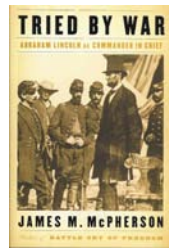


2009 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNER JAMES MCPHERSON FOR *TRIED BY WAR: ABRAHAM*

*LINCOLN AS COMMANDER IN CHIEF*



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

I accept this prize with a profound feeling of gratitude for the vision and generosity of the individuals who made it possible: Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman, along with Gabor Boritt, who had much to do with inspiring the creation of the prize. I also wish to thank this year's Lincoln Prize jury and the board of the Lincoln and Soldiers Institute at Gettysburg College. And I can't forget to mention Scott Moyers, the former editor of Penguin Books who first suggested that I write a book on Lincoln as commander in chief, and Eamon Dole, the editor who shepherded the book through the publication process.

Two score and ten years ago I sat in the studio of a radio station in Baltimore to answer call-in questions about Abraham Lincoln on the sesquicentennial anniversary of his birth, February 12, 1959. I was a first-year graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, where I had done a research paper on Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's secretary of war. So when Station WBAL called the Hopkins History Department to ask if someone knew enough about Lincoln to take part in this program, the Department secretary – with the wonderful name of Lily Lavarello – suggested me. It seemed to matter little that my paper had focused on Stanton during Andrew Johnson's administration – that was close enough. So I made my way to the studio, where I discovered just how much I did *not* know about Abraham Lincoln. My inability to answer some of the questions did not augur well for a career as a Civil War historian – which, to be sure, I didn't yet know would be my fate.

I have learned a lot about Lincoln during the years since my initial foray into talk radio. At first, however, this learning process took place along a narrow axis, from the perspective of abolitionists who were initially very critical of Lincoln because of his perceived conservatism on the issue of slavery and race and his perceived slowness to move against slavery in the early part of the Civil War. I did my doctoral dissertation on the abolitions during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Like many young historians – even some older ones – I tended to absorb the point of view of the people whose words I was reading and whose activities I was writing about. Wendell Phillips denounced Lincoln in 1860 as “the slave hound of Illinois” because he had pledged to obey the Fugitive Slave Law. A prominent Ohio abolitionist proclaimed the same year that Lincoln “ignores all the principles of humanity in the colored race, both free and slave; and as abolitions claim the right to freedom of the one class, and political equality to the other, how can they be consistent, to say nothing of honest, in supporting such a man?” When Lincoln in September 1861 revoked General John C. Fremont’s edict freeing slaves of Confederate supporters in Missouri, abolitionists condemned his “pigheaded stupidity.” William Lloyd Garrison fumed that even if Lincoln was “six feet four inches high, he is only a dwarf in mind.”

I wrote my dissertation during the early, crusading years of the civil rights movement, whose goals and leaders I admired. The similarities between these goals and leaders and those of the abolitionists produced admiration for them as well. I absorbed some of their attitudes towards Lincoln, though I never went so far as to think of him as characterized by pigheaded stupidity.

As the years passed and I grew to maturity as a scholar and teacher, I also grew in appreciation and admiration for Lincoln. On the question of slavery I learned the truth of what he himself said: “I have always hated slavery, I think, as much as any abolitionist. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.” But as a responsible political leader, as a student of the Constitution, and especially as president of the United States, Lincoln could not act unilaterally or unequivocally on this moral conviction. Demands from abolitionists were not the only kind of pressure Lincoln faced as president. A dozen or more different constituencies in the North and

Border States tried to sway Lincoln's policies on slavery – and on many other issues connected with conducting this war. After years of studying these powerful crosscurrents of political and military pressures, I came to appreciate the skill with which Lincoln steered between the numerous shoals of conservatism and radicalism, free states and slave states, abolitionists, radical Republicans, moderate Republicans, War Democrats, Peace Democrats, border-state Unionists, and various factions among army officers to maintain a course that brought the nation to victory – and the abolition of slavery – in the end. If he had tried to act decisively against slavery in the war's first year, as radicals pressed him to do, he might have fractured his war coalition, driven border-state Unionists over to the Confederacy, and witnessed the survival of slavery for at least another generation. Lincoln ultimately proved to be the foremost abolitionist of all. And toward the end of his life he was also moving toward the abolitionist goal of equal civil and political rights for freed slaves.

