

Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man

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Review

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Stahr, Walter *Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man*. Simon & Schuster, \$32.50
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Vital New Study of a Political Giant

Today, as when they worked together in Washington, Abraham Lincoln towers over his Secretary of State, William Henry Seward. But until May 1860, Seward cast a longer shadow. Governor of New York when Lincoln toiled in the Illinois legislature and a prominent U.S. Senator when Lincoln languished in political obscurity, Seward was the odds-on favorite to win the Republican party's presidential nomination in 1860. Then, of course, Lincoln seized the prize. But Seward adjusted. "The relationship between Lincoln and Seward was close," Walter Stahr writes, "closer than between the president and any other cabinet member" (366). They enjoyed each other's company and they tended to think alike. A gravely wounded Seward survived the ghastly assassination conspiracy that killed Lincoln, and so Seward continued to head the cabinet during Andrew Johnson's turbulent tenure. This fine new biography goes far toward restoring Seward's stature. He was among the giants in the American pantheon. "Other than presidents," Stahr concludes, "Seward was the foremost statesman of the nineteenth century" (547).

Writing about Seward is no casual undertaking. One must start with a daunting bulk of documents he collected over his long career (the microfilmed segments total almost 200 reels, and other portions remain in the University of Rochester archives). A friend of Seward's once wryly observed that his biographer "would not be at a loss for materials" (542). The written record tends, however, to be opaque—Seward's oracular prose sometimes conceals as much as it reveals. Worse, the man's handwriting was abominable, as was that of his alter-ego Thurlow Weed. Any serious Seward biographer faces additional challenges. He kept no diary, so those who seek inside information about developments in Lincoln's cabinet turn first to the diaries and postwar

recollections of Gideon Welles and Salmon P. Chase, Seward's rivals and adversaries. Often seeing Seward as an unprincipled opportunist who tried to exercise a malign influence over the president, they have exercised an outsized influence in shaping historical memory.

Many memorable encounters and points of colorful detail relating to Lincoln and Seward and the Civil War era have become so embedded in popular consciousness that we simply take them for granted. Not Stahr. He investigates familiar stories industriously, often with surprising results. Did Lincoln and Seward spend a night together at the same hotel in Worcester, Massachusetts, while out campaigning for the Whig ticket in 1848—at which time Lincoln allegedly allowed that Seward had been right in his “anti-slavery position and principles” (110-11)? Alas, the train schedules did not match up, Stahr finds, and so the oft-told tale is probably apocryphal. Did Seward attempt to sabotage the Fort Sumter expedition in April 1861 when he diverted the *Powhatan*, a powerful warship, to Fort Pickens instead? The charges “fall flat,” Stahr concludes (273-74, 277). Navy lieutenant David Dixon Porter had first claim to the *Powhatan* for Pickens; he worked secretly through Seward because the Navy Department was honeycombed with secessionists. Did Seward boast that he could ring a “little bell,” and thereby throw civilians into prison? “In all likelihood Seward never said this,” Stahr decides (285). The story first appeared in anti-administration newspapers, a dubious source. Did Lincoln first reveal to Seward and Welles, while they and Seward's daughter-in-law Anna Seward were out on a carriage ride on Sunday, July 13, 1862, that he intended to issue an emancipation proclamation? The carriage ride did happen, Stahr accepts, but “the famous carriage ride conversation is a later invention by Welles” (340). Was “Seward's folly” hooted out of sight before the ink had dried on the treaty by which Russia ceded Alaska to the United States? No (487).

Stahr has closely studied the pivotal five months between the presidential election in November 1860 and the first shots of the war in April 1861. (A personal disclaimer: I exchanged several e-mail communications with Stahr as he researched this book.) Seward promised that Republicans would respect the right of the slave states to determine the future of slavery. He counted on white Southerners themselves to realize, sooner or later, that slavery was obsolete. Until the very moment the war started, he hoped that sensible leaders North and South could prevent a violent impasse. Stahr does not fully agree with young Henry Adams, who lauded Seward's “wisdom and moderation” in trying to avert war, and considered it “one of the wonders of statesmanship” (250). But Stahr

recognizes that Seward held Virginia in the Union in early 1861 and kept open communications with anti-secession leaders elsewhere in the Upper South. He would have gone further than Lincoln did to hold their allegiances, even to the point of withdrawing from Fort Sumter. Had war still come, he would have tried to entice more of the Upper South to follow the example of Kentucky.

