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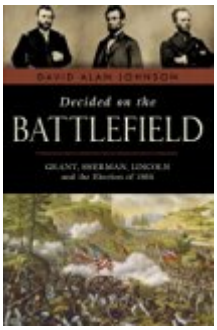

David Johnson. *Decided on the Battlefield: Grant, Sherman, Lincoln and the Election of 1864.* Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2012. 319 pp. + 8 pp. of plates $27.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61614-509-5.

Reviewed by Gerald Prokopowicz

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Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson (Miami University Hamilton)

When I took the review copy of this book out of the envelope, my first impression was positive. The author's name was new to me (this is his first book about the Civil War), which suggested the likelihood of a fresh interpretation of the 1864 election. The production values are solid, with an attractive Kurz & Allison battle print featured on the dust jacket. On second look, I wondered what the battle of Chickamauga, fought in September 1863, had to do with the 1864 election (or with Grant or Sherman, neither of whom was there), but since authors don't always have control over such matters, I didn't consider the cover a red flag, just the work of a talented but historically uninformed graphic designer. The title looked promising, with its implication of an integrated military and political approach. I already knew (as does everyone who has ever read a general history of the war, like James McPherson, ***Battle Cry of Freedom*** [1988], or any good Lincoln biography) that Lincoln's reelection was in doubt during the summer of 1864, until Union victories at Mobile Bay, Atlanta, and the Shenandoah Valley rekindled Northern voters' belief that the war could be won. I was curious to see what kind of spin the author's thesis would put on this familiar story.

Opening the book to the back, to get a sense of the depth of the author's research, I found no bibliography. This revealed that the book was not aimed at an academic audience, but this was still not necessarily a red flag. There's always a place for engaging, colorfully written popular history that synthesizes the latest secondary works into an attractive package, to draw new readers into the field. With that in mind, I turned to the endnotes to see what works the author had brought together.

Here, I found the red flag. The twenty notes in chapter 1 cite books by Carl Sandburg (four times), Bruce Catton, Shelby Foote, Herbert Mitgang, Geoffrey Perret, and Charles Bracelen Flood, the last of these being the only secondary source less than thirty years old. The primary sources cited are Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs (four times), the

New York Times (cited three times, once for the "actual" number of casualties at Shiloh, as if a contemporary reporter could know that), and three online sources for materials readily available in their original printed form. The sources cited in the remaining chapters are more of the same. The author appears to have done no archival research, or to have read any primary sources other than Grant's memoirs, an abridgment of William T. Sherman's memoirs, and the *New York Times* (he occasionally cites the *New York World* too, but ignores the more influential *Herald* and *Tribune*). There are quotes from a number of soldiers' letters scattered throughout, but the notes reveal that all of them were plucked from compilations by authors who bothered to do their own research, like Henry Commager's ***The Blue and the Gray*** (1950). Even when quoting Abraham Lincoln, whose ***Collected Works*** can be accessed online, the author haphazardly cites various secondary sources, perhaps the books in which he first happened to find the words. There are no maps. For statistics of battle casualties, there are references to Wikipedia. If a senior at East Carolina University turned in one of these chapters as a term paper, I would give the research either a C-minus (if feeling generous) or the D it deserves.

The use of outdated secondary sources is not just a technical problem. Because of the author's apparent lack of exposure to more recent scholarship, he presents obsolete legends and myths of the Civil War as fact. His one-dimensional caricature of Thaddeus Stevens as a fanatical abolitionist ("abolitionists, fanatical" is the first entry in the book's index) is drawn largely from the one-volume Sandburg abridgment he cites frequently, unleavened by any references to Hans Trefousse's ***Thaddeus Stevens: Nineteenth-Century Egalitarian*** (1997). He retells tales about Union soldiers pinning their names to their uniforms at Cold Harbor, Oliver Wendell Holmes shouting at the president at Fort Stevens, Lincoln ordering 13,000 arbitrary arrests, and even a chestnut about Sherman sparing a Southern town because an old girlfriend of his lived there. Gordon Rhea, Matthew Pinsker, Mark E. Neely, Jr., and Mark Dunkelman have debunked each of these stories, but the author cites none of their works.

