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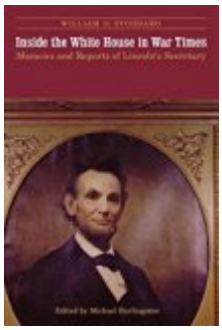

William O. Stoddard. *Inside the White House in War Times: Memoirs and Reports of Lincoln's Secretary.* Edited by Michael Burlingame. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. xxi + 226 pp. $25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8032-9257-4.

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William Stoddard's Civil War White House

Michael Burlingame has done a fine job in reviving the work of one of Abraham Lincoln's lesser-known personal clerks, William O. Stoddard. A collection of previously published and unpublished reminiscences, *Inside the White House* offers an intriguing glimpse of wartime Washington as well as a useful tool for explaining the transformation of Washington, D.C., from a provincial southern city to a bustling and mainly northern center of political power.

William O. Stoddard served as a minor clerk in the Lincoln White House, occasionally performing useful services for the President, though his main job was signing land office deeds. He worked in the nineteenth-century equivalent of the White House mailroom, which at the time was located near the Oval Office and the private rooms of Lincoln's personal secretaries, John Hay and John G. Nicolay. Stoddard's position enabled him to keenly observe and then wonderfully describe the dignitaries, officers, hayseeds, and rabble of office seekers moving in and out of the administrative offices.

In 1890 Stoddard published his accounts of those days in a book entitled *Inside the White House in War Times*. The book was a collection of reminiscences rather than first-hand accounts. However, in the new edition Michael Burlingame includes over a dozen, never-before-published "sketches" written in 1866 to Charles G. Halpine, editor of the New York *Citizen*. This short collection proves to be a valuable preface to Burlingame's forthcoming edition of Stoddard's anonymous Civil War writings (also from University of Nebraska Press). Prior to his White House service Stoddard worked as a newspaper editor in West Urbana, Illinois. He even claimed to be one of the first editors to promote Lincoln as a presidential contender. His urban values placed Stoddard out of touch with the mainly rural people who came to see the President and contributed to a snobbish demeanor.

In many ways, and I think Burlingame would agree, Stoddard and Lincoln shared an impatience for frontier Americans that bordered on disdain. The only thing Stoddard found more reprehensible than the northern bumpkins who acci-

dentally found their way to the White House were the southern whites, whom Stoddard briefly supervised as marshal for the eastern district of Arkansas late in the war. In a letter to congressman Elihu B. Washburne, Stoddard wrote: "We want twenty thousand soldiers to settle here. I tell you, my dear Sir, you cannot build up a new and free state with the worn out and demoralized debris which is all that this war will leave of the old population of Arkansas. It always was ignorant and wanting in energy, but now--upon my soul Sir they are trash!" (p. xx).

No matter who appeared before him--whether sycophantic editors trying to impress Lincoln, crying mothers of deserters pleading for a commutation, or disgruntled politicians stopping by to offer Lincoln advice--Stoddard exercised no restraint in condemning them in the same way he condemned Arkansans. Inventors peddled their latest gadget sure to bring the Union closer to victory. Contractors lobbied to win the latest round of expenditures. Even foreign dignitaries and aristocrats pressed Lincoln for everything from an introduction to a presidential appointment in the army.

Though amusing at times, the endless parade of people through the White House doors proved an encumbrance during the worst days of the war when hysteria and feverish excitement inundated the normal monotony. If one is to believe Stoddard, it was only Lincoln's detachment from the excitement that kept the White House staff focused on winning the war.

But those closest to Lincoln also played an important role. For example, Lincoln received scores of critical letters, which Stoddard describes as "the foulest vulgarity to which beastly men can sink" (p. 15). But Stoddard discarded them in such rapid fashion that it annoyed men waiting for an audience with the President. One wonders how much correspondence was destroyed and what historians would have learned from so many letters signed by "The Angel Gabriel" and announcing either divine retribution or how Lincoln might capture Richmond.

One expects Stoddard to write a hagiographic account of the president Stoddard called the "American Atlas" (p. 149). Some of Stoddard's descriptions of Lincoln exaggerated his moral fiber and character, but the young clerk was understandably swayed by Lincoln's mystique as much as by his affable manner.

Stoddard spends a great deal of time defending Lincoln from editors, Southerners, McClellan supporters, and others who spread rumors demeaning Lincoln's character. The intense atmosphere of the White House is perfectly foiled by Stoddard's portrayal of the calm but stressed President. Though he did not invent the "Father Abraham" myth, Stoddard's accounts fall within the genre of personal accounts that contributed to its creation. One can also see how his portrayal of Lincoln as the "miracle worker" illustrates what Allan Guelzo recently described as a "redeemer president" (p. 11).

