

Gathering To Save A Nation: Lincoln And The Union's War Governors

Mark A. Neels

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Neels, Mark A. (2017) "Gathering To Save A Nation: Lincoln And The Union's War Governors," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.4.09

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss4/4>

Review

Neels, Mark A.

Fall 2017

Engle, Stephen D. *Gathering to Save a Nation: Lincoln and the Union's War Governors*. University of North Carolina Press, \$49.95 ISBN 146962933X

Mobilizing a Country, Saving a Nation: Lincoln and the War Governors

In his manuscript *Lincoln and the Union Governors* (2013), part of the Concise Lincoln Library with SIU Press, William C. Harris observed that little has been written about President Abraham Lincoln's working relationship with the Union Governors. Indeed, aside from Harris's short book, William Hesselstine's *Lincoln and the War Governors* (1948) has been the standard narrative for nearly seventy years. However, Stephen Engle's recent book *Gathering to Save a Nation: Lincoln & the Union's War Governors* changes that.

Dr. Engle is well suited to write this story. Besides teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in the nineteenth century at Florida Atlantic University, he is an accomplished author of the Civil War Era. His previous works include *Yankee Dutchman: The Life of Franz Sigel* (1993) and *Don Carlos Buell: Most Promising of All* (1999), as well as general histories of the war in the west and Lincoln's wartime presidency. In this, his most recent book, Engle argues against the theory put forward by Hesselstine that, in mobilizing the nation for war, Union governors followed while Lincoln led. Instead, Engle states that the relationship between the governors and the president was truly collaborative. Union governors such as Republicans Richard Yates of Illinois, Andrew Curtin of Pennsylvania, and John Andrew of Massachusetts partnered with Lincoln to, as Engle states on page 2, "mobilize for war, and, at times, push him toward greater national efforts." Even Democratic governors such as John Downey of California and Beriah Magoffin of Kentucky, while critical of Lincoln's policies and--in Magoffin's case--reticent to support either side of the war, ultimately stifled attempts at disunion in their states. In arguing against Hesselstine's top-down theory of executive leadership, Engle also reinforces the theory that

Lincoln sought to preserve constitutional federalism within a new national framework. “The net result,” Engle writes on page 7, “is a book that focuses on a collection of leaders who helped Lincoln gather the resources to save a nation.”

Besides providing a new interpretation of the role of executive leadership--both national and statewide--during the Civil War, Engle’s book reinforces the prevailing image of Lincoln as “conciliator-in-chief”, putting out fires started by strong-willed subordinates. This trend over the last decade--since the publication of Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals* (2005)--seeks to better understand how Lincoln became an expert politician, fostering partnerships with political rivals, and effectively managing relationships between civilian and military leaders in order to successfully carry out his public policy goals. In recent years, thanks especially to the national interest in the sixteenth president spawned by the bicentennial of his birth as well as the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, Lincoln admirers and scholars have been blessed with new biographies of subordinate officers such as Elizabeth Leonard’s *Lincoln’s Forgotten Ally: Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt of Kentucky* (2011), Walter Star’s *Seward: Lincoln’s Indispensable Man* (2012), William Marvel’s *Lincoln’s Autocrat: The Life of Edwin Stanton* (2015), and Joshua Zeitz’s *Lincoln’s Boys: John Hay, John Nicolay, and the War for Lincoln’s Image* (2014) to name only a select few. We have also seen new works discussing Lincoln’s relationship with, and management of military officers such as David Work’s *Lincoln’s Political Generals* (2009), and Stephen Sears’s *Lincoln’s Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac*(2017)--both of which, like Engle, argue against the older theory of Lincoln as facilitating a top-down approach to military affairs. It is a safe assumption that more works like these will follow in the years to come. Whether they be cabinet officials, military commanders, or state governors, Lincoln carefully established channels of communication and partnerships at every level of the federal system, keeping all interested parties focused on the same universal goal of winning the war. “Governors,” Engle writes on page 477, “had established a partnership with Lincoln that demonstrated the powerful bond between the nation and the states. The war had proven that the republic the Founding Fathers engineered decades before had matured into a more perfect Union of states.”

Aside from its contribution to the field of Civil War studies, it might also be worthwhile to note a few general strengths of Engle’s book as a scholarly work. If good histories inspires others to continue down the path they have tread, then historians and students alike will be pleased with Engle’s work. Not only does he

provide a helpful appendix of names of Union war governors, classified by state and time in office, but he has also consulted a vast array of primary and secondary sources that are exhaustively chronicled in the endnotes, which alone cover 127 pages of text! The bibliography is another impressive sixty-nine pages of text, which will no doubt prove a rich resource to scholars wishing to delve further into the lives and political careers of the persons touched upon in this work.

Dr. Engle's *Gathering to Save a Nation* is the kind of superior scholarly work one comes to expect from the University of North Carolina Press. Over time, the press has become the national leader on Civil War studies. Indeed, several of the above-mentioned works by other authors were also published by the press. Dr. Engle's new book, then, is in good company. An important contribution to the field, *Gathering to Save a Nation* will assuredly become the standard work on the subject of Lincoln and the Union war governors for generations to come.

Dr. Mark A. Neels is Visiting Assistant Professor of History at Western Wyoming Community College in Rock Springs, Wyoming. His dissertation, Lincoln's Conservatives: Conservative Unionism and Political Tradition in the Civil War Era, is the winner of the 2017 Hay-Nicolay Dissertation Prize from the Abraham Lincoln Association and the Abraham Lincoln Institute.