

American Exceptionalism: Union Soldiers Revered Lincoln And His Merciful Leadership

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Review

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Union soldiers revered Lincoln and his merciful leadership

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Davis, William C. *Lincoln's Men: How President Lincoln Became Father to an Army and a Nation.* Free Press, ISBN 684833379

William C. Davis, who has authored numerous fine works on American Civil War topics, has written another impressive one entitled, **Lincoln's Men: How President Lincoln Became Father to an Army and a Nation**, which helps us answer one of the most pertinent, and arguably one of the most fundamental questions which any people, and their historians may ever ask: "What, if anything, is unique or exceptional about our nation?"

There are several different approaches, but this question is best answered by studying those individuals whom the nation reveres as national heroes. England has her Alfred the Great, France her Napoleon, and Germany her Bismark. And in America, there is Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln stands apart as not only our most popular president, but also our most popular American. By studying him, or rather by studying what Americans revere in him, one can gain a better grasp of the uniqueness or exceptionalism of America.

Davis's study focuses on the Union soldier's opinions of Abraham Lincoln. In developing this work, Davis researched 600 manuscript collections and 200 or more published sets of wartime diaries and letters. One may wonder, as some did in respect to James McPherson's work in this field, whether these sources best represent the opinions and ideas of the 2 million who served in blue.

Like McPherson before him, Davis admits that some were illiterate, maybe 30 percent, but that one cannot study the opinions of those who left no records. Historians can only make conclusions from what remains, and these diaries and letters give us insight into the soldiers' opinions better than anything else that we have. Both Davis and McPherson should be complimented for developing a

convincing answer to the question of what, if anything, is unique or exceptional about the United States.

The soldiers' opinions on several controversial issues provide overwhelming evidence that they revered Lincoln more than they revered any of their contemporaries. While some soldiers reacted negatively to Lincoln's dismissal of McClellan, his issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, and his 1864 campaign, the majority supported the president through all of these events. The soldiers appreciated McClellan's organization of the army but exhibited greater appreciation for Lincoln's leadership. They approved of the Proclamation, although not altogether out of egalitarian impulses. They were more likely to applaud the document as another weapon in the Union's arsenal. And for the 1864 election, the vast majority of soldiers voted for Lincoln and firmly applauded his re-election.

According to Davis, the soldiers supported Lincoln because Lincoln supported them. Throughout the war, Lincoln visited troops in the field and in hospitals, and warmly greeted them in the White House without any prior appointment. The soldiers well knew that, on an almost weekly basis, he spared the lives of soldiers condemned to death, as he preferred to show mercy rather than punishment. They appreciated his steadfast determination to save the nation and to finish the war. Lincoln's actions towards his soldiers enhanced his reputation so that, as Davis astutely concludes, they referred to him not as President Lincoln, but as "Father Abraham."

Lincoln transcended the title of his office, becoming something more dear, more personal, and more revered than any of their generals or any other American.

Although Davis's summaries of the soldiers' opinions more than adequately provide the reader with a strong sense of their views, it might be interesting to know the exact number of soldiers who commented on each pivotal event and what percentage supported Lincoln's actions and what percentage did not. It would also be fascinating to know if Union soldiers from certain states were more likely to applaud Lincoln's actions or despise them and the number of soldiers who opposed emancipation at the beginning of the war but approved of it by the end. As a slice of 19th century American society, these soldiers' opinions, if studied in this manner, would substantially enrich our understanding of the Civil War.

This point aside, Davis has produced a fine work, which is easily read and thoroughly informative. For anyone who has an interest in Abraham Lincoln, especially how he related to his soldiers, this is a must read. And for those who have an interest in knowing what is exceptional or unique about America, this work provides voluminous information on America's most popular hero and highlights some of those qualities for which Abraham Lincoln was revered.

Timothy S. Good, author of We Saw Lincoln Shot, writes from Springfield, Illinois.