

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Lincoln season

by [Marc Arkin](#)

On *Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-chief* by James M. McPherson

For students of the Civil War, the lone figure of Abraham Lincoln fills the place occupied by the entire founding generation for historians of the early republic. There is simply no other person of comparable stature during the war years. This has certain drawbacks. One of them is a problem of oversupply. In living memory, readers have been treated to Lincoln the theologian (William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln*), Lincoln the rhetor (Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*), Lincoln the master politician (Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize), and Lincoln the messianic figure (Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln: Redeemer President*, winner of the Lincoln Prize), to name but a few of the available works. A look at my own bookshelf shows probably half a dozen Lincoln biographies of various sorts.

And, as we approach the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth this coming February, oversupply is about to become glut. By my current count, no less than twenty-seven new books on our sixteenth president are slated to appear between now and then. As one might imagine, new angles are hard to come by. There is Lincoln and literacy (Daniel Wolff, *How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the Educations that Made Them*), Lincoln and technology (Thomas B. Allen and Roger MacBride Allen, *Mr. Lincoln's High-Tech War*; Thomas Crump, *Abraham Lincoln's World: How Riverboats, Railroads and Republicans Transformed America*), Lincoln and Stephen Douglas (Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America*; Roy Morris, Jr., *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America*), and, not surprisingly in a solipsistic generation, several works on Lincoln and us (Jean H. Baker, Mario M. Cuomo, Joan Flinspach, and Sara Vaughn Gabbard, *Lincoln Lessons: Reflections on America's Greatest Leader*; Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America*; Eric Foner, *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*).

Into this crowded field steps James B. McPherson, dean of America's Civil War historians and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *The Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), with no less than two entrants, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* and, due out in February, *Abraham Lincoln: A Presidential Life*. It is hard to know what to make of all this Lincolniana—and, in this particular case, whether one is spending time on the warm-up act when you might as well wait for the main event.

As McPherson observes, Lincoln was the only United States president whose entire time in office was bounded by war. His administration began with the crisis created by South Carolina's blockade

of Fort Sumter and ended with his assassination five days after Lee's surrender at Appomattox. At his death, Confederate armies were still in the field. A militia captain who saw no action in the Blackhawk War of 1832, Lincoln was thrust from the very first into the problems of military command; during the four years he was in office, he spent more time on military matters than anything else. It is the thesis of this concise, lucid, and accessible work that, for better or for worse and largely out of necessity, Lincoln created the role of presidential commander-in-chief.

In this, Lincoln labored under grave disadvantages. His adversary, Jefferson Davis, was far better prepared for the task. A graduate of West Point, Davis had fought as a colonel in a Mississippi regiment during the Mexican War and had served with distinction as Secretary of War in the Pierce administration from 1853 to 1857. But perhaps worse than Lincoln's own inexperience—a remarkable autodidact, he largely overcame that deficit with a crash course of reading in military strategy—were the problems of logistics, personnel, and politics. The logistical disadvantage was clear. The eleven Confederate states covered a territory of more than 750,000 square miles, larger than France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and Great Britain combined. Like the original thirteen colonies during the American Revolution, to secure independence all they needed was to defend their territory; the Union forces had to dislodge them while fighting through hostile countryside.

The personnel disadvantage perhaps was less obvious but no less real. At the outset of hostilities, the military was overwhelmingly Southern and from the opposition Democratic Party; three-quarters of the officer corps were Democrats. Lincoln aptly described their war strategy as fighting with “elder stalks” (squirt pistols) filled with “rose water.” Aside from divided sympathies, there was also the question of competence. In the various iterations of the Union army command, Lincoln cycled through a sorry succession of generals. When Lincoln assumed office, the military's general-in-chief was Winfield Scott, seventy-five years old, weighing over three hundred pounds, suffering from edema and vertigo, and with a disconcerting propensity to fall asleep in meetings.

His successor was the thirty-four-year-old George B. McClellan, whose *amour propre* and reluctance to fight are the stuff of legend, and McPherson quotes enough of his smarmy letters to drive home the point. But McPherson also demonstrates that McClellan was effectively the leader of a fifth column, both among the junior officer corps and among his influential political friends, that continued long after Lincoln finally cashiered him. McClellan's successor, George B. Halleck, a military scholar nicknamed “Old Brains,” was blessed with strangely bulging eyes, an irritable personality, and a bizarre habit of constantly scratching his elbows. He suffered greatly from hemorrhoids, which became even more painful under stress. As a result, he dosed himself with opium during military reverses, becoming as Lincoln said “little more than a first-rate clerk” under fire. It was not until the last year of the war, when Lincoln hit on the combination of Ulysses Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, Philip Sheridan, and George Thomas, that he finally had a fighting team with both the will and the wherewithal to win the war.

