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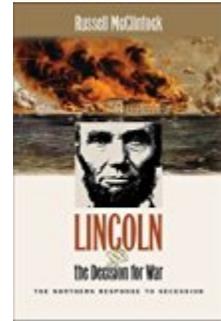
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Russell McClintock. *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 400 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3188-5.

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The Impending Crisis

Although the Civil War took place more than a hundred and fifty years ago, it remains a subject of intense historical debate. Virtually no aspect of the war remains unexamined, with a vibrant industry producing a rich literature for both academic and popular audiences. One of the more contentious areas of dispute has been the causes of the war and the larger question of whether or not the war was preventable.

Moreover, historians have tried to move the nature of this debate beyond a Washington-centered account of a breakdown in national politics. As important as the national context may be in understanding the coming of the Civil War, historians have increasingly focused on regional, state, and local levels. While some of the more important work in this regard has placed a critical emphasis on developments in the South, historians have begun to devote increasing attention to the Northern response to the secession crisis. Study of the respective regions, state, and other localities can give us a clearer understanding of not only why secession took place but also why it led to war. Civil War causation in this regard is like a detective story in which the fracturing of the American republic is like a modern-day investigation of a murder scene. Invariably, such investigations have become part of a larger effort to assign blame, but they also have helped uncover how and why Americans were unable to resolve their differences one hundred and fifty years ago.

McClintock's work fits into this larger effort to study

how Northerners responded to the breakup of the Union. McClintock's study has two main components: 1) a detailed examination of how the North responded to secession during the long winter from November to April of 1861; and 2) an examination of the way in which policy was made by the administrations of James Buchanan and Abraham Lincoln. McClintock's work is built on impeccable scholarship, careful understanding of the historical literature, and writing that richly conveys the national mood in a state of crisis. He is thoughtful, reflective, and has an appreciation of the significance of the events that unfolded over this relatively short time frame. His chapters have a strong chronological perspective, giving readers a sense of the manner in which the crisis gathered force in the months before Lincoln's inauguration. Further, his description of the different responses to well-known events provides a detailed analysis of whether a path short of war was possible in this period.

By considering whether the war was inevitable, McClintock's approach is very similar in tone and perspective to that of Daniel Crofts's *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (1989). Like Crofts, McClintock considers the efforts toward sectional compromise to be of critical importance and he argues that a significant number of Northerners were amenable to compromise efforts. McClintock also seeks an understanding of the dimensions of the Northern response to secession by giving a prominent role to Northern Democrats and conservative Republicans. Under-

standing the secession winter will never truly be possible unless we have a firm comprehension of the way in which Northerners from a variety of different perspectives viewed the crisis. Ultimately, compromise efforts failed because Northern Republicans were unwilling to countenance permanent protection of slavery in the Union. This suggests that certain limits exist in viewing the crisis only from the Democratic and conservative Republican perspectives. The rejection of compromise efforts is thus only truly comprehensible if we understand how mainstream Republicans viewed the crisis from the perspective of their larger political culture.

Beyond simply examining the efforts at compromise, McClintock also seeks to tell this story from outside the boundaries of Washington. This is a laudable goal and has much promise for illuminating how Northerners from all walks of life understood the crisis as it unfolded. Nevertheless, despite the assertion that he provides a detailed look at Northerners from different states, his approach on this subject is fairly narrow. We learn a great deal about how Northerners in Illinois, Massachusetts, and New York felt about the crisis and we have occasional nods to other states, but this hardly gives us a comprehensive view. In his notes McClintock informs us that he ignored the western states because they were not contiguous and communication was poor in the region, seemingly suggesting that westerners and their concerns were irrelevant to this discussion. I find this totally unconvincing. Within the Republican political culture in the antebellum period the fate of the West and the whole territorial question was of critical significance. Northern Republicans always recognized that the debate over the territories was about the future of the republic and accordingly, they were very interested in what happened to the West. Moreover, one of the prime issues in the Crittenden Compromise was a suggestion to allow New Mexico to be admitted as a slave state—something most Republicans stoutly rejected. Whatever the difficulties with communication, the Lincoln administration was deeply concerned about maintaining the federal presence in the western territories.

McClintock's work is one that takes political history seriously. He makes an effort to understand how the political beliefs of Northerners played a role in the crisis of disunion. However, he follows historians' common approach to the Republicans by using "moderate," "radical," "conservative," and other labels to describe the groups of people who differed in approach and over various policy proposals. McClintock too makes frequent allusions to factional differences in the Republican party

and discusses the radical-moderate-conservative Republican disagreements over patronage and party direction. Nonetheless, he never effectively defines their core differences and perhaps even confuses them. For examples, in one sequence McClintock describes Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois as a radical, while in another place he describes him as being aligned with the more moderate or conservative faction of the Republican party.

I would suggest trying to separate Republicans into these corresponding groupings is of dubious utility. Since the vast majority of Republicans rejected efforts to compromise, except for some very conservative Republicans in the Northeast, how valuable is it to spend time discussing their factional differences? It would perhaps make more sense to look at a shared political culture and the way in which Republicans formed a united front than to look at the tiny minority that supported compromise efforts. As one can imagine in a story that focuses on the secession crisis, Lincoln plays a pivotal role. McClintock takes seriously the debates within the Lincoln administration over whether to withdraw federal forces from forts still held by the federal government. At one point McClintock suggests that Lincoln was prepared to withdraw federal troops from Fort Sumter, but the evidence for this seems dubious at best. McClintock is aware of the difficulties confronting the Lincoln administration and is not insensitive to the difficulties that confronted him in March of 1861. While at times critical of the decisions made by the Lincoln administration, he acknowledges the challenges faced by Lincoln. Of course ultimately Lincoln could not accept the destruction of the United States as the price for peace.

At the end of the day, every work of history must be a reflection of the author's vision and understanding of historical forces. McClintock's Lincoln is thus as he has come to understand him. I do wish he had given more attention to the deep nationalism that informed Lincoln's actions in the crisis. Moreover, one of McClintock's criticisms is that Lincoln failed to understand the South and appreciate the central role that slavery played in Southern culture. This is a historical myth that has been repeated by many and needs to die. Lincoln was after all the product of a Kentucky culture in which slavery was a central part of political life, a fact that led Lincoln's father to leave the state. Throughout his political life Lincoln paid close attention to the slavery issue, particularly the way in which it related to the South. Lincoln was fully aware of the role that slavery played in Southern society, and the dangers of slavery and the future of the Union were important elements of his thought through-

out the 1850s. It is true that Lincoln failed to comprehend the conditional nature of Southern unionism in this period of crisis, but that was a failing that was shared by many in the North throughout the sectional crisis.

McClintock's study is an important work examining

the Northern response to the secession crisis. Historians of the Civil War will find it a significant addition to the historiography of Civil War causation and will want to read and consider it carefully. I have no doubt that it will eventually rank as one of the landmark studies of the secession winter.

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