

Review Essay

**Lincoln, the Civil War, and the
New Approval-Ratings**

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE SECOND AMERICAN AMERICAN
REVOLUTION. By James M. McPherson. New York: Oxford University Press.
1991.

THE FATE OF LIBERTY: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties. By Mark E.
Neely, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press. 1991.

WHAT THEY FOUGHT FOR, 1861-1865. By James M. McPherson. Baton
Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 1994.

THE PRESIDENCY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN. By Phillip Shaw Paludan.
Lawrence: University of Kansas Press. 1994.

The most important recent scholarship on the American Civil War and its preeminent protagonist, Abraham Lincoln, is represented by the four books under review. Two of the authors, James McPherson and Mark Neely, have won the Pulitzer Prize in History, while several of these volumes have been History Book Club selections, Paludan's even being chosen by the Book of the Month Club. Since they have been acknowledged as significant and deemed worthy of notice to a broad readership and since two of them appeared as long ago as 1991, there seems little need, at this point, to review them individually in the traditional way.

Instead, this essay will treat them as a group and will suggest what they indicate about the state and tone of current scholarship on those two topics of endless fascination, Lincoln and the Civil War.

Although they deal with different aspects of these two subjects, all three authors are in agreement that the Civil War was not a “needless war” or a conflict lacking in purpose. Rather, the war had meaning and direction and it achieved specific and desirable objectives. Furthermore, despite its length and its enormous human material cost, it did not degenerate into an orgy of random destruction. As commander of the victorious forces, Lincoln naturally shared in and contributed to these favorable developments and outcomes. The upshot is that the historical reputation of this most devastating and deadly episode in American history has not merely survived the attacks launched by the revisionists after World War Two and then by the radicals in the 1960s and 1970s, but it has rebounded and now enjoys extremely high approval-ratings, as does President Lincoln himself.

One of the major elements in this reassessment of the war has been a renewed interest among academic historians in its military history. Long the possession of Civil War Round Tables and “Civil War buffs,” the campaigns and battles have recently been restored to the center of the history of the sectional conflict. In this development, James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom*, winner of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize, was the catalyzing agent. Not only did McPherson focus on the battlefield, but he even argued for the decisiveness of battlefield results in determining the war’s outcome. If the deeds of soldiers in Pennsylvania cornfields or on Mississippi River bluffs were that critical, then the attitudes and experiences in combat of these ordinary men take on a greater significance. And so McPherson himself has embarked on a large-scale project trying to find out why they fought, of which *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* is a preview. Originally presented as the three Fleming Lectures in Southern History for 1993 at Louisiana State University, this short book takes issue with Bell Irvin Wiley, whose earlier *The Life of Johnny Reb* (1943) and *The Life of Billy Yank* (1952), concluded that common soldiers had very little idea of, or commitment to, any larger cause or purpose, besides personal survival and solidarity with their comrades. Through close reading of their voluminous surviving letters, McPherson has discerned a good deal of awareness, on both sides, of what the respective war-aims and policies were. Furthermore, there was considerable endorsement and support for them, even though, for example, fighting for slavery or for its abolition were more easily accepted by Confederates or Union soldiers when understood as necessary means to achieve independence or reunion than as ends in themselves. With this degree of consciousness and purpose among the soldiers, it follows that whatever the larger cause each side professed was likely to be sustained and not overwhelmed by the feelings of futility that accompanied the unrelenting carnage of the battlefield.

In contrast to this preoccupation with soldiers in combat, McPherson’s *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* deals with the nature and

meaning of the war itself, as Lincoln, the Union's chief strategist and policy-maker, understood it and as a historian viewing it from the even loftier perch of hindsight interprets it. As his title indicates, McPherson revives Charles Beard's designation of the Union victory in the war as the sequel to and fulfillment of the earlier, anti-colonial American Revolution. In McPherson's view, the struggle was revolutionary because it overthrew the old regime in the South—by ending slavery and freeing and providing political rights to the slaves, by reducing decisively the planter class's power in the nation's politics, and by enabling northern economic interests and social priorities to become dominant throughout the nation. In his policies as well as in the language he used to explain these policies and the war itself, Lincoln was at the helm of this revolution. Although, in McPherson's view, he was no ideologue armed with a blueprint, he was nevertheless so much in sympathy with the transforming course that events were taking that it would be inaccurate to describe him as a conservative. Instead, McPherson considers "revolutionary statesman" to be the most apt categorization (42). Furthermore, he did not hesitate to employ the power of the federal government to expand the scope and definition of liberty so that a value regarded by Lincoln as fundamental to the nation's existence could be given "a new birth." As a result, the negative liberty of the Bill of Rights that protected the individual from governmental infringement and personal harm would, as McPherson explains it, be transformed by governmental action and nurture into a positive liberty that was enabling, empowering, and available to all.