In the political realm, Lincoln was forced to deal with political appointee generals of limited military skills, chosen because their local followings enabled them to raise troops in the days before the Union instituted a draft. Both political leaders and a politicized press, especially the influential Horace Greeley of *The New York Tribune*, second-guessed Lincoln's every move, particularly on the issue of emancipation. Further, as Union losses surged, Lincoln had to navigate a rising antiwar movement among Democrats sympathetic both to the South and to the continuation of slavery, a movement that raised doubt as to his prospects for reelection.

All this is perhaps an oft-told tale among civil war historians. What distinguishes this book is its close focus on Lincoln's development as a war leader. As McPherson observes, although the Constitution provides that the president “shall be the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States,” it nowhere defines what the powers of the presidential commander-in-chief might

be, and in Lincoln's day there was little precedent on the issue. Instead, Lincoln had to improvise on the fly.

According to McPherson, Lincoln undertook five interrelated wartime functions: defining the nation's war aims, mobilizing the Union's resources to achieve those war aims, planning for the deployment of the armed forces, managing the movement of armies in particular campaigns, and developing tactics for the field of actual battle. Particularly in these last three, Lincoln was a more "hands-on" military leader than any president, before or since.

It is hardly surprising that, as chief executive, Lincoln defined the nation's war aims: to preserve the federal union and the country as a republic based on majority rule. The national strategy that Lincoln developed in the service of reuniting the country is perhaps more eye-opening. Indeed, it was Lincoln who coined the term "war power" to justify a multitude of extra-constitutional executive acts, ranging from raising troops and blockading Confederate ports before Congress authorized hostilities, to the suspension of habeas corpus (held unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in a decision that Lincoln ignored), and the "arbitrary arrests" of civilian Confederate sympathizers operating in the North, some of whom were then tried by military courts and subsequently imprisoned.

Even more surprising is Lincoln's deep personal involvement in day-to-day military affairs. As McPherson gracefully details the progress of the war from campaign to campaign, he effectively makes the claim that Lincoln was a more sophisticated military strategist than his professional generals. Certainly, he was a more aggressive one. For example, early in the war, Lincoln grasped that Union superiority in manpower, munitions, and supplies would allow it to overcome the disadvantage of operating on "outside lines." By "concentration in time"—having several Union forces attack simultaneously—the Federals could neutralize the South's advantage by tying Confederate forces down so that they could not reinforce one another on their interior lines. Repeatedly, and without much effect, he pressed recalcitrant generals to recognize that victory would not come by capture of the Confederate capital but rather by pursuit and destruction of the Confederate army. Indeed, one of the most startling aspects of McPherson's account is just how often Lincoln's officers ignored direct orders.

McPherson uses Lincoln's approach to slavery to illustrate the complex interplay of politics and strategy in his prosecution of the war. To ensure border state support, Lincoln early insisted that the war was intended solely to preserve the Union. This required both a national and a military policy of leaving slavery alone. As it became increasingly clear that slave labor sustained the Confederate economy and its armies, Northern opinion began to recognize that the abolition of slavery was a necessary part of a war strategy that would target enemy resources and, eventually, with the use of black troops and labor, turn them to Union advantage. The Emancipation Proclamation—another extra-constitutional act, some would say—was the culmination of Lincoln's management of this highly contested process of turning a war for union into a war for union and freedom both.

McPherson is too skilled an historian to let this book become a mere work of hagiography as so many Lincoln studies are. He is well aware that Lincoln's policies contributed to an unprincipled growth of the executive and that Lincoln's record on civil liberties was decidedly spotty. Lincoln's attitude toward the Constitution was instrumental at best. Looking back on the early weeks of the war from the vantage point of 1864, Lincoln remarked, "Was it possible to lose the nation, and yet preserve the Constitution? By general law life *and* limb must be protected; yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life; but a life is never wisely given to save a limb. I felt that measures, otherwise unconstitutional, might become lawful, by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the Constitution through the preservation of the nation." Lincoln's vision of his war powers was more sweeping still, "as commander-in-chief of the army and navy, in time of war ... I have a right to take any measure which may best subdue the enemy"; "I conceive that I may in an emergency do

things on military grounds that cannot be done constitutionally by Congress.” To his critics, Lincoln replied pithily that his war measures and war powers were like an emetic needed to cure a sick patient; once returned to health, there is little danger that the cured patient will want to spend the rest of his life taking emetics. One wonders what a man with such a wry outlook would make of all this bicentenary fuss.

Marc Arkin is Marc M. Arkin is a Professor of Law at the Fordham University School of Law. A 1982 graduate of the Yale Law School, Professor Arkin also holds a Ph.D. in American Religious History from the Religious Studies Department of Yale University. She clerked for the Honorable Ralph K. Winter of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit and spent several years as a litigator with the law firm of Debevoise and Plimpton before joining the Fordham faculty. She is the author of scholarly articles in areas ranging from nineteenth century American habeas corpus practice to the influence of David Hume on the thought of James Madison, and, most recently, the role of New England regionalism in national affairs during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In addition, Professor Arkin has written on law, religion, and history for a variety of publications including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and *The New Criterion*. At Fordham she teaches, among other courses, civil procedure, mass tort litigation, and conflict of laws.

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