

Lincoln, the Cabinet, and the Generals

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Recommended Citation

Owens, Mackubin T. (2011) "Lincoln, the Cabinet, and the Generals," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 2

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.2.05

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss2/4>

Review

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Spring 2011

Hearn, Chester G *Lincoln, the Cabinet, and the Generals*. LSU Press, \$39.95
ISBN 978-0-8071-3637-9

Combining Political and Military History

As president, Abraham Lincoln had to navigate the treacherous waters of partisan politics in order to prosecute the war to save the Union. To do so, he developed a working coalition comprised primarily of moderate Republicans and War Democrats, while appeasing radical Republicans when he could. There was not much he could do about the “peace” wing of the Democratic Party, which veered perilously close to crossing the line from dissent to obstruction.

How Lincoln navigated these waters is the subject of Chester Hearn’s excellent book, *Lincoln, the Cabinet, and the Generals*. While there are fine individual treatments of both Lincoln’s cabinet choices (Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals*) and military commanders (James McPherson’s *Tried by War* and T. Harry Williams’ *Lincoln and His Generals*), this book is the first to provide a broad overview of Lincoln’s complex relationship with both groups. This synthesis is important, because Lincoln’s approach to both groups cannot be separated.

Lincoln’s choices both for his cabinet and for military command reflected his sensitivity to the problem of partisan politics. In making his choices, Lincoln attempted to balance ideological and regional interests within the infant Republican Party, maintain the loyalty of the so-called Border States, and appease War Democrats.

Of course, Lincoln appointed his four main rivals for the Republican nomination in 1860 to cabinet posts: William Seward as Secretary of State; Edward Bates as Attorney-General; Simon Cameron as Secretary of War; and Salmon Chase as Secretary of the Treasury. Seward and Chase still thought they

should have been president.

Seward thought of himself as prime minister and took steps during the secession crisis without Lincoln's knowledge, notably assuring Confederate commissioners that Ft. Sumter would be abandoned. On this occasion, Lincoln made it clear that he was the president and accordingly was responsible for administration policy. Subsequently, Seward became Lincoln's most loyal cabinet member.

As a member of the cabinet friendly to the Radicals, Chase caused no end of problems for Lincoln. Nonetheless, despite the fact that he had no experience as a financier, he became an extremely effective Secretary of the Treasury, working closely with Congress and private bankers such as Jay Cooke to fund the war while keeping the rate of inflation relatively low.

Cameron's integrity was always suspect, and after Cameron made a series of missteps, Lincoln named him ambassador to Russia, replacing him with Edwin Stanton, a War Democrat who had also been James Buchanan's attorney-general. In tandem with Major General Montgomery Meigs, the Quartermaster General of the US Army, Stanton was able to tap the entrepreneurial talents of northern businessmen, effectively mobilizing the resources necessary to prevail in a modern industrial conflict.

The tensions that developed in Lincoln's cabinet were a microcosm of the difficulties the president faced in his conduct of the war as a whole. Lincoln had to constantly hold both the radical Republicans and "Peace Democrats" at bay. The former saw Lincoln's prudential approach to the war as being too timid. The latter sought a negotiated settlement with the seceded states. Many of the radicals did not think Lincoln was up to task of commander-in-chief. They constantly pushed for a government by cabinet, which they wanted to control by ousting the War Democrats and replacing them with antislavery Republicans.

Hearn argues that Lincoln did a much better job of manipulating his cabinet than he did his generals. But he came to dominate the military field as well. With little military experience (and a cabinet with little as well), Lincoln initially deferred to his generals, falling back on what Eliot Cohen called in Supreme Command the "normal" theory of civil-military relations, wherein the civilian authority establishes the goals of the war and then steps out of the way to permit the generals to implement what they believe to be the best military measures to

achieve those goals. But as Cohen also shows, Lincoln soon became an active commander-in-chief who frequently "interfered" with his generals by constantly asking questions and goading them to perform more aggressively.

Lincoln intuitively understood that civilian leaders cannot simply leave the military to its own devices during a conflict because war is an iterative process involving the interplay of active wills. He recognized that wars are not fought for their own purpose but to secure political goals and therefore that the military instrument requires constant adjustment.

Thus Lincoln understood that what appears to be the case at the outset of the war may change as the war continues, modifying the relationship between political goals and military means. The fact remains that wars are not fought for their own purposes but to achieve policy goals set by the political leadership of the state. And the truth is that, as James McPherson has observed, Lincoln turned out to be a better strategist than any of his generals.

Perhaps the most important political-military challenge Lincoln faced was that, early in the war, his generals pursued the war they wanted to fight rather than the one their commander-in-chief wanted them to fight. The clearest example of this problem was General George McClellan, who disagreed with many of Lincoln's policies, and indeed may have attempted to sabotage them.

This it was not McClellan's "incompetence" that caused problems for the Union. Instead it was that he essentially refused to fight the war on the basis that Lincoln wanted, especially after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

It is easy to criticize McClellan, but his view of the war was not uncommon during its early phases. Even Lincoln deplored the potential resort to a "remorseless revolutionary struggle" against the South. But by the summer of 1862, he realized that the Confederacy would not relent unless the character of the war changed. There were substantial political risks for Lincoln and the Republicans, but he concluded that the only way to save the Union was to ratchet up the pressure. The successful Union generals were those who adapted to the changing circumstances; McClellan was not one of them.

