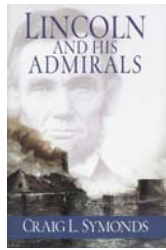


2009 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNER CRAIG SYMONDS FOR *LINCOLN AND HIS ADMIRALS: ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE U.S. NAVY, AND THE CIVIL WAR*



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

At the risk of turning this event into something resembling the Academy Awards, before I say a few words about Abraham Lincoln and the Navy, there are some people I need to acknowledge.

First, I want to thank Lew Lehrman and Dick Guilder, not only for their generosity in sponsoring this prize, but even more for the long-term commitment they have made to encouraging the study and teaching of the life of Abraham Lincoln and the era of our nation's great national trauma. Without their sponsorship, people would still study Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, but perhaps not as many, and perhaps not as often. You, and your co-conspirator Gabor Boritt, have initiated an important and continuing conversation about Lincoln that had extended from academe to the general public.

Second, I owe a debt to the scores of Civil War and Lincoln scholars, many of whom are here tonight, and I want to acknowledge not only their contributions, but also their generosity which is evidenced by their willingness to share ideas, resources, and hospitality. It really is a community of scholars. In that respect, few have contributed as much or been more generous than my co-laureate, Jim McPherson, who is the very model of the gentleman-scholar. I am honored to share this prize and this podium with him. Jim and Pat are also good friends, and Marylou and I are grateful for their friendship.

I also want to thank my good friend Harold Holzer, who has stood at this podium before, very likely will again, and indeed, might easily be standing here now in my place for his fine book on Lincoln as President Elect. Both Jim and Harold read my entire manuscript in draft and helped me clarify several important questions. Bill Miller, who is also being honored here tonight for his wonderful book on Lincoln's Duty as a Statesman, read my chapter on Fort Sumter and shared with me his essay on "The Case of the Purloined Powhatan." Without generous scholars like Jim, and Harold, and Gabor, and Bill, we would not only be poorer in our scholarship, the endeavor would not be nearly as much fun. I also want to thank my friends at Oxford University Press, several of whom are here tonight—including my editor Tim Bent, for their support and encouragement.

Finally, I want to acknowledge a few people who are here tonight simply to cheer me on: My wonderful wife, Marylou, the love of my life, who is also my most insightful and valued editor; our son Jeff Symonds, who is the best classroom teacher I have ever seen, and his partner Susee Witt (who successfully defended her dissertation at Stanford last Thursday, so that if you get a chance to talk to her tonight, you can call her Dr. Witt); and our friends John and Jeanne Marszalek who we first met at this event sixteen years ago this week when John and I were both finalists for the 1993 Lincoln Prize.

The most important person here tonight, of course, is Abraham Lincoln, who brings us all together, and whose bronze likeness dominates the room. There is a sad irony in the fact that despite the fact that Abraham Lincoln abhorred war, and made his first national reputation as a war protestor by introducing the spot resolutions, he nevertheless spent virtually his entire presidential tenure charged with the responsibility of managing the bloodiest conflict in our national history. In testament to that, both Jim and I sought to examine Lincoln's role as Commander-in-Chief in our books, and my particular effort focused on doing so through the seldom-employed prism of naval policy and operations.

It is curious that of the more than sixteen thousand books that have been published on Abraham Lincoln, none has focused on his management of the navy. The reason is perhaps evident: The Civil War was fundamentally a land war, with the navy playing an important, but clearly secondary, supporting role. To Lincoln, too, it was a secondary concern. Nevertheless, examining Lincoln's involvement with, and management of, the Navy offers us one more way to look at and to assess his leadership. The Navy occasionally forced Lincoln's hand, as when Captain Charles Wilkes stopped the British mail packet steamer *Trent* on the high seas to provoke an international crisis, or when the Navy's occupation of enclaves along the South Atlantic coast required him to confront the issue of the legal status, and the political future, of the thousands of black refugees that came under the Navy's protection, before he was politically ready to do so. In these and other ways, Lincoln's relationship with the Navy compelled him to re-examine, and sometimes to re-consider, his most basic policies.

