



Lincoln and His Admirals

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Abraham Lincoln began his presidency admitting that he knew "but little of ships," but he quickly came to preside over the largest national armada to that time, not eclipsed until World War I. Written by naval historian Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals* unveils an aspect of Lincoln's presidency unexamined by historians until now, revealing how he managed the men who ran the naval side of the Civil War, and how the activities of the Union Navy ultimately affected the course of history.

Beginning with a gripping account of the attempt to re-supply Fort Sumter--a comedy of errors that shows all too clearly the fledgling president's inexperience--Symonds traces Lincoln's steady growth as a wartime commander-in-chief. Absent a Secretary of Defense, he would eventually become de facto commander of joint operations along the coast and on the rivers. That involved dealing with the men who ran the Navy: the loyal but often cranky Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, the quiet and reliable David G. Farragut, the flamboyant and unpredictable Charles Wilkes, the ambitious ordnance expert John Dahlgren, the well-connected Samuel Phillips Lee, and the self-promoting and gregarious David Dixon Porter. Lincoln was remarkably patient; he often postponed critical decisions until the momentum of events made the consequences of those decisions evident. But Symonds also shows that Lincoln could act decisively. Disappointed by the lethargy of his senior naval officers on the scene, he stepped in and personally directed an amphibious assault on the Virginia coast, a successful operation that led to the capture of Norfolk. The man who knew "but little of ships" had transformed himself into one of the greatest naval strategists of his age.

Co-winner of the 2009 Lincoln Prize

Winner of the 2009

Barondess/Lincoln Prize by the Civil War Round Table of New York

John Lyman Award of the North American Society for Oceanic History

Daniel and Marilyn Laney Prize by the Austin Civil War Round Table

Nevins-Freeman Prize of the Civil War Round Table of Chicago

Lincoln and His Admirals Details

Date : Published October 1st 2008 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published January 1st 2008)

ISBN : 9780195310221

Author : Craig L. Symonds

Format : Hardcover 448 pages

Genre : Military History, Civil War, History, Nonfiction, Military, North American Hi..., American History, War, Military Fiction

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From Reader Review Lincoln and His Admirals for online ebook

Steven Peterson says

This is an interesting volume, exploring Abraham Lincoln's admirals, his role in naval decision making, and the effectiveness of strategic and tactical decisions using the navy. In the process, we learn about some of the more important naval leaders. We learn of the team: Lincoln and his top naval advisors Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles and his Assistant Secretary Gustavus Fox. The author notes (Page xiii): "One of the themes of this book is to demonstrate not only how Lincoln managed the navy, and particularly its admirals, during its great national drama, but also how--and how much--he grew in the job during his metamorphosis into greatness."

Admirals such as DuPont, Farragut, Foote, Porter, Goldsborough, Lee, and so on. The book does a nice job of discussing the naval commanders who did not "cut the mustard" and those who did. We learn of those admirals who could work with others and those who did a poor job of collaboration. The book does not necessarily spend a great deal of time on specific battles--such as the taking of New Orleans by David Farragut. But one learns how such events fit into the larger picture.

The book does a good job of describing the politics of naval decisions and how decisions came about.

If interested in the relationship between the Lincoln Administration and the navy, this would prove a fine addition to one's library.

Sam says

Wow, if you think Lincoln had his hands full with some numbskull generals (e.g. McClellan), it was the same for most of his admirals. With the exception of Porter, many of his admirals, like the generals, were afraid to fight, afraid to lose their ships. Lincoln had to continually prod them to hunt out the confederate navy ships, regardless of where they were, and engage them in battle. Symonds also does a great job explaining the maritime strategy, of the Union and Lincoln, along with its goals and objectives. We read much about the land battles (Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Manassas), but not much about what was happening at sea, Symonds closes that loop. Great read.

Jim says

A command study of Lincoln & his navy. I recommend this book for anyone who wants to better understand the navy's role in the Civil War.

