

# H-Net Reviews

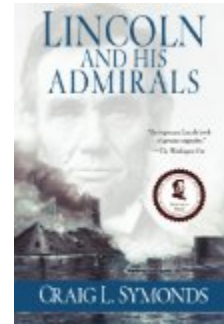
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Craig L. Symonds. *Lincoln and His Admirals*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 448 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-975157-0.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



## Managing the Civil War at Sea from Pennsylvania Avenue

The past ten years has seen an explosion of literature concerning American Civil War history. Included within this swell of studies are two books analyzing civilian policymakers and their influence on the United States Navy during the Civil War. Stephen Taafe's *Commanding Lincoln's Navy: Union Naval Leadership in the Civil War* (2009) approaches the topic from the perspective of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles and his interactions with his naval commanders, fellow cabinet members, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox, and President Abraham Lincoln. Craig L. Symonds, however, utilizes the United States Navy as a vehicle for assessing Lincoln as a wartime commander in chief in his book *Lincoln and His Admirals*.

Symonds attempts this task by tracing and assessing the interactions of President Lincoln with Welles, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Secretary of State William Seward, and such naval officers as Naval Lieutenant David Dixon Porter and Rear Admiral John Dahlgren at the Washington Naval Yard. Symonds focuses on the commanders, their actions, and Lincoln's perception of their job performance on the battlefield. He adopts a linear narrative in his book, tracing the evolution of Lincoln as a wartime commander from Fort Sumter through Ford's Theater. This approach allows Symonds to focus on Lincoln's command decisions and how he shaped the war at sea. Moreover, his chronological template permits him to discuss such threads as Lincoln's relationships with Welles, Fox, and naval officers. Yet, at all times, his primary attention remains fixated on Lincoln. Symonds ar-

gues that by the end of the war, Lincoln had developed into a smart, capable wartime commander in chief without diminishing his humanity or charm. He left many of the major naval decisions to Welles and Fox, but utilized personal and political knowledge to interject and take responsibility for actions if events moved into fields of legal, economic, or political arenas.

Symonds utilizes the Fort Sumter crisis to illustrate Lincoln's inexperience as a commander in chief, particularly when it came to delegating orders for the relief of both Fort Sumter and Fort Pickens. Lincoln, Stanton, and Welles all issued orders directly to naval officers at various points during the crisis. Symonds emphasizes this point when he cites the activities of Seward, Porter, and Army Captain Montgomery C. Meigs when "under the direction of the secretary of state, an army captain and a navy lieutenant were reorganizing the armed forces of the United States" (p. 20). Thanks to Seward's actions and Lincoln's signature, Welles was kept out of the loop on the initial planning for the relief of Fort Pickens, which led to two late night meetings on April 1 and 5, 1861, over the deployment of ships for relieving the two forts. By the end of the two meetings, Welles had convinced Lincoln of the necessity to have authority to maintain control of the Navy Department unless the president issued an order superseding Welles's authority, keeping Seward's influence out of the Navy Department. Symonds argues that while there were many faults and flaws with how Lincoln handled the Sumter crisis, his ability to solicit outside opinions from experts, encourage

debate, implement unique solutions, and make difficult decisions increased through the war. However, the decisions regarding Fort Sumter and Fort Pickens showed that Lincoln needed more experience at handling the military as commander in chief, experience he would gain throughout the war.

Symonds deliberately limits the time devoted to operational history, only including such events or issues when they deliberately affected Lincoln's decision making as commander in chief. For example, he details Lincoln's trip to Fort Monroe during the Peninsula Campaign in 1862, noting how Lincoln's activeness contrasted with Flag Officer Louis Goldsborough, commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, and his subordinate's relative inaction. Symonds particularly cites how Lincoln, in tow with Stanton, hopped on a small tugboat and scouted out a possible beach near Sewall's Point where General John Wool could land troops. While Wool ultimately chose a different landing zone, Lincoln wished his commanders, both on land and at sea, to actively engage the enemy whenever they could. If these men appeared timid or inactive, then Lincoln would seek out alternatives who might bring the fight to the Confederates.

One of the men Symonds highlights in this regard is the commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, Samuel Du Pont. Symonds casts him as a naval counterpart to General George McClellan in that both men were well liked by their subordinates but their perpetual caution and lack of forthright action forced Lincoln to seek out other military men to fill their rolls. Conversely, Symonds points to the positive relationship Lincoln had with Du Pont's successor, Dahlgren, with whom Lincoln met frequently during the war when Dahlgren ran the Washington Navy Yard, and whose influence helped Dahlgren gain a promotion not only to rear admiral but also to commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron.

Symonds's treatment of Lincoln's interactions and role and the dismissal of both Du Pont and Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes in 1863 appears in his chapter "Peace Does Not Appear So Distant as It Did": Lincoln and Wartime Politics." Using the blight of these two men as a case study, Symonds shows that Lincoln rarely directly criticized his admirals and captains, mostly allowing Welles autonomy as the war progressed. He notes that while Welles was more confrontational, rigid, and direct with his naval officers, Lincoln was more under-

standing and deflecting of their criticism. Symonds utilizes a quotation from Sophie Du Pont, Samuel Du Pont's wife, to highlight this fact, showing that Lincoln's primary concern rested not on a personal inconvenience or slight but on the Union war effort. Symonds's use of this quotation, found within the Samuel Du Pont Papers, emphasizes the power of Lincoln as a master politician but someone who grew within the war from being unsure of his responsibilities and capabilities as commander in chief to being a leader more comfortable with his hand on the political and military tiller, knowing the course he wanted to take and unafraid of changing direction if the pilots were incapable of steering the ship. Symonds's use of the Du Pont Papers in this case demonstrates his mastery of his source material, utilizing court cases, letters, orders, newspaper accounts, published diaries, and collections of family papers in crafting a clear, concise argument in his book.

Throughout his work, Symonds addresses thematic issues as they arose through the war. He devotes time to discussing Lincoln's views on contrabands in the navy throughout the war, arguing that less controversy surrounded the introduction of black sailors as compared to black soldiers given that black sailors were already serving on naval vessels. Symonds devotes an entire chapter to the Trent Affair in 1861, and also assesses other diplomatic incidents when they arose, such as the violation of Brazilian neutrality in the capture of the Confederate raider *Florida* in 1864. When these diplomatic controversies erupted, Lincoln and his cabinet members acted in the moment and made reasonable decisions on the fly rather than remain wedded to policy, showing, in Symonds's eyes, consistency within the Lincoln White House and a pragmatic approach to foreign affairs when the navy provoked controversy abroad.

This book could have benefited from some sort of conclusion assessing Lincoln's conduct as commander in chief of the United States Navy. Ending the book with Lincoln inviting the crew of the monitor *Montauk* from the Washington Navy Yard to see *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theater provides literary closure, but it leaves room for a short assessment that could have given Symonds the prose cherry on top of this historical summary. With that said though, *Lincoln and His Admirals* is an outstanding book, valuable not only to historians interested in Lincoln but also those interested in military professionalism, civil-military relations, naval history, and the growth of the president as commander in chief in wartime.

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