

H-Net Reviews

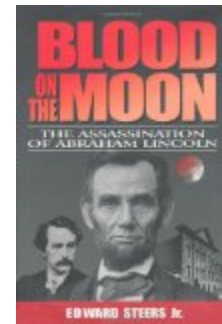
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael Burlingame, ed. *Dispatches from Lincoln's White House: The Anonymous Civil War Journalism of Presidential Secretary William O. Stoddard*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xxvi + 287 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-9290-1.

Edward Steers, Jr. *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001. xv + 293 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2217-5.

Reviewed by Christopher H. Sterling (George Washington University)
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Viewing Washington during the Civil War

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Both of these recent volumes shed some light on the city of Washington during the American Civil War, though only as background or setting. Still, the chaos of a growing city under seemingly constant siege (mentally if not actually for most of the war) breaks through, especially in *Dispatches from Lincoln's White House*. The following evaluation, aimed at users of the H-DC website, focuses on the "Washington" part of both books.

William Stoddard (1835-1925) was one of several secretaries to presidential secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay as well as to President Abraham Lincoln himself. Later in life he achieved a measure of renown as the author of some seventy children's books. While living in Washington, in a side venture that surely would never be allowed today, Stoddard wrote 120 unattributed weekly columns for the *New York Examiner*, signing them simply as "Illinois." Between May 1861 and the end of 1864, Stoddard informally reported and commented upon various events in the capital city. His copy arrived in New York via rail, typically appearing in print several days after he sent it. During the last several months of the column's run, he wrote from locations outside of Washington as he returned to his native Arkansas to serve (for only a few years as it turned out) as federal marshal. Burlingame, an emeritus professor of history at Connecticut College, has

used microform copies of the *Examiner* to assemble the series together for its first appearance in book form. He also helpfully provides extensive annotations for references to names and places unfamiliar to modern readers.

The book reads much like a diary, and it provides a vivid sense of the changing quality of life in the city as the war wore on. Stoddard's very first column refers to the city as a "camp" because of the number of troops and support personnel seeking places to work and sleep. He reports the streets safe "by night and day" in part because "the haunts of vice and infamy are closed for lack of business" (p. 1). Later entries depict a city in which the war deceptively appeared to be out of sight. Ubiquitous office-seekers thronged the Executive Mansion, as the White House was then known, and government bureaus; Mrs. Lincoln hosted receptions; construction of the Treasury Building and the Capitol continued. Yet signs of the war were everywhere: Confederate spies lurked in the city; southern sympathizers were purged from the ranks of government employees; views of General George McClellan, who arrived as "the young Napoleon," changed for the worse; hospitals were developed to treat the influx of wounded Union soldiers. Stoddard also describes theaters and other amusements, the part and paths of rumors, Washington during the hot summer months, the changing roles of blacks in a city still Southern in its customs and ways, and politics—always politics.

Of particular interest are Stoddard's fairly regular references to the slowly improving state of the city's defenses. Completely vulnerable to raids at the war's start in the spring of 1861, and having virtually no natural defense lines other than the Potomac, by 1864 the city was perhaps the best defended place in the world. A string of forts and defensive barriers encircled the capital (a few remain as parks to this day), only to be closely tested by the Confederacy on one occasion (where Lincoln himself came under fire at Fort Stephens, but was unhurt). Stoddard also tells us how war news arrived and was disseminated through Washington—and with what effect.

Blood on the Moon offers something quite different. First, that title.... We learn on the very last page that it is based on a Biblical prophecy to the effect that "the sun had turned to darkness and the moon to blood" (p. 293). Steers begins with a justification for yet another Lincoln book, noting that only a handful of scholarly studies of the April 1865 assassination have appeared. Other than the fact that he is the author of other books on Lincoln, however, no information about the author or his (possible) academic background or affiliation is provided.

There is less material about Washington in *Blood on the Moon* than in *Dispatches*, even though most of the "action" obviously takes place in or around the capital city. We are given but occasional glimpses of the world in which the assassination and aftermath take place. Steers tells us that the poor condition of Washington's rutted streets made it impossible to take the dying president the six blocks from Ford's Theater to the White House. We also learn how the closely guarded bridges across the Potomac often allowed people, including John Wilkes Booth, out of but not into the city during evening hours.

In fairness, neither of these books intends to provide a full description of Washington at war. *Dispatches* comes closest to that mark with delightful insight on people and happenings over three years. *Blood on the Moon* has a quite specific mission for which the city serves, at most, as a proscenium arch. Readers seeking the best narrative on the nation's capital during this period are urged to take up Margaret Leech's magisterial and Pulitzer Prize-winning *Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865* (Harper & Brothers, 1941) which has never been surpassed.

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