When he became President, Lincoln didn't know anything about the navy. When he had commanders he could rely on, he was happy to let Gideon Welles (his Secretary of the Navy) & his commanders run things. But he could & did take charge when he had to, for example by ordering the navy to transport troops to capture Norfolk & to speed up the production of mortars used to bombard Confederate fortifications on the Mississippi.

Lincoln preferred to let events unfold until his course of action became clear. That didn't serve him well during the Fort Sumter crisis. It served him better during diplomatic crises with England & Brazil caused by overzealous Union naval captains who violated neutrality laws. 2 of these overzealous captains were later courtmartialed.

The army & navy didn't cooperate well early in the war. There was no unified command structure like the present day Joint Chiefs of Staff so Lincoln had to make the two services cooperate. In addition, Lincoln's cabinet members Welles, Stanton, Seward & Chase often squabbled over things like who got ownership of captured Confederate cotton (a quite lucrative prize), who had control over transport & naval ships on the ocean & on rivers & how to respond to diplomatic incidents.

There are interesting chapters that describe how politics & luck played key roles in who got promoted. Samuel Lee, who was politically well connected, was a competent commander but he didn't get promoted to full Rear Admiral (he was an acting Rear Admiral during the war) in part because he didn't win a key victory that got voted the Thanks of Congress. Porter, who Lincoln & Welles considered to be somewhat rash & self promoting, won key victories and thus moved up the ranks. DuPont captured Port Royal early in the war but was replaced by Dahlgren after DuPont failed in an attack on Fort Sumter.

Jerome says

An excellent, well-organized, and coherent work about Lincoln, his involvement in the war's naval campaigns, and decision-making in the naval establishment of the time. Symonds does a great job setting the context: the politics, the strategies, the land and naval campaigns, foreign relations, economics and the state of the nation as a whole.

Through the management of the naval establishment, Symonds develops as a theme the three key leadership skills that Lincoln employed to success, which were patience, pragmatism, and acceptance of new ideas. According to Symonds, Lincoln was a reactive leader, not a proactive one as demonstrated by no set program of reform. "His genius derived more from what might be labeled inspired patience than from insistent direction" (p. xi). When action was required, sometimes forcibly, the administration was required to deal with exponentially growing problems. Lincoln was pragmatic and innovative in looking for solutions. He frequently advocated the development and use of new technologies to fight the Civil War. He often participated in the testing of new weapons and was a frequent presence at the Washington Navy Yard, as much as he is reported to appear at the telegraph office or War Department.

Also, most of the portraits that Symonds paints of the navy leaders aren't very flattering. Charles Wilkes, for example, "entered the war with a well-earned reputation for cupidity and obstinacy, and lived up to it during the war." David Dixon Porter was "brash, self-promoting, and not always truthful." Lincoln came to think of Samuel Francis DuPont as "a nautical George McClellan." Lincoln's favorite admiral, John A. Dahlgren, was judged to have gone insane. (In all fairness, it was also thought from time to time that General William T. Sherman had gone insane.) The reluctance of some of the naval officers to fight "compelled [Lincoln] to become involved in the planning and execution of particular campaigns, even directing an amphibious landing on the Virginia coast to capture Norfolk."

Lincoln improved upon his performance in naval issues by taking some those issues into his own hands. In the west, he championed a river campaign utilizing combined army and naval forces that could strike simultaneously at multiple targets and force the rebels to divide its military resources. While not as directly

involved, he was similarly heartened by the success of Admiral David Farragut's taking of New Orleans and run up the Mississippi. These combined operations succeeded in giving the North a toehold on both ends of the Mississippi as it ran through the South.

