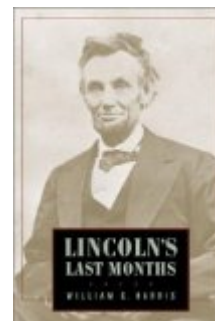


**William C. Harris.** *Lincoln's Last Months*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. 303 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-01199-1.



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Lincoln's demanding presidential schedule is often written about. We are familiar with the throngs of people who daily lined up outside of Lincoln's office and how Lincoln patiently received the callers who waited hours to see him. We know that at the same time he directed a Civil War, wrestled with emancipation, and planned for reconstruction. Other books have focused on this general time period of Lincoln's life, including *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (1994), by Phillip Shaw Paludan, and *The Jewel of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln's Re-Election and the End of Slavery* (1994), by David E. Long. In *Lincoln's Last Months*, William C. Harris presents the last six months of the Lincoln story, from Lincoln's reelection to his assassination, which allows for more detail and insight into the Lincoln presidency than a standard biography or even a presidential history could devote. Harris delivers this information, going from issue to issue, at a pace that must have been similar to the pace at which Lincoln conducted presidential business.

Harris tells the usual stories related to Lincoln's re-election campaign, including trying to

hold together both radical and conservative support, despair over military setbacks early in 1864, and the ultimately flawed Democratic "war failure" platform that helped retain Lincoln in the White House. Harris also goes into some detail on the influence of the clergy in Lincoln's reelection, concluding: "In this critical election for the Union and the antislavery cause, civil religion, or the influence of the church on political affairs, achieved its high-water mark in American history" (p. 33).

The African-American issue also played an important role in Lincoln's last months. In his discussion of the controversy regarding congressional actions on the poor conditions in the Confederate prison camps, Harris makes a reference to a new agreement for prisoner exchanges with the little known inclusion of black soldiers. Harris concludes that Lincoln deserves the title as "Great Emancipator" for his issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. Moreover, "his support of the recruitment of black troops, his pressure on border states and restored Union governments in the South to end slavery, and, finally, his efforts to secure congressional passage of the Thirteenth

Amendment were critical in the abolition of slavery and the ultimate granting of citizenship to black Americans" (p. 136). Lincoln's optimism for the future of African-Americans is illustrated in his belief that, as Harris states, "white opposition to black rights, including the ballot, would fade as the former slaves by means of education and work became part of the free economic system" (pp. 133-134).

Harris adds to our knowledge of Lincoln's Indian policy, or lack of policy. He mentions Lincoln's well-known response to the earlier Sioux Indian uprising in Minnesota and goes into more detail on the Lincoln administration's less than responsive policy regarding the Sand Creek Massacre and other issues concerning Plains Indians. Despite calls for reform of the Indian policy, Lincoln stayed focused on the Civil War and emancipation efforts.

As Harris writes, Lincoln fell back on his Whig roots when he attempted to persuade the southern citizens to return to the Union by appealing to their pocket books through the cotton trade. Lincoln exposed himself to criticism with a system that not only allowed cotton in the Confederate States to be traded through the Union lines, but granted permission to select people to conduct, and profit from, that trade. Harris goes on to identify several of Lincoln's Illinois friends who involved themselves in this trade across the battle line, including James W. Singleton, Orville H. Browning, Leonard Swett, and Ward Hill Lamon's brother Robert. Critics contended that, along with benefiting the southern citizens, proceeds from the sale of cotton were financing the Confederate war effort. Lincoln took considerable heat for this policy and ultimately backed off.

Harris explains that one reason for Lincoln's desire, in his reconstruction policy, to "let the south up easy" was his fear of anarchy. If the south was treated harshly, Lincoln feared, they would not be as willing to lay down their arms and a general guerilla war might result. Indeed,

Harris later mentions that Jefferson Davis wanted to push the war even as he was fleeing, but General Joseph E. Johnston was willing to accept the same surrender terms that were offered to Lee. Had those terms not been generous, then perhaps the remaining field commanders would have been willing to follow Davis.

Harris devotes considerable attention to Lincoln's extended visit to the front and City Point, Virginia. Lincoln must have seen the trip to City Point as a welcome break from the pressures in Washington. Lincoln was more relaxed with the soldiers and fell back into story telling with his signature hearty laugh at the conclusion. Harris relates the story of how Lincoln, during a meeting with his military advisors, tenderly picked up a stray kitten and talked gently to it, caressing it while he planned for battle. Harris also tells of Lincoln's return trip to Washington via the *River Queen* in early April. As the group passed Mount Vernon, a French guest suggested to Lincoln that his home in Springfield "will be equally honored in America" as that of Washington's. Lincoln ignored the compliment, responding "Springfield, how happy I shall be four years hence to return there in peace and tranquility" (p. 211).

Harris interjects evidence of Lincoln's interactions with his family throughout the book. Lincoln took advantage of his trips to Virginia to see his son, Captain Robert Lincoln, and on the morning of Lincoln's assassination, "he ate breakfast at eight o'clock with his family, including Robert, who was fresh from Grant's army in Virginia. Robert gave the family tantalizing details of Lee's surrender, which brightened his father's mood" (p. 219). Harris also presents a balanced view of Mary Lincoln, commenting on the many challenges that she posed to her husband, but adding "although Mary Todd Lincoln has generally been blamed for the problems in the marriage, it should be remembered that the pressures of the presidency, in addition to Lincoln's often abstracted and withdrawn nature, contributed to the cou-

ple's marital difficulties." And Harris goes on to say that "still, the Lincolns remained devoted and dependent on each other" (p. 58). Harris concludes *Lincoln's Last Months* with accounts of the nation in mourning over the tragic loss of their president, demonstrating how friends and enemies, both at home and abroad, came to terms with the tragic assassination and death of the leader "equaled only by Washington in the pantheon of American heroes" (p. 246).

Throughout his book, Harris utilizes a wide variety of sources, both documents and reminiscences from well-known players in the Lincoln White House as well as lesser-known contributors, to give multiple voices and perspectives to the last months of the Lincoln administration. Some sources provide intimate glimpses, very much removed from the White House. For example, Harris successfully places us with Lincoln and his party on the April 1865 riverboat ride back to Washington as the band music plays *Dixie* and the slow moving riverboat makes its way up the Potomac and passed Mt. Vernon.

*Lincoln's Last Months* is not a book that someone just starting to learn about Lincoln should read first. However, anyone wanting further insight into the Lincoln presidency in general and Lincoln's last months in particular would find great value in this publication.

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