Finally, there is the fact that absent a Secretary of Defense or a Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lincoln was the only person in the entire nation who had simultaneous command authority over both the army and the navy, a fact that put him—often unhappily—in the middle of what today we call joint operations. There were occasions when Lincoln had to step into what amounted to a vacuum of authority when the army and navy were expected to cooperate, and the generals and admirals were disinclined to take orders from officers of a rival service.

As a result, Lincoln became more of an activist wartime leader than was usual for American presidents, and far more than was instinctive to him. He coordinated several aspects of the war on the western rivers where navy gunboat commanders and army generals lacked any unified commander; he adjudicated disputes between the army and navy concerning joint operations against Charleston, Wilmington, and Richmond; and on one notable occasion, actually initiated and supervised an amphibious assault on the Virginia coast that led to the fall of Norfolk.

Just as he felt compelled to do with the generals, Lincoln occasionally stepped in to promote some admirals, and to relegate others to obscurity. He promoted both David Dixon

Porter and John A. Dahlgren from commander to Rear Admiral in a single step, jumping them over the heads of every captain in the navy—which naturally provoked a lot of bitter comment from those captains. Similarly, Lincoln declined to step in to save the careers of Captain Charles Wilkes or Rear Admiral Samuel Francis Du Pont from the consequences of their own foolishness. Throughout it all, and despite unceasing public attacks, he supported his fiercely loyal and much-criticized Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles.

In all of this Lincoln was sustained in his efforts by those same characteristics that made him such a successful politician.

First was his patience. There is a popular view today that effective presidents must necessarily be proactive—that they should be the kind of men (and so far they have all *been* men) who seize the moment and master the situation by virtue of their assertive, even dominant, personality. Lincoln almost never did this. To be sure, he took charge of joint operations when there was no one else who could, or would. But as a rule, Lincoln didn't try to direct events, instead he sought to channel them, to guide them—to nudge, to encourage, even to cheerlead.

In a much quoted passage, Lincoln noted in 1864 “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.” This did not mean that Lincoln remained passive when confronted with the several and serial crises that came to his desk, but rather that he was realistic enough to know that one individual cannot simply impose his will on History, and that it was often necessary to assess the momentum of events before making a decision. As was often the case, Lincoln was able to explain his views by means of a story. “A man watches his pear-tree day after day, impatient for the ripening of the fruit. Let him attempt to force the process, and he may spoil both fruit and tree. But let him patiently wait, and the ripe pear at length falls into his lap.”

There was a limit to Lincoln's patience, of course, as Charles Wilkes, Samuel F. Du Pont and others discovered. But Lincoln seldom shot from the hip, and when he was wrong, he was willing to say so, to reverse himself, and apply soothing words.

Second only to this habit of patience was Lincoln's often cited pragmatism. He was unburdened by a commitment to any particular military or naval doctrine. To be sure, he became an avid student of the military art, requesting numerous books on the subject from the Library of Congress, but principally that gave him a mastery of military terminology; his strategic suggestions derived primarily from a common sense instinct. And that pragmatism also extended to his interest in new technology. He was quick to grasp the importance and utility of the telegraph, the railroad, and of armor plate and heavy rifled guns for warships. Very likely, Lincoln's expressed support for the monitor-type ironclad was crucial in getting the members of the Ironclad Board to accept it.

Let me be clear: Lincoln's pragmatism did not extend to compromising on issues of principle. Inside that pragmatic envelope was a core of pure steel. Willing as he was to postpone hard decisions when it was evident that they would be unpopular or might undermine the war effort, he was not willing to abandon them altogether. When members of his party argued that standing by the Emancipation Proclamation might well wreck the party's hopes for the 1864 election, Lincoln was firm. The promise had been made, and having been made, must be kept.

Third, and finally, Lincoln was a great commander in chief because of a characteristic that was virtually unique to him, an almost complete absence of ego. Unlike either his generals or his admirals, he felt no need to assert personal credit for progress in the war so long as there was progress. Throughout his management of the naval war, Lincoln demonstrated not only his patience and pragmatism, but also a keen political sensitivity, a deft touch as a manager, a willingness to make a hard call and assume full responsibility for the consequences, and throughout it all, despite personal and national tragedy that could easily have broken him, his humor and his humanity.

Thank you very much for this great honor.