

# H-Net Reviews

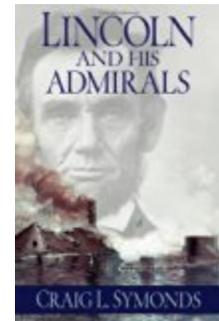
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Craig L. Symonds. *Lincoln and His Admirals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 448 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-531022-1.

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## Don't Forget Uncle Sam's Webbed Feet: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief

In 1952, T. Harry Williams published a groundbreaking work on Abraham Lincoln and his leadership skills with *Lincoln and His Generals*. The book was highly acclaimed at the time and continues to be a fixture in Civil War historiography. Williams argued that Lincoln was a natural genius and much smarter than the professionally trained generals employed to conduct the grand strategy of defeating the Confederacy, and thus had to take control of the armies as commander in chief. Emphasizing Lincoln's talents, the author excoriated the majority of the generals Lincoln had to deal with, especially George B. McClellan, while praising the few generals who were able to accomplish Lincoln's overall vision of victory, mostly focusing on Ulysses S. Grant.

One flaw in Williams's work is that he did not give the entire story of Lincoln as commander in chief, for he only explored the president's leadership ability through his dealings with the army. There is no discussion of naval operations. Since then, other historians have explored the topic of Lincoln's leadership, but have generally ignored the naval aspect of the grand strategy of Union victory, which necessarily limits the true scope of Lincoln as a commander in chief. In a partial way, some scholars are forced to deal with combined operations, but usually are only limited to Grant's cooperation with David D. Porter in the campaign to capture Vicksburg in 1863. It is into this void that Craig L. Symonds presents Lincoln as a commander in chief of all the military forces of the United States with *Lincoln and His Admirals*. Symonds consciously chose the title of his work

to tie in with Williams's exploration of Lincoln as leader to introduce the concept that the wartime president had more to deal with than the army.

This work is more than an introduction for many readers, as it moves beyond merely showing that a naval war was also conducted; Symonds presents his own interpretation of Lincoln as commander in chief. Symonds argues, like Williams, that Lincoln was highly intelligent and a quick student of military affairs, sometimes forcibly so. Aside from the more familiar story of the armies, Lincoln oversaw the "development and deployment of the largest naval force in American history to date" (p. x). His first immediate crisis as president was one of a naval concern, what to do about Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Lincoln, though, was not yet the architect of victory over rebellion. He made several missteps in his handling of the Fort Sumter episode, which, according to Symonds, reveals that Lincoln's education in military affairs was a progressive one rather than the standard interpretation of Lincoln as the great leader from the beginning.

Through the management of naval commanders Symonds develops 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 ac-

tion was required, sometimes forcibly, the administration was required to deal with exponentially growing problems. Lincoln was pragmatic in looking for “solutions unfettered by concerns about how it had always been done before, or even by conventional limitations on government authority” (p. xi). Acting as both lawyer and statesman, he certainly understood quite well that laws should not cause “inaction or injustice,” so his “pragmatism led him to seek new and creative ways to fulfill what he conceived of as his sacred responsibility” (p. xi). The acceptance of new ideas also was part of Lincoln’s makeup with a “naturally creative mind that could bend itself to the solution of all sorts of issues” (p. xii). 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.

Symonds incorporates the introduction of the key figures of the naval war with Lincoln’s development as commander in chief. The civilian administration of the U.S. Navy was headed by Gideon Welles, who was chosen by Lincoln because of political and regional considerations. Welles served as secretary of the navy throughout the war, and as opposed to the army, tended to let Welles administer the naval war with Lincoln’s long-term goals in mind, though Lincoln did step in and take control when he considered it necessary. Part of Lincoln’s growth as a leader was forging his administration into a team that would achieve victory over the rebellion. Welles and Secretary of State William Seward had a tempestuous relationship that was revealed on several occasions during the course of the war. Lincoln used patience and pragmatism to settle these disputes for the greater good. Assisting Welles in the administration of the navy was the talented Gustavus V. Fox, who was named assistant secretary of the navy. Fox was introduced to Lincoln during the planning of the relief of Fort Sumter and the president saw talent in him. Not wanting to waste this talent, the president was key in helping to create the new office of assistant secretary and placing Fox in that office. Fox did not disappoint and essentially acted as a chief of naval operations.

The navy commanders are introduced as they play their roles in the conduct of the war. Lincoln did step in to deal with command and personality issues with these men, but never to the extent that he had to with his generals. The rank of admiral was created in order to deal with command issues of so large a naval force. David Farragut, Porter, John Dahlgren, Charles Wilkes, Andrew

Foote, and Samuel Du Pont are a few of the naval commanders that Symonds introduces. Lincoln’s patience and pragmatism reveal themselves in how he dealt with these new admirals. Farragut was considered trustworthy and achieved victory with the capture of New Orleans, while Wilkes, though active, was eventually removed from command because of a pattern of untrustworthiness by continually antagonizing the British in such episodes as the *Trent* affair and capturing and seizing suspected blockade runners clearly falling under the protection of the British flag. By late 1863 Lincoln believed that his best choice for command in all services was Farragut.

One area to which Symonds points prominently in order to describe Lincoln as a patient and pragmatic leader is how he allowed events to reveal a way to deal with African Americans. Though the concept of “contraband” of war to describe runaway slaves came from General Benjamin Butler, the navy began protecting runaway slaves whenever vessels came near the coast or along rivers as their masters either abandoned them or conspired with military officials to force their continued subjugation. Largely beginning at Port Royal in November 1861, the navy set up refugee camps replete with schools and provided a system of supply to keep the runaways fed and clothed. Furthermore, African Americans were already serving in the navy at the beginning of the war and some “contrabands” were either hired by or enlisted into the navy. About 15 percent of the U.S. Navy during the Civil War consisted of African Americans. The navy allowed Lincoln a way to experiment with a variety of different policies regarding racial issues that solved legal, social, and political problems.

Symonds weaves this story of Lincoln the total commander in chief together very effectively. In discussing naval issues he does not use the jargon of the maritime services that tends to confuse the layman. He successfully integrates the decisions that Lincoln was making for the navy with the much-told command problems of the army. For instance, at the beginning of the Gettysburg campaign, Lincoln removed Joseph Hooker from command of the Army of the Potomac and replaced him with George Meade. In the same timeframe, Lincoln was making the decision to remove Du Pont from command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron and replacing him with Dahlgren. The total image of a commander in chief becomes clearer through Symonds’s narrative. Here was a leader who was able to forge more effective fighting forces to achieve grand strategy, and over the course of the war, able to plan and implement combined operations

with the services that go together like “oil and water.”

This book is a very welcome addition to the shelves of Civil War historiography. Lincoln scholars will appreciate the story of the development of the man as a leader. Naval historians will be ecstatic about the navy receiving its due from a long period of being overshadowed

by their army counterparts. The average reader will find an enjoyable read without being bogged down with too many details, which at times can be frustrating. At the risk of hyperbole, this is one of the most important books to come out about Lincoln and the Civil War navies in quite some time.

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