As was the case with the cabinet, Lincoln faced a major problem with regard to his choices for high command: satisfying the demands of different groups within the electorate whose support he needed to prosecute the war, especially

War Democrats and German-Americans. For instance, one of the reasons that Lincoln did not sack McClellan sooner was that such a move would have agitated the Democrats, who revered him as an obstacle to what they took to be the radical policies of the Republicans and their abolitionist allies. These, the Democrats believed, were destined to ruin the Union and lose the war.

On occasion, this need for balance created problems. For example in the fall of 1862, Grant was preparing for a move south along the Mississippi Central Railroad to capture Vicksburg. Meanwhile, John McClernand, a War Democrat and friend of Lincoln from Illinois, convinced the president to permit him to raise an independent command in the Northwest also for action against Vicksburg. McClernand argued that Grant was moving too slowly and that raising the new force would rekindle the patriotism of the Northwest in the wake of the unpopular preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

When Grant got wind of McClernand's actions, he telegraphed General-in-Chief Henry Halleck for clarification of his authority. Halleck assured Grant that he had control of all troops in his department, and then organized McClernand's force into two corps subordinate to Grant. McClernand complained to Lincoln, but the president backed Grant.

Most of Lincoln's choices for command make a great deal of sense when examined in context. Lincoln's first general-in-chief was Winfield Scott, recognized as the greatest American soldier between Washington and Grant. But Scott, who had conducted a brilliant campaign that culminated in the capture of Mexico City during the Mexican War, was old and infirm when the Civil War began.

Lincoln replaced Scott as general-in-chief with McClellan. The latter's record was exemplary. He was first in his class at West Point, had served with distinction during the Mexican War, had been sent as an observer of the Crimean War, and, after resigning his commission, had risen to president of the Illinois Central Railroad. Lincoln appointed him both general-in-chief and commanding general of the Army of the Potomac. When Lincoln expressed concern that both jobs were too much for one man, McClellan replied, "I can do it all."

But Lincoln was right. As a field commander, McClellan could not properly carry out his tasks as general-in-chief, so Lincoln replaced him with Henry Halleck in the spring of 1862. Halleck was a true military intellectual who was

commander of the Department of Missouri when Lincoln tapped him for general-in-chief. But as general-in-chief, Halleck was a disappointment to Lincoln, acting primarily as a conduit for communications between Lincoln and his generals.

Lincoln replaced Halleck with Grant in 1864. Grant was by far the Union's most successful field commander. Commanding the Army of the Tennessee, he snatched victory from defeat at Shiloh in April 1862, achieved victories at Corinth and Iuka in the fall of that year, and after a masterful campaign, captured Vicksburg in July 1863. He subsequently was elevated to commander of Union armies in the West, in which capacity he oversaw the capture of Chattanooga in November of 1863. As general-in-chief, Grant implemented Lincoln's strategy of concentration in time. During the Virginia Campaign of spring-summer, 1864 and the siege of Petersburg, he made his headquarters in the field with the Army of the Potomac, largely because Lincoln had never quite forgiven its commander, George Meade, for failing to pursue Lee more vigorously after Gettysburg.

One of Lincoln's great strengths as commander-in-chief was his decisiveness in relieving failed generals. In this, he differed greatly from the Confederate president. In 1862, he relieved not only McClellan, but also John Pope after Second Manassas, Don Carlos Buell as commander of the Army of the Ohio (later renamed the Army of the Cumberland) and Ambrose Burnside, McClellan's successor, after the disaster at Fredericksburg. In 1863, he relieved Joseph Hooker as commander of the Army of the Potomac early in the Gettysburg campaign, and William S. Rosecrans after his Army of the Cumberland was mauled at Chickamauga. Lincoln described him as "confused and stunned, like a duck hit on the head."

Lincoln never let sentiment or his personal opinion of an officer get in the way of his assessment of the officer's military potential. He was willing to accept a great deal from his generals if they would give him victory. This is illustrated by two cases. On one occasion, Lincoln visited McClellan at his headquarters. McClellan was not present when the president arrived, so Lincoln waited. When McClellan returned, he went directly upstairs, although he knew Lincoln was there. Some time later, McClellan sent an orderly to advise Lincoln that the general had retired for the evening. When his secretary, John Hay, criticized the president for permitting such an affront, Lincoln replied that "it was better at this time not to be making points of etiquette and personal dignity."

An even better example is the letter that Lincoln sent to Gen. Joseph Hooker when he appointed him commanding general of the Army of the Potomac in early 1863.

I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to be sufficient reasons. And yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which, I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and a skillful soldier, which, of course, I like...You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable, if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm...[Yet] I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you command. Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship...

And now, beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy, and sleepless vigilance, go forward, and give us victories.

Lincoln performed effectively as a military leader. He understood what had to be done and then found the generals who could implement his vision. The Union may have possessed a material edge over the Confederacy, but it was necessary to develop and implement a strategy that would translate this advantage into victory. This Lincoln did and Chester Hearn has done an excellent job of telling the story.

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