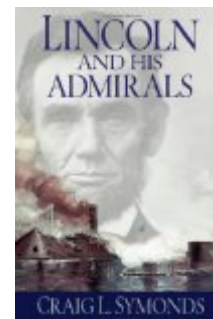


Craig L. Symonds. *Lincoln and His Admirals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 448 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-531022-1.



Reviewed by Stephen Taaffe

Published on H-CivWar (March, 2011)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle (Saint Anselm College)

The Union navy is one of the neglected stepchildren of Civil War historiography. Moreover, with some notable exceptions, much of the limited research into the navy's role has centered on its military operations. In *Lincoln and His Admirals*, however, Craig L. Symonds argues that the Union navy's contribution to the war was important, multidimensional, and illustrative of the conflict's larger social, political, and economic issues. He also uses the navy's Civil War experiences to demonstrate President Abraham Lincoln's remarkable growth as commander in chief, which Symonds attributes to Lincoln's personality, the incompetence of some of his military advisors, the undeveloped nature of the American military establishment and its doctrines, and the pressures of war. Symonds, professor emeritus at the U.S. Naval Academy, is author of ten previous books and editor of numerous others, mostly on various aspects of the Civil War. Although Symonds was already a well-respected historian, *Lincoln and His Admirals* is likely to be his definitive and most influential work. Indeed, it won several awards,

including the prestigious Lincoln Prize in 2009. *Lincoln and His Admirals* is a seminal contribution to the field not so much because it changes the way historians view Lincoln as a military leader, but more so because it integrates the Union navy into the larger themes that were central to the conflict.

It is easy for historians to isolate the Union navy from the rest of the Civil War and relegate it to the military backburner. Operating mostly on the high seas, the navy appears fairly remote from the nitty-gritty social, political, and economic issues that complicated the Union army's efforts to crush the rebellion. Symonds, though, recognizes that this was not accurate. He argues instead that the navy influenced, and was influenced by, innumerable important nonmilitary factors, and that these provided Lincoln with plenty of opportunities to advance the war effort and grow as commander in chief. Symonds rightly points out that the navy played an integral role in the onset of the conflict (the Fort Sumter relief expedition), foreign policy (the Trent affair and the

Peterhoff dispute), Lincoln administration intrigue (Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles's various power struggles with his fellow cabinet members), technology (the development of ironclad warships), interservice rivalries (the navy's dispute with the army over control of vessels on the Mississippi River), international law (numerous and often conflicting interpretations of blockade rules), economics (the navy's occasionally unseemly pursuit of cotton for prize money), and emancipation (the navy's efforts to resettle former black slaves along the Carolina coast). These are big topics that altered the course of the war and required presidential intervention. Had the navy acted differently, it is possible that the Civil War would have resulted in foreign intervention, Democratic victory in the 1864 election, and even Confederate independence. Lincoln, Symonds notes, recognized that the Union navy's usefulness extended beyond purely military operations. Symonds observes that Lincoln often employed the navy as a stalking horse for controversial policies he contemplated. For example, Lincoln permitted the navy to recruit freedmen onto its warships months before he allowed the army to follow suit as a kind of trial balloon to gauge public opinion for such a controversial step. Symonds's point, often overlooked and unappreciated, is that any detailed discussion of the Civil War's larger issues, from emancipation to economic mobilization, should take the Union navy's perspective into account.

Symonds also uses the Union navy to demonstrate Lincoln's transformation into a brilliant commander in chief. There is nothing novel to this thesis, initially and most famously articulated by T. Harry Williams, but Symonds provides new evidence for the argument by analyzing Lincoln's relationship with the navy. Lincoln had little military experience at the war's start, and this greenness manifested itself most obviously in the botched attempt to rescue Fort Sumter. Although Lincoln would have preferred to maintain a more hands-off approach to running the war and rely

instead on military professionals to operate the Union's military machinery, circumstances forced him to become more involved in the process, especially in the conflict's early years. In the army's case, he did so because of the shortcomings of so many of its generals, but it was more complicated for the navy. Symonds states that Lincoln had great faith in Welles and generally let him run the Navy Department as he saw fit. There were, however, instances in which Lincoln felt the need to take a more active role despite the confidence he placed in Welles. Sometimes he did so to overcome what he saw as the navy's technological myopia, as with his role in encouraging the adoption of ironclad warships. At other times he interfered to promote or defend naval officers whom he felt were neglected or unfairly treated, such as John Dahlgren and David Dixon Porter. More often, though, the country's military organization required his intervention. The Union army and Union navy were separate and independent entities, and as commander in chief only Lincoln had authority over both branches. As a result, joint operations against the Confederate coast, such as the assault on Port Royal, the New Orleans expedition, and the campaign against Charleston, often necessitated his participation to iron out interservice disputes and secure agreements. Symonds notes that Lincoln learned to use his patience, thoughtfulness, commonsense, pragmatism, willingness to embrace new ideas, and a desire for wide-ranging opinions to prosecute the war effectively. By the end of the conflict, Symonds states, these circumstances had forged Lincoln into a commander in chief second to none in the nation's history.

Symonds recognizes that the Union navy was not a unitary actor engaged solely in military operations, but a multifaceted and complicated bureaucracy that touched the war in innumerable ways. *Lincoln and His Admirals* therefore covers military operations as well as the navy's role in economic mobilization, personnel management, logistics, technology, etc. *Lincoln and His Admi-*

rals eschews a purely thematic format for a more narrative approach that makes for a lively and readable story. Well researched, thought provoking, well organized, and engaging, *Lincoln and His Admirals* makes the Union navy not only relevant in and of itself, but also integral to the overall Union war effort. Symonds's book is likely to become a standard work on the topic, and should find a place in the libraries of Civil War historians of all stripes.

N

N

N

N

P

E

N

N

N

A

N

N

N

A

N

N

N

N

N

N

A

N

N

N

A

N

Secretary of the Navy&#160;

N

A

N

.

N

not only&#160;

, but also

N

-

-

-

N

as an&#160;

part of

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Stephen Taaffe. Review of Symonds, Craig L. *Lincoln and His Admirals*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. March, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32320>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.