The modern focus on emancipation as the central wartime issue inevitably marginalizes Seward. For him, Stahr writes, "the war was about the Union, and not about slavery" (303). His abolitionist wife Frances disagreed, and the issue added to the strains in their already-distanced marriage. During the early phase of the war, he opposed any enlargement of Union war aims. But as the war raged on, he concluded that slavery was doomed. He predicted, in 1863, that emancipation would reknit the national fabric—Americans would discover once again that they were "friends and brothers" and they would come to cherish the Union that bound them together (385). When the war ended, and with it the slave system, he wanted the southern states to be "allowed to govern themselves" and invited "to rejoin the national government, without undue delay or onerous conditions" (529). His eagerness to bring the South back into the Union enabled him to work with Andrew Johnson, while it estranged him from most of his fellow Republicans. He opposed radical reconstruction and "was prepared to wait for gradual social and political processes to improve the lives of former slaves and their descendants" (463). If judged only by the standards of enthusiasm for an antislavery war and a zeal for equal rights, Seward appears to have been a dead weight.

Seward's formal wartime duties centered on the perilous international situation. Stahr credits him for persuading Lincoln to back down and allow a peaceful resolution to the *Trent* affair, "the Cuban Missile Crisis of the nineteenth century" (308). Seward could not prevent France from installing a puppet government in Mexico, but he skillfully isolated it after the war ended while, at the same time, deflecting hot-blooded Americans (notably Ulysses S. Grant) who wanted American forces sent into Mexico. Seward's principal wartime objective was to keep Britain and France from offering to mediate the war or aid the Confederacy. An illogical aspect of international realpolitik aided him: Czarist Russia maintained warm relations with the United States, as he deftly reminded Britain and France. During Johnson's presidency, Seward embarked on an ambitious plan for overseas acquisitions. He persuaded Russia to sell Alaska and he lay claim to Midway Island but he hoped for more—British Columbia, Hawaii, the Isthmus of Panama, the Danish West Indies, plus the

Dominican Republic, perhaps Haiti too, and eventually Cuba. He anticipated a leading role for the United States in the Caribbean region, and expanded commercial ties with Latin America and Asia.

The Seward that emerges on these pages considered himself impelled by “motives of duty” rather than “motives of ambition” (476). He was an optimistic nationalist—proud that the United States stretched from ocean to ocean and thereby demonstrated the success of republican governance, confident that it had a bright future, and keenly aware that improved transportation and communications technologies were bringing about a new era of world history. Stahr also offers glimpses into the inner life of the man with the expansive national vision—his incompatible marriage; his anxieties about his son William, fighting in the Army of the Potomac; the delight he took in his daughter Fanny, and the awful pain inflicted on him by her death; his friendship with the great Shakespearean actor, Charlotte Cushman, the role model for Fanny of a “useful unmarried woman” (381); and his late-in-life infatuation with young Olive Risley.

Frederic Bancroft’s two 1899 volumes, *The Life of William H. Seward*, occasionally highlight an important matter that Stahr blurs—for example, Seward’s desperate effort to depict the Whig party as antislavery in 1848, when large majorities of voters in western New York were “in favor of Free-Soil doctrines in the abstract.” Those wanting to see the secret messages from the Upper South that reached Seward in early 1861 also will turn to Bancroft. But in many other ways Stahr supersedes both Bancroft and Glyndon G. Van Deusen’s 1967 biography, *William Henry Seward*. Van Deusen’s almost encyclopedic volume remains useful, but his topical chapters tend to fracture chronology (as do Bancroft’s), and Van Deusen’s clumsy annotation obscures his sources. Stahr, by contrast, has written a coherent narrative that keeps Seward in sharp focus. His full references—the book has over one hundred pages of notes—testify to his engagement with primary sources and with the modern historiography of the era. He engages in no special pleading. Every serious student of the Civil War era will want to own this book, and we may hope that Stahr reaches a wide audience of interested generalists.

Daniel W. Crofts is working on a history of the would-be Thirteenth Amendment of 1861. His most recent book is A Secession Crisis Enigma: William Henry Hurlbert and “The Diary of a Public Man.”