Even though the book ignores almost everything written about its topic in the last twenty years, it might still have had value if the author had a provocative argument to make. Instead, he repeats again and again in the first five chapters the proposition that the war was going badly for the Union in 1864, and that if Grant and Sherman didn't win some battles, Lincoln would lose the election. Like Anne Elk's theory on the brontosaurus, this book's thesis is a painfully repetitive restatement of commonplace knowledge. In chapters 6 through 8, after Sherman captures Atlanta, the author concludes that Lincoln's reelection is now assured, and then attempts to resuscitate the suspense of the earlier chapters by dwelling on remote threats to that event, like the possibility of the soldiers' vote giving the election to McClellan. In constructing this scenario, the author does not bother to cite any figures, but simply asserts that Lincoln feared that the soldiers would "vote overwhelmingly for McClellan" (p. 209) without considering that there was much more to the soldier vote than the Army of the Potomac, and that Union soldiers elsewhere had no particular loyalty to Little Mac.

Without the benefit of archival research or familiarity with up-to-date scholarship, the author has few defenses to keep presentist assumptions from infiltrating the book. He repeatedly notes that Lincoln didn't need to campaign in 1864 once the army started winning battles, and describes McClellan as being in seclusion during the presidential campaign, apparently unaware that mid-nineteenth-century presidential candidates traditionally avoided going on the campaign trail. He refers to the twentieth-century political folk wisdom that rain on election day benefits Republican candidates, as if the Democrats and Republicans

of 1864 were made of the same constituencies as they were a hundred years later. More important, he applies twenty-first-century cynicism to nineteenth-century politics, and thus gets the politics wrong. His Lincoln is a nervous, depressed, self-interested politician concerned primarily with his own reelection. Perhaps because Johnson sees the Peace Democrats as comparable to the antiwar movement of the 1960s, his Peace Democrats not only believe in 1864 that the war is a failure (an accurate observation) but also "that the South should be allowed to secede from the Union" (p. 175), even though sources like the 1864 Democratic platform, which he quotes, directly contradict this conclusion.

At other times, Johnson simply makes mistakes, for example repeatedly referring to Henry Halleck as Grant's chief of staff, an error that could have been avoided by a cursory glance through John Marszalek's biography of Halleck, *Commander of All Lincoln's Armies* (2004)or even by looking at the spine of Stephen Ambrose, *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff* (1996) without taking it off the shelf. Some of the book appears to be pure invention; it is hard to conceive where he got the notion that Edwin Stanton was "too timid and exasperatingly nonbelligerent" (p. 148) or that Stanton "did not have a very high opinion of Lincoln" (p. 224).

It is almost impossible to recommend this book for any purpose. Anyone who wants a quick canned history of the Army of the Potomac, which the author summarizes in the first chapter, would do better to go to Bruce Catton, or Wikipedia for that matter, and cut out the middleman. Those who want to know about the presidential election of 1864 would be much better served by David E. Long's classic *The Jewel of Liberty* (1994), which is not cited once. If you prefer journalistic storytelling to professional history, then John Waugh's *Re-electing Lincoln* (2001), cited twice, would be a better choice. If you want a doorstop, this book is too small; if you teach history and want to show your graduate students how not to write popular history, it's too long to have them read it all.

For those who do stay with the book all the way, there is a little bit of payoff at the end. In the final chapter the author, a freelance author who specializes in World War II books, finally tips his hand as to why he wrote "My first book on the subject of the American Civil War" (p. 281). Describing Lincoln's Second Inaugural, he criticizes Lincoln's reference to slavery as the cause of the conflict, by adding that Lincoln "elected to leave out the economic reasons for the break between North and South, which were every bit as responsible for the war as slavery" (p. 254). Having revealed what looks suspiciously like a Lost Cause card, he spins out in the epilogue that follows an eighteen-page counterfactual history of the United States if Lincoln had not been reelected. The South separates, five American republics eventually occupy North America, but everything turns out more or less fine. It takes an extra year to defeat Germany in World War One, but World War Two is won by 1944 and the Cold War ends well, although slavery extends to the 1920s and legal segregation in the South persists into the present. Since "Exactly what would have happened if Abraham Lincoln had not been re-elected in 1864 is open to the wildest sort of speculation" (p. 279), the reader can simply enjoy the epilogue, if not the rest of the book, as a flight of the author's fancy.

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