

Russell McClintock. *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 400 pp \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3188-5.



Reviewed by Michael Smith

Published on H-NC (February, 2009)

Commissioned by Judkin J. Browning (Appalachian State University)

In his meticulous new study of the Northern response to the secession of the Confederate states in 1860-61, Russell McClintock takes a partly cultural approach to the study of political history, evaluating the influence of popular values and attitudes on leaders' decisions. This useful work deepens our understanding of the Union leadership's decision making during this pivotal crisis, though, in most respects, the author supplements rather than supplants earlier interpretations by scholars of this period, particularly Kenneth Stampp, David Potter, and Daniel Crofts. His focus on the role of Northern political culture in this crisis is appropriate and, as he notes, "confirms the conclusions of a number of historians regarding the centrality of politics to public life, and of parties to politics and government," in nineteenth-century America (p. 9).

The author nicely delineates the divisions that characterized the initial Northern response to the first wave of secession following Abraham Lincoln's election as president in November 1860, but prior to his inauguration the following March.

Northern parties themselves were even divided, with a pro-Southern wing of the Democratic Party at odds with Stephen A. Douglas and his more nationalistic followers, and Republicans at odds over what concessions—if any—to offer the departing rebel states. The antebellum model of a weak national government and national political party leadership, McClintock notes, proved ill suited to produce a strong or coherent response to the crisis, at least in the short term. Lincoln's ultimate success in rallying the Northern public behind him, according to the author, primarily resulted from his great talent and "expertise as a party manager" (p. 279). His policy of holding Federal forts and property and refusing to negotiate their surrender grudgingly satisfied both hard-line Republicans who favored coercion and more conciliatory Northerners who ultimately fell in line behind his policies when they resulted in the provocative Confederate bombardment and seizure of Fort Sumter.

The author, like Crofts in his essential work on the secession crisis, *Reluctant Confederates:*

Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis (1989), sees incoming Secretary of State William H. Seward's role in the Northern response to secession as being commonly misunderstood. Seward negotiated behind the scenes with Southern leaders, attempting to reassure them that the Lincoln administration's policy would be unaggressive and conciliatory. Meanwhile, he tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Lincoln of the wisdom of adopting such a course and, failing that, worked to convince Lincoln to cede control of the administration's policy to him. Ultimately, Lincoln decisively rejected both of these possibilities, and the Southerners who had listened to Seward's false assurances were angered and embittered, further worsening the crisis. McClintock argues that Seward was, however, not motivated by personal ambition, but instead primarily desired "to save the Union from both disunion and war." Moreover, faced with Lincoln's firm control of the administration and intransigence on the issue of possible concession to the South, Seward supposedly had "no choice but to engage in increasingly desperate attempts to convert Lincoln to his thinking," including threatening to resign and potentially cripple the administration, and proposing a wild scheme to declare war on several major European powers in an attempt to rally the departed Confederate states back to the flag (p. 11). While a charitable interpretation might construe Seward's actions as actuated more by high-minded concern with the national interest than cynical political maneuvering, it is difficult nevertheless to avoid regarding them unfavorably as, at best, wrongheaded and unhelpful to the incoming president under whom he had agreed to serve, whose own policies proved vastly superior.

On a methodological note, this book's topic poses several obvious challenges to the author in terms of defining just what exactly constitutes the region he is studying, i.e. "the North." He opts to define this term to mean "the free states," an understandable and justifiable choice that is nevertheless problematic in that a number of the bor-

der slave states ended up rejecting secession and embracing the Union as well (p. 11). He also excludes the Pacific Coast states from his case study, arguing that it would be "needlessly confusing" to include them and also that "the great distance and poor communication and travel conditions rendered West Coast Americans largely irrelevant" during the secession winter (p. 284). These points are both well taken but again tend to oversimplify just what exactly is meant by that ever-elusive term, "the North." Excluding West Coast states seems particularly questionable given Leonard Richards's recent eye-opening account of the central role of California, in particular, to the sectional crisis of the 1840s and 1850s, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (2008).

The views of Northern women and African Americans are not analyzed separately as the author finds "no evidence that either group significantly affected the Northern decision-making process" and moreover that "the opinions of blacks and women that appear in the written records do not differ substantially from those of white men with similar politics. Therefore I found it inappropriate and unproductive ... to analyze sources according to distinct categories of race or gender" (p. 13). One suspects, based on the rich recent scholarship (of which the author is aware) regarding the varied political activities of both of these marginalized groups, that further delving into such issues might have been more productive than the author contends. But his choice to focus on the still vast and varied region and demographic group no doubt helped make this a more manageable and focused volume, and contributed to the production of a worthy addition to Civil War scholarship.

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Citation: Michael Smith. Review of McClintock, Russell. *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession*. H-NC, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.

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