While studying and writing about these events I became convinced that most of the important issues and achievements of Lincoln's presidency were connected with his conception and execution of his war powers as commander in chief. Yet in the vast literature about Lincoln, this crucial dimension of his career has received relatively little systematic attention. There was T. Harry Williams's classic book *Lincoln and His Generals*, published in 1952, of course, and the five volumes by Kenneth P. Williams, *Lincoln Finds a General*, published during that same period more than half a century ago. And all Lincoln biographies and studies of his presidency touch on the subject to some degree. But the books by the two Williamses (unrelated to each other) focus almost entirely on the military aspects of Lincoln's actions as commander in chief. These aspects were obviously important, but they were far from the whole story. Lincoln conceived of his duties as commander in chief to lie as much or more in the political as in the military sphere. It was a war of peoples as well as of armies, and those armies were composed mostly of volunteer citizen soldiers (and voters) mobilized through a political process from local communities all the way up to the national government itself.

So I decided to write a book that would offer a narrative and interpretive account of Lincoln's multi-tasking activities as commander in chief. The Constitution specifies simply that the president is commander in chief of the army and navy and of state militias when called into federal service. It does not define the functions of commander in chief. Wartime presidents have defined and carried out those functions according to their own understanding of the problems they faced. Lincoln took a more hands-on role than any other war-time president. In many ways he established the modern powers of the president as commander in chief. In his first message to Congress he twice mentioned the phrase "war power" in describing the president's authority. These words appear nowhere in the Constitution. He was the first president to use these now-familiar words.

As commander in chief, Lincoln performed or oversaw four functions, and on one famous occasion, a fifth: policy, national strategy, military strategy, and operations. The fifth was tactics, which despite temptations a few times to go to the front and take direct command of an army, Lincoln got involved with tactics only once when he went to Hampton Roads in May 1862 and gave direct orders to army and naval officers to occupy Norfolk and even picked out a spot to land the troops. On several other occasions he sent telegrams from Washington to generals in the field with specific operational orders to act against enemy armies in the Virginia and Tennessee theaters.

But Lincoln's main energies were directed toward the first three functions of a commander in chief. His unwavering *policy* – the war aims – was preservation of the United States as one nation, indivisible. His every action was directed to that end. *National strategy* refers to the mobilization of the political, economic, diplomatic, and psychological as well as military resources of the nation to achieve this war aim, this policy. National strategy was primarily a political and administrative function. Lincoln had superb political skills, and he picked some good administrators to carry out these tasks: Edwin M. Stanton as secretary of war, Montgomery Meigs as quartermaster general, William H. Seward as secretary of state, Salmon P.

Chase as secretary of the treasury, Gideon Welles and Gustavus V. Fox as secretary and assistant secretary of the navy. Some of Lincoln's most controversial actions grew out of his conception of war powers to mobilize Union resources and weaken enemy resources: suspension of the writ of habeas corpus and the Emancipation Proclamation to seize enemy property being used to wage war against the United States – in this case, slaves.

Finally, there was military strategy. Lincoln may have spent more time – and certainly experienced more frustration – on this matter than on anything else. It was a task for which he had almost no preparation – a function that he had to learn on the job, as it were. He had to do it because his first three generals in chief, whom he had hoped would run the war, proved inadequate: Winfield Scott, George B. McClellan, and Henry W. Halleck. So did many of his commanders of field armies. Not until he got Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, and Thomas in top commands was he able to put together a winning team. Lincoln's evolving understanding of military strategy and his relations with various commanders form the narrative backbone of *Tried by War*, but the book's central argument is that policy, national strategy, military strategy, and operations must be understood as an integrated whole. Lincoln came to understand that truth better than anyone else, and to carry out the integration. That was what made him the greatest commander in chief in American history.