Apart from the hagiography, Stoddard also shows the human side of Lincoln, particularly through his sons, Tadd and Willie, and how their rambunctious playing punctuated the tense atmosphere of war. At one point Stoddard described the scattered furniture and military maps used by Lincoln and officers, then he noted how much the boys enjoyed experimenting on them with their new pocketknives.

Stoddard maintained a contradictory tone regarding the other object of editorial ridicule, Mary Todd Lincoln. Then as now, few doubted the difficulty of working with Mrs. Lincoln and navigating the quirks and idiosyncrasies of her personality. She may have suffered from serious mental illness, but this did not make the job of White House staffers any less difficult, especially when it came time to plan the social calendar. It was left up to Stoddard to handle the First Lady, comfort her when Washington gossip got the best of her, and to change her mind when she tried to do things

the President's secretaries thought embarrassing. In many ways, Nicolay and Hay's use of Stoddard as their intermediary to the First Lady brings to mind Edwin Meese and James Baker's use of Michael Deaver to deal with Nancy Reagan.

Stoddard was most insightful with his appreciation for the rapid transformation of Washington society during the war. No longer would it be a slow, sleepy town, whose most exciting events had more to do with the social calendar organized by socialites than it did with political debate.

In many ways, the beginning of Stoddard's story occurred not in 1861 but in 1791 when James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton agreed to compromise on the first Bank of the United States. Madison and Jefferson dropped their opposition to the Bank on the condition that Hamilton would work to get the national capital located in Virginia, where southerners could keep their eye on things. Highbrow families from Virginia and Maryland took pride in their position in Washington society and consciously enveloped the city's social scene with Southern gentility for the next seventy years.

But as Stoddard claims in the opening paragraph of the reminiscences, "the old nation melted away and a new nation was moulded [sic]" (p. 3). From the perspective of the twenty-first century, we might not agree with Stoddard's assessment at least in terms of how much the war changed the cultural and economic climate of many places in America. But surely one place that changed considerably was Washington, D.C. Stoddard essentially explains what it was like to watch the descendants of Hamilton reclaim their lost capital.

Throughout the collection, Stoddard cleverly juxtaposes aspects of old Washington against the new order created by the war. Old Washington was Joe Hall's, a gaming establishment luring congressmen who were close associates to Daniel Webster and Henry Clay. New Washington was the unfinished capitol and treasury buildings, which he saw as signs of a more enlightened age to come. "It is very nearly a true saying," Stoddard reminds his readers "that all that remains of that [older] era is a clog and hindrance to the Administration" (p. 36). Stoddard humorously recounts the old politicians who took credit for Lincoln+IBk-s accomplishments or claimed to direct his thoughts. Little did they realize that not only was their power slipping away, but also the legislative power they exercised was slowly passing to the chief executive. The new Washington would not even have been a place where Lincoln's political mentor, Henry Clay, would be welcomed.

At times it is difficult to reconcile Stoddard's jubilation at the new society being forged and his puritanical sensitivity to the "fossil remains of former political eras" (p. 173). Not everything could be blamed on the old political order. Railroad promoters frequented the White House seeking the expansion of credit and subsidies. Hack inventors attempted to fool clerks into purchasing flawed armaments. Bankers plotted how they might benefit from easy credit and the national banking system. But these vices continued long after the war because they were attracted to Washington by the very politicians Stoddard adored and by the lasting effects of their policies. The explanation offered for why Lincoln went through so many generals is a case in point. Lincoln claimed the common good of the nation required a general willing to defeat the Confederates at whatever the cost. Better to kill thousands on the battlefield than see more die in diseased camps and hospitals. This is what Stoddard called "battle-field arithmetic" (p. 101). Surely even Stoddard must have realized that though wars demand such calculations, the consequences can last for generations.

Though I think Stoddard was unsuccessful, he made a good effort to defend the Lincoln administration from detractors who clamed it created the corruption rather than suffered under it. Stoddard's attempt to separate Lincoln from the war fever and the debilitating effects of the inflation-

ary greenbacks seems strained at best. He expected the war to usher in a new order where the masses that supported the South (and the Democrats) would be marginalized and replaced by an urban elite that was pragmatic, efficient, and industrious. The new style of politics after the war did not end the wartime machine, neither did it finish off the speculators and promoters, who became the norm for Washington life.

But perhaps this interpretation is incorrect. Perhaps Stoddard, writing in 1890 at the latest, longed for the lost hopes of the country when it could have gone in a different direction, one conforming to the incorruptible path he believed Lincoln would have taken.

Stoddard relates a telling story that explains the changes in Washington life that took place during the war. When large numbers of free blacks and freedmen formed militia units and marched down the streets of Washington, Stoddard remembered asking William Seward and Abraham Lincoln for their opinions of the event. Seward, the long-time abolitionist finally satisfied with the fight for freedom, told Stoddard, "It grows. It grows" (p. 173). The hundreds of black soldiers typified the profound transformation of Washington life, and ever since, it grows.