The other significant part of this Anaconda plan was the blockade of southern ports. Here, Lincoln first had to navigate admiralty law while his fleet was built or acquired. Thanks to "King Cotton," European nations had a vested interest in maintaining trade with the South. They would not submit to a "paper blockade": the North would have to have a real force in place. Yet, the logistics of putting a blockade in place seemed to worry Lincoln less than the legal gymnastics required to legitimize a blockade against the South, which Lincoln had contended was not an entity in and of itself. Symond's explains this well.

In all, a must-read for anyone interested in the war's naval campaigns.

Bill V says

This is a very good and important book on the American Civil War. The naval aspect of the war is greatly overlooked in the great majority of books and this book addresses many aspects of the war on the ocean, the seas and American rivers. It presents qualities of Lincoln I was not aware of and multiple facts and anecdotes of many of the key figures involved in the war.

By no means do I consider myself an expert on the war but I've probably read about 10 titles thus far and I consider this title an important and indispensable part of my book collection. While the author writes well, his style isn't as engaging as some other civil war writers. Also, and this may not be the author's fault, the book comes with 5 maps but they are not indexed anywhere.

Scott says

This is another classic book by Craig Symonds. It is also another masterpiece he has written. The book is about the Anaconda Plan and finding the men to carry it out during the Civil War. The same problem the Union had with the Army also existed in the Navy. Too much deadwood and political appointments. Another problem was the officers who were out for themselves once they reached command.

Craig also talks about the problem of the cotton trade between the Union and the Confederacy. This trade was what extended the war for several months. Once, the officers realized Cotton was a prize that could be seized and sold for profit many officers went after it instead of fighting or doing their job.

Andrew says

A very well researched book in the Oxford University Press series on American history, it details the naval war that was as important as the land war in ending the American Civil War. Symonds has collected a dozen or more of Lincoln's colorful quips in the process.

Recommended for any Civil War buff and recommended for a view of Lincoln's cabinet members, who were

alternately helpful and fractitious in pursuit of the war.

Robert Melnyk says

I've read a lot of books about Lincoln and the Civil War, but never read much about the naval involvement. This book was an interesting look at the role the Navy played in the war, and how Lincoln handled his naval officers. It gave an insightful look at the relationships between Lincoln and his admirals, between the admirals themselves, and between the army and navy personnel. At times I think the book got a little too detailed and became a bit tedious, but overall it was very interesting and informative, and definitely a worthwhile read for those interested in Lincoln and the Civil War.

Lance says

Lively, engaging and well-told story of Lincoln's conduct of the naval Civil War contains many insights into the characters of Lincoln, his cabinet and his admirals. There is unexpected detail in Lincoln's decision-making on inducting freed slaves into the navy, emancipation and striking a balance between warring factions in his own cabinet. Several incidents I was not aware of are revealed here, including Lincoln's taking command and ordering an amphibious assault on Confederate positions during the peninsular campaign. This book is of interest not only to naval and Civil War history buffs, but also anyone seeking a view of Lincoln's character from the unique perspective of his role as a fast-study commander in chief.

Jewels says

This is a fine volume to accompany the earlier book of Lincoln and His Generals. Mr. Symonds outlines the troubles and the triumphs that President Lincoln endured to the end of the Civil War. Among generals and admirals that jockeyed for promotions, cotton to sell, ships to collect as prizes, and the interminable animosity of Seward and Welles, Lincoln held steady to the middle road. I have even more respect for him and sympathy for his tenure as President after having read both of these books.

Adam Yoshida says

Magnificent

It is often the fate of those who study the Civil War to repeat the same stories as infinitum. How many times shall Grant take command or Meade haltingly pursue the bleeding Army of Northern Virginia as it lumps away from Gettysburg? In "Lincoln and His Admirals", Craig Symonds breaks fresh ground in focusing on the naval war and, specifically, the Union Navy's high command, who have an unjustly-neglected place in the war's pantheon. Their work, less-glamorous and without the pitched battles of the war on land, was nonetheless essential to the North's victory and, in telling their story and that of Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, Symonds does an important service. I highly recommend this book.

