Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wiley agitator who induces him to desert?'"

The suspension of habeas corpus did become an issue for the courts, with Chief Justice Rober Taney ruling against the President's action. Later, however, the Congress and the nation supported Lincoln's imposition of martial law with passage of the Habeas Corpus Act of March 3, 1863.

Emancipation

Lincoln was always opposed to slavery, but his approach to emancipation went through several changes, from compensation to colonization, and eventually to some undeveloped notion of integration. The legal/constitutional issues involved were enormous, viz., the right to property (i.e., slaves), and the incorporation of slavery itself into the Constitution, which made simple emancipation initially out of the question.

As Lincoln neared his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, he utilized the legal thesis developed by War Department legal counsel, William Whiting, who expounded on the " 'hitherto unused' powers of the Constitution." Whiting developed the legal justification for what would become military emancipation, and allowed Lincoln to carry out one of the boldest moves of his Presidency.³ For Lincoln, this fell within the expanded powers of the President to wage war, and in this case, as a war measure to suppress the rebellion.

Perret points out that, in Lincoln's mind, emancipating the slaves would allow him to "cheat death," by accomplishing something immortal. Lincoln acknowledged that, "We must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued." Lincoln also stated that military emancipation would have to be followed by a constitutional amendment, which was passed by Congress, in the weeks before his death.

Lincoln as Military Commander

As for Lincoln's prosecution of the war, Perret is quite good on several areas that have not been fully explored previously.

His appreciation of the impact of the original war plan developed by the aged Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott at the outset of hostilities, certainly stands out. Most Civil War historians and Lincoln scholars have identified Scott's Anaconda Plan as quite passive, a squeezing of the Confederacy from the outside. Not so Perret, who dug up very useful studies of the plan, and realized that Scott intended his original outline to be an aggressive, classical, flanking maneuver against the

3. In fact, none other than anti-slavery warrior John Quincy Adams had presaged this mode of eliminating slavery in a House floor debate in 1836, arguing that under the war powers, slavery could be constitutionally interfered with, even in the original slave-states. (See William Lee Miller, *Arguing about Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress*; Vintage Press, 1998.)

nascent Confederacy. Scott realized the treacherous terrain between Washington and Richmond would not be conducive to military operations, and he proposed to merely attack and pin down the enemy in the eastern theater. His main assaults would be waged in the western theater, where he called for deploying a large land army and water-borne armada to cut the Confederacy in two, and aggressively attack east from bases secured along the Mississippi.

That plan would eventually carry the day, and Perret's description provides a useful exposition of military strategy, which ran counter to the politically motivated "On to Richmond" battle cries that dominated the war.

Late in the war, after Gen. William Sherman had taken Atlanta, Perret points out the decisive battles fought by Gen. Phil Sheridan around Richmond and in the Shenandoah Valley cemented the Union victory in the south, and guaranteed Lincoln's re-election. Perret's observations are novel in pointing out the strategic import of Sheridan's campaign.

The author is also quite good on presenting Lincoln's absolutely crucial role in supplying arms and munitions for the army. Appreciating Lincoln's wonderful intellect and inventive capabilities, Perret sees the President as a man of ideas, and the driving force to bring technological innovations to the battlefield as quickly as possible.

"Lincoln was an aspiring inventor. He held patent number 6469 for a machine that would lift boats over shoals. The principle was sound, because large vessels were raised from the seabed more than a hundred years later in the manner Lincoln had anticipated. The only topic on which he ever gave a public lecture was 'Discoveries and Inventions,' shortly before he ran for president."

Lincoln was directly responsible for the production and employment of repeating rifles, ironclad vessels of all types, balloons utilized for intelligence gathering, and many other innovations. He replaced procurement officers repeatedly if they stood in the way of technological progress.

The President also spurred on the training and mass employment of cavalry divisions. The combined impact of superior rifles, rifled artillery, and cavalry units vastly improved Union firepower over the more poorly equipped enemy. Perret reports that, by March of 1865, the Union Army had 260 cavalry regiments armed with 250,000 repeating rifles and carbines, the equivalent of nearly 2 million muskets.

As the war escalated, Lincoln came to appreciate the role of logistics in depth, firepower, and manpower. Hence he scoured the countryside for manpower, moving from an all-volunteer army, to the draft, to the integration of black soldiers into the army and into combat.

Perret also chronicles Lincoln's maddening search for generals who could fight, and would fight, and offers some very insightful critiques of the rogues' gallery of early generals. The author's 1997 book on Grant (*Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier President*) is an indication of his appreciation for those generals who did rise to the occasion.

Perret also explores, with great insight, Lincoln's development as a military strategist. He traces the evolution of the President as a first-rate military thinker. Initially too deferential to the likes of the treacherous McClellan, Lincoln immerses himself in a thorough study of military works, engages in intense discussions with Stanton and others, and emerges as a keen military commander himself.

Lincoln detested maneuvers, of all types. As Perret repeatedly chronicles, Lincoln was only interested in crushing the armies of the Confederacy, though he grew to realize that creative application of massive force, as utilized by Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan was the preferred method.

Lincoln's Immortality

Lincoln saw himself as both a tool for righting the accumulated wrongs of the past generations that had brought the nation to Civil War, and a mortal man who had to answer to a higher being for his own actions. His first obligation was to save the Union at all cost, regardless of consequences to himself.

Perret develops a fine example of Lincoln's selflessness when confronting the paradox of his own re-election in the Summer of 1864, and the need for a massive increase in troop strength to win the war. Union armies were stalled outside of Petersburg and Atlanta, and had already suffered enormous casualties in the Summer campaigning. Lincoln called upon Congress to raise an additional 500,000 troops.

Lincoln was told by his allies in Congress that the request would doom their own re-election chances, and those of the President as well. Lincoln responded, "I have thought that all over. My election is not necessary, but it is necessary for me to put down the rebellion. I must have five hundred thousand more men. You give me that law and I will put it down before my successor takes his seat."

This President was gripped by a sense of immortality unlike any other in American history. There are many statements Lincoln made that testify to this, but we choose to conclude with one he made to the 166th Ohio Infantry Regiment in August of 1864:

"It is not merely for today, but for all time to come that we should perpetuate for our children's children this great and free government, which we have enjoyed all our lives. I beg you to remember this, not merely for my sake, but for yours. I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each of you may have, through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise, and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright—not only for one, but for two or three years. The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel."