

Lincoln and the Border States: Preserving the Union

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Review

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Harris, William C. *Lincoln and the Border States: Preserving the Union.* University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1804-0

Understanding the Vitality of the Border States

"I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game," Abraham Lincoln told his Illinois friend Orville Hickman Browning in September 1861. "Kentucky gone, we can not hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland. Those all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us" (3). Lincoln did manage to hold Kentucky and the other border states, and that story is the focus of William C. Harris's important and impressive new study. It was not easy, and there were numerous stumbles along the way, but in the end Lincoln once again demonstrated how fortunate the American people were to have his steady hand at the helm in our penultimate national crisis.

The border area of the slave South was bound to be a contested area. Slavery was a central element of the social and economic fabric of Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri even though slaveholders comprised a relatively small percentage of border state families (14%), and in Delaware the actual number of slaves was miniscule (1,800 in 1860). As subsequent events were to prove, a venomous racism covered the region, and anti-slavery forces were virtually nonexistent (the German population of St. Louis was a notable exception). From the Union perspective, the precarious position of Washington, still a slave city and surrounded by slave-holding territory, added critical importance to the border state question. If to lose Kentucky was to lose the game, as Lincoln said, to lose Maryland was to lose the nation's capital.

Lincoln's retention of border state loyalty required a deft combination of the velvet glove and the iron fist. The mix was sometimes problematic. Lincoln had to revoke the early abolitionist proclamations of two of his generals, one of whom, John C. Fremont, was operating in Missouri. With Lincoln's approval,

civil rights were frequently trampled on, and bad leadership choices sometimes led to the compounding of problems rather than their solution. Lincoln's appointment of the intemperate Nathaniel Lyon to military command in Missouri was clearly a mistake, one the President waited far too long to correct. Missouri's descent into a bloody, atrocity-fueled guerilla war cannot be laid at Lincoln's feet, but he certainly bears some responsibility for the failure to stabilize the situation on the western border early in the war.

Lincoln did much better in Maryland and Kentucky. He usually supported moderate governors in both states, handled their truculent congressmen and senators with remarkable adroitness, and eventually found military commanders, like Lew Wallace in Maryland, who had the political skills needed to keep the peace between antagonistic factions. In the end, state governments in Maryland and Missouri even embraced voluntary emancipation, thus realizing one of Lincoln's long-sought-after and most elusive goals, one that seemed light years away during the first three years of the war. William Harris guides the reader through this labyrinth of divided loyalties, military uncertainty, and oversized political egos with a sure hand. It is an absolutely critical Civil War story, and we are indebted to the author, for many years a distinguished professor of history at North Carolina State University, for taking up the challenge of telling it. Each state is a book in and of itself, but here, to our great good fortune, we have the border state picture in full. Through it all we are shown a Lincoln who, despite his occasional errors, never lost sight of his twin goals: first, preserve the Union, and then move to eradicate slavery. Neither could have been done without border state loyalty, and this the President managed to achieve.

As I finished reading this outstanding study, I was reminded of Frederick Douglass's ultimate assessment of Lincoln. "Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent," Douglass wrote in the last of his autobiographies, "but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined." Professor Harris has given us a remarkable picture of Lincoln's leadership in this well-written, exhaustively researched, and handsomely produced volume. It is a portrait that, in the end, confirms the penetrating insight of Douglass's well-chosen words.

Charles B. Dew is Ephraim Williams Professor of American History at Williams College. He is the author of Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War (2001) and is currently at work

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