Nathan Albright says

Although the naval history of the civil war is not something that is completely neglected by historians [1], it has definitely not received the same amount of attention as Lincoln's relationship with his generals. Part of this is due to the fact that the squeaky wheel gets the grease--Lincoln's generals were a fairly obstreperous lot, many of them with political connections who wanted to throw around their weight. This is not to say that the political element was missing from the navy during the Civil War, as this book demonstrates, but rather that there were far fewer political admirals and so Lincoln's focus was usually focused on those people who were making the most noise and whose behavior was the most pivotal when it came to votes. This book, though, is an admirable one in explaining the complicated involvement of Lincoln in naval affairs, and the author does a good job in setting a context in which his involvement was often necessary to smooth over conflicts, and in which Union victory came about through complicated means, in which the navy played a supporting but important role.

With over 300 pages of content, none of it filler, this book fills an admirable void in discussing Lincoln's relationship with his admirals. As is the case in general, the tale shown is of increasing confidence and competence among Lincoln in his role as commander and chief along, as well as a high degree of rivalry between Seward and Welles over matters that involved both of them, which proved to be quite a few.

Organized in a chronological fashion, the author shows how Lincoln's initial understanding of the navy and the relationship between the navy and army and the navy and foreign affairs was not always strong. Lincoln is consistently shown as being a moderating influence on the extremes pushed by others, seeking to guide a path between radical and conservative, and usually successful at engaging in the difficult balancing act.

Likewise, the importance of the navy is shown in combined operation, blockade running, attempting to deal with commerce raiding, and interacting with foreign citizens and the agents of foreign governments. The result is a book that contains some information that people might not be aware of, such as the patronage politics of the navy and the struggle for officers in promotion as well as to gain the naval victories that would give one a high reputation. As was the case with his generals, Lincoln preferred those who didn't continually demand reinforcements.

This is a book that makes a fine companion volume to *Lincoln and His Generals*, a book the author himself makes reference to in the introduction to this book. For those who have an interest in the naval history of the Civil War, and enjoy reading about the ways that naval affairs can influence matters of diplomacy as well as military strategy, this is a worthwhile book. The way that the author is able to grasp Lincoln's political skill and the way he made people feel like he was on their side even when he was somewhat skeptical about them, as was the case with Porter, is itself worth the read. Where else can one expect to know so thoroughly the rivalries between various naval officials and the way that Lincoln and Seward struggled with being back channels, especially early in Lincoln's presidency, concerning naval affairs? The end result is that this particular volume gives a fascinating and detailed look, well backed up by the evidence, into an area of history that is often ignored. To be sure, there are many more books about Abraham Lincoln than one could read during a lifetime, but this is certainly a worthy one.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2013...>

Tim says

A nice book. A different perspective on some Civil War subjects and information about unknown ones. It is not the best narrative flow, but it is reasonable, although some descriptions report events that are scrambled in time without explicitly stating the order that the events occurred.

Urey Patrick says

Interesting examination of the personalities and issues involving the Navy during the Civil War. This is not a battle account - battles are mentioned more in passing than in detail. And since the Civil War was predominantly a land war, the Navy gets relatively little historical attention - the author spends almost as much time on several of Lincoln's generals as he does on Lincoln's admirals, and the major strategies and land campaigns are explained as well as the relatively fewer naval campaigns. It is an interesting study in personalities and the issues/strategies affecting the naval aspects of the war - it is not a particularly deep examination of Lincoln's interactions with his admirals. Good read - but definitely supplemental to more comprehensive histories of the war and of the land and sea strategies and campaigns. There are some delightful anecdotes regarding Lincoln and the Navy, and some good explanations of technical aspects of naval warfare as it was in that time.

Nick says

Dense reading at times but this is a fine addition to a somewhat overlooked area of war nerd studies, the naval aspect of the American Civil War, and Lincoln's increasingly hands-off approach to managing it.
