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Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals: Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. Navy, and the Civil War*. Oxford University Press, 2008. 430 pp. Illustrations, maps, index.

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In 1952 Dorset Press published T. Harry Williams' *Lincoln and His Generals*. Well received on publication, over the years the book has become recognized as a genuine classic. The question that immediately arises about a book entitled *Lincoln and His Admirals* is: Does this book deserve to sit on the same shelf as Williams' study? The short answer is "yes." This is a masterful account of Lincoln's relationship with the Navy Department personified by Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Vasa Fox and below them the flotillas of the fighting Navy and the men who led them—the admirals of the title. Given the author's credentials as a Civil War and naval historian, perhaps this was only to be expected. Craig L. Symonds, professor emeritus from the History Department at the U.S. Naval Academy, is the author of numerous studies of naval and military history with a special, but not exclusive, focus on the Civil War.

When Abraham Lincoln assumed the chief magistracy on March 4, 1861, he had essentially no experience with navies or with oceans. Equally important, the man who famously conducted his law practice based on documents he carried in his stove-pipe hat had precious little experience with large organizations or with what passed in that day as complex bureaucracies. He was immediately thrown into the Fort Sumter crisis upon taking office. Although he handled the policy and, more importantly, the politics of the crisis deftly, he failed as a commander-in-chief. Without realizing what he had done until after the fact, he dispatched the warships that he had intended to use in relieving Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, to support the Federal garrison at Fort Pickens in Pensacola Harbor, Florida.

Still, Lincoln learned from his mistakes, and he had exhibited certain characteristics during the crisis that enabled him to grow into his role as commander-in-chief. First, notes the author, the president sought expert advice from a variety of sources. Second, he encouraged, "even demanded" free discussion among the advocates of different courses of action (36). Third, he was willing "to consider unconventional solutions and independent thinking" (36). Fourth, when he weighed the arguments and made a decision, he followed through on it. If the results were not what he had anticipated, he took full responsibility publicly for the consequences. In so

doing he won the loyalty of most of his cabinet members (Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase was a notable exception) and all the members of his personal staff.

From the opening discussion of Lincoln the neophyte chief executive, Symonds' strengths as a historian are on display. As might be expected of someone of his background, he has a superb mastery of the secondary literature of the Civil War, not just of the Sumter relief expedition but, as he demonstrates in succeeding chapters, of the conflict as a whole. Symonds, however, has not simply synthesized the existing literature. He has mastered a wide range of primary materials that allow him to embody the main characters—and even the secondary ones—as three dimensional figures. Consider Symonds' description of one of those lesser participants, the commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, Captain Louis Malesherbes Goldsborough. He “was not physically impressive; a stocky, even plump, short necked fifty-seven-year-old with small eyes and a straggly beard, though in the middle of the night after a long day of seasickness, the president was probably not focusing on Goldsborough's appearance” (148). That last clause demonstrates an additional strength—the author's wry and understated humor that adds much to the pleasure of reading his account.

Once Lincoln became more accustomed to his duties as commander-in-chief of the Army and the Navy, he focused on the major issues of strategy and those political and military problems of such intractability that only the president could resolve them. His role in the January 1863 naval attack on Charleston illustrated how Lincoln operated at this stage of his development. In contrast to Robert M. Browning, Jr., who saw Fox as the instigator of the operation, Symonds makes clear that Lincoln was one of the primary backers of such an attack.<sup>1</sup> Not only was the president convinced that the seizure of Charleston was a good thing unto itself, but he anticipated that an active campaign in that quarter would draw off Confederate attention and resources from the primary theater of war in Virginia. As sophisticated as Lincoln's understanding of strategy was in late 1862 and early 1863, Symonds makes clear that the president was still very much an amateur in military and naval affairs. He associated sieges with Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's dilatory operations on the Peninsula in early 1862 and equated advocacy of combined Army and Navy operations as the equivalent of a siege. The president's presuppositions combined with R. Adm. Samuel F. Du Pont's unwillingness to forthrightly describe the difficulties associated with taking his ironclad fleet into Charleston Harbor created intellectual confusion about the purpose of the Charleston campaign. As a result, Du Pont's conduct of the attack was not what Lincoln, Wells, and Fox intended—and ultimately led to both defeat and the admiral's relief.

Throughout the book, Symonds remains focused on the president and his immediate advisors. The author, for example, mentions in passing the practical problems that Du Pont faced off Charleston, but these are decidedly secondary to his main theme. At the same time, because Lincoln focused on problems, difficult figures such as R. Adm. Charles Wilkes and R. Adm. David Dixon Porter claimed his time and attention disproportionately. Likewise, Symonds gives

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<sup>1</sup>Robert M. Browning, Jr. *Success Is All That Was Expected: The South Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002), pp. 153–67.

them considerable space in his narrative. Quietly competent sailors, such as Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, who captured New Orleans and ran by the forts at Mobile Bay after only minimal direction, received less of Lincoln's attention—likewise the author's. In short, as the author notes, *Lincoln and His Admirals* is not a substitute for a comprehensive history of the Union Navy in the Civil War. It is quite simply the best account available for the often neglected naval portion of civil-military relations during the conflict and promises to be the standard account on that subject for the foreseeable future.

The book suffers from one major defect. Symonds does not choose to reflect on how his findings fit into the historiography of either the Civil War or civil-military relations. He provides a wonderfully sophisticated narrative focused on the president's role in the conduct of naval operations, but ends his account and the book with Lincoln's death. Readers can only lament that this seasoned scholar has not shared his mature reflections about those topics with them.



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