This is a far cry from the observations of historians such as C. Vann Woodward who, in the 1950s, noted not only that "Lincoln was inaugurated President of a slaveholding republic" but that he "never wanted to turn the war into a moral crusade" (*The Burden of Southern History*, 69,71). Nevertheless, McPherson's depiction of Lincoln as "revolutionary statesman" has to be differentiated from those of Neely and Paludan. Although they too defend and admire Lincoln, they have different perspectives on him and his role. Neely's study rescues Lincoln from the persistent criticism that he was careless about civil liberties and either failed to protect them or, worse, actively subverted them. Indeed, it is charged that he enforced the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act with a vigor that justified the Democrats' warnings of dictatorship. After examining the records—something historians seem not to have done previously—Neely concludes that, in the northern states, very few were imprisoned without trial. Instead, the overwhelming number of arrests were war-related and occurred in Union-occupied parts of the Confederacy or in the contested border states, with the arrestees being all kinds of individuals who were actively intriguing against or interfering with the Union's military operations, or were suspected of doing so. Thus, Lincoln was no conscious subverter of the right to trial who played fast and loose with peaceful citizens' civil liberties. Nevertheless, having saved Lincoln from charges that he was a despot, Neely then concedes that he was not a particularly scrupulous observer of constitutional niceties. In a chapter on

Lincoln and the Constitution, he observes that he “did not by habit think first of the constitutional aspect of most problems he faced. His impulse was to turn to the practical,” as political necessity was uppermost in his mind (210).

The Lincoln portrayed by Phillip Paludan is rather different, however. Although his presidency began and ended with secession and assassination, both of them abnormal and beyond the provisions of the nation’s legal and political processes, Lincoln’s achievement was to sustain “the political-constitutional institutions” of the United States, while prosecuting an enormous war that threatened to destroy them. Rather than being indifferent to them, Paludan maintains that Lincoln was preoccupied with constitutional procedures and was determined to uphold and work within them. But this did not mean that there was a conflict between Lincoln, the conservative, trying to adhere to a restrictive constitution and Lincoln, the radical, attempting to transform it so that the emancipation of the slaves and the reconstruction of the defeated South could be rammed through. It also did not mean that Lincoln had to turn a conservative war into a moral crusade to free the slaves and reinvent liberty.

How does Paludan reconcile these apparently divergent elements within the developing war and within Lincoln himself? His explanation is that “Freeing the slaves and saving the Union were linked as one goal, not two optional goals. The Union that Lincoln wanted to save was not a Union where slavery was safe” (xv). Moreover, he could pursue these complementary objectives, simultaneously because the constitutional system and political institutions were not inimical to freedom and equality. They simply had to be steered towards an outcome that was latent in and fundamental to the governmental system. The system was therefore an ally, not an obstacle, to Lincoln’s aspirations. Because Lincoln believed that these shaping public institutions were progressive and benevolent in purpose and because, as President, he mastered their operation quite brilliantly, he made them work to achieve his aims. So he did not need to transform or revolutionize the system. Rather, he guided it to achieve ends—abolition of slavery and an expanded liberty—that were already implied and present in the system but needed, in effect, merely to be operationalized.

There are no startling revelations, no fancy gimmicks, in Phillip Paludan’s depiction of the Lincoln presidency. Nevertheless, this is an important contribution because it offers a resolution of the contradictory impulses that seem to exist at the core of Lincoln’s course during the war—conservative or revolutionary, reluctant or willing as an agent of change. Since he argues that neither “the political-constitutional institutions” nor Lincoln needed to change in order to accommodate the transformations effected during the war, Paludan’s is ultimately a conservative interpretation. And it is based on an understanding of the governmental system as grounded in very broad definitions of individual freedom, despite the necessity of a massive war and a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery. All the same, this interpretation of Lincoln and the war marks the culmination of a trend in Civil War historiography over the past two decades

towards an acceptance, even celebration, of the struggle. While historians have rarely regretted or criticized the wars that America got involved in after 1776, that has not been the case with the Civil War. At present, however, these doubts and reservations seem to have evaporated.