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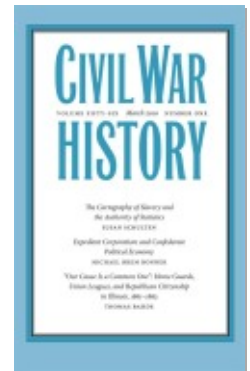
Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief (review)

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Book Reviews

Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief. By James M. McPherson. (New York: Penguin, 2008, Pp. 384. Cloth, \$35.00; paper, \$17.00.)

James M. McPherson's distinguished corpus of work includes a great deal of attention to Abraham Lincoln. The sixteenth president is prominently featured in the Pulitzer Prize-winning narrative *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), explored through various analytical lenses in *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (1992), and discussed within the context of the 1862 Maryland campaign in *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam* (2002). In all of these books, McPherson sizes up Lincoln's abilities as a commander in chief who forged relationships with general officers whose talents varied widely. With the publication of *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*, McPherson builds on his earlier scholarship to present a clear, concise, and grippingly written assessment of Lincoln as war leader. In doing so, he continues a historiographical tradition that includes Colin R. Ballard's *The Military Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (1926) and T. Harry Williams's *Lincoln and His Generals* (1952), both of which praised the president as one who made early mistakes but grew into a knowledgeable and successful commander in chief, as well as Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones's *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (1983).

McPherson's Lincoln, like the ordinary soldiers in the huge volunteer army he commanded, knew next to nothing about military affairs at the war's outset. Early costly mistakes, such as the debacle at First Bull Run, inspired considerable criticism of Lincoln's military decisions. McPherson gives full attention to such mistakes but highlights Lincoln's growth as a war leader whose skills as a master politician were soon complimented by those of a strong and able military strategist. "At all levels of policy, strategy, and operations," he argues, "Lincoln was a hands-on commander in chief who

persisted through a terrible ordeal of defeats and disappointments to final triumph . . . at the end” (8).

McPherson offers readers just enough of the necessary background for the reader to comprehend the unique set of challenges facing the new president. By the time Lincoln was sworn into office on March 4, 1861, the Confederate States of America were established. Immediately, Lincoln struggled to formulate a military strategy to achieve his political goal of preserving the United States. McPherson points out that there was little or no precedent for Lincoln’s actions as commander in chief, either in history or in the vague wording in the Constitution, which gave the executive chief unspecified “war powers.” He lists five categories—policy, national strategy, military strategy, operations, and tactics—that provide his analytical framework for judging Lincoln’s role as successive chapters move through the war chronologically (5). Lincoln not only fleshed out the formerly ambiguous powers of a war president but, in McPherson’s telling, excelled in all five categories. The learning curve was steep, however, with enormous costs in lives and treasure. Over half of *Tried by War* is devoted to the first two years of the war as Lincoln searched in vain for the military commander who could win decisive victories on the battlefields, especially in the all important eastern theater. McPherson unleashes a devastating critique of the early commanders of the Army of the Potomac, especially singling out Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan. In contrast to more favorable recent interpretations by Ethan S. Rafuse and Joseph L. Harsh, McPherson’s “Little Mac” is an arrogant and vain soldier whose ill-fated Peninsula campaign and half-victory at Antietam failed to produce the results that would bring the South back with slavery intact. As the war dragged on, Lincoln fired McClellan and emancipated the slaves as a military measure, adding black freedom to the Union cause.

During this time, Lincoln obsessively studied textbooks of military strategy and tactics, haunted the telegraph room pouring over the battle reports, always learning from his mistakes and those of his leading generals. As the casualty lists grew longer and the political opposition from Democrats, Copperheads, and Radical Republicans mounted, Lincoln was subjected to constant criticism for his failed military strategy. Despite the pressures, Lincoln waged the war in a steadfast and vigorous manner, always with a passion for saving the Union. It is a measure of McPherson’s literary gifts that this familiar tale takes on a taut and riveting character.

By early 1864, Lincoln identified Ulysses S. Grant as his top commander. Fresh from their triumphs in the western theater, Grant and his lieutenants—

William T. Sherman and Philip A. Sheridan—took center stage in the last part of the war. Their campaigns diminished and finally obliterated the South's major field armies. A remarkable team, Lincoln and Grant weathered severe criticism as losses mounted during the campaigns of spring and summer 1864. For a while, it looked like Lincoln was going to lose the critical election of that year. Success on the battlefield and the overwhelmingly favorable soldier's vote returned him to the White House with a large majority.

Throughout the narrative, McPherson reminds readers that "Lincoln could never ignore the political context in which decisions about military strategy were made" (7). Indeed, military strategy represented the most obvious, and bloody, component of a national strategy resolutely focused on restoring the Union. "Here was the core of Lincoln's concept of his war power as commander in chief," declares McPherson. "His supreme constitutional obligation was to preserve the nation by winning the war" (30). Readers unfamiliar with the details of Lincoln's complex and often troublesome relationship with his generals will find *Tried by War* richly rewarding. Even students more familiar with the literature will appreciate the analytical and descriptive skill evident in McPherson's narrative. They will also be reminded again of the daunting obstacles Lincoln faced and overcame in presiding over the most serious threat yet to the American nation.

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A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escape to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation. By David W. Blight. (New York: Harcourt, 2007. Pp. 320. Cloth, \$25.00.)

In *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escape to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation*, David Blight reveals the narratives of Wallace Turnage and John Washington, men who escaped slavery during the Civil War and recorded their emancipation experiences later in life. Part of a growing body of rediscovered nineteenth-century African American writings, they straddle a line between antebellum narratives published under the auspices of white abolitionist organizations, and postbellum memoirs like Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, which celebrate the journey "from slave cabin to the pulpit," and other sagas of post-emancipation uplift (14). Blight's annotations illustrate that the narratives are remarkably verifiable Civil War-era source material, and he provides a detailed four-chapter introduction offering