

TAH: A More Perfect Union
Book Review
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Over the summer, I read a highly detailed book about the four months between Abraham Lincoln's election and his inaugural. The book, Lincoln President Elect, was a great read and tightly organized. The author proves his point-Lincoln was wasting no time in preparing for the Presidency. By reading this book, I learned a fair amount about Lincoln and learned about some primary sources I could incorporate in the class. This is a book I would recommend to any student of history.

First, the thesis of the Mr. Holzer. Almost immediately, Holzer makes his purpose evident-"to paint the most accurate and detailed picture" (7) of one of the greatest crises facing the United States. His portrait is lovingly laid out in 463 pages, of which you will find a summary below.

Lincoln President Elect is divided into two portions. The first- The Promise of Something Better and the second-The Momentous Issue of Civil War, chronicle the path from election night 1860 through Inauguration Day 1861. Holzer seems to focus on five tasks that faced Lincoln during those months-selecting a Cabinet, distributing patronage (and seemingly enjoying it), writing his Inaugural Address, speaking publicly to reassure the American populace and travelling to Washington DC safely.

Lincoln very adeptly assembled his 'team of rivals'. It seems everyone in the new Republican Party had someone they wanted in his Cabinet. Geography played a large role in the selection process-convention votes may have been given with the promise of a Cabinet position for someone from that state (106). Everyone had an opinion, be it in

person or in writing and many of the potential team did not get along. Seward, Chase and Bates, were eventually wooed by Lincoln-Seward very late in the interregnum. Lincoln effectively “molded a unity government composed of an equal number of men of opposing parties in the past” (434).

Patronage-it seems Lincoln was constantly besieged by office seekers, and to some extent, he did not seem to mind. By distributing government jobs to loyal Republicans he could do two things, reward those who had supported him electorally and “guarantee the loyalty of the federal bureaucracy during the difficult years to come” (121). Holzer provides evidence of why some of these jobs were highly sought after. Lincoln could appoint over 40,000 well paying civilian jobs, ranging from “22,700 post offices, 9,400 Navy Department positions, 4,000 places at Treasury, and 1,900 apiece for the Departments of War and Interior” (235). These job seekers did take their toll. One journalist claimed Lincoln did not “enjoy a single entire day of mental calm” (231) after the election until assuming the Presidency. These job seekers cornered him at public events, sent letters and telegrams and tried to curry favor with his wife. Even the girl who wrote to him about growing a beard asked him for a job during his term (334). In the past, historians claimed these four months were a period of ‘masterly inactivity’ on the part of the President Elect. Clearly, these were not months of inactivity.

Constructing an Inaugural Address that “assure(d) the South that he posed no threat to its sovereignty or its slaves, without abandoning the anti-slavery principles on which he had won the Presidency” (265), Lincoln was careful in drafting his speech, incorporating his beliefs, party ideals, ideas he had articulated in public speeches on the way to Washington and the advice of others, most notably Seward (439). The Inaugural

was laden with words of unity and patriotism and an attempt to reassure Southerners that Lincoln would not interfere with their peculiar institution.

On the way to the Inaugural, Lincoln gave over 100 speeches at varying locales. Different audiences called for different variations of the same speech. While he was known in the west, he had to introduce himself with “greater care” in the east (342). One topic was totally avoided-slavery. Lincoln’s views on slavery were already well known and he was afraid of stirring further turmoil in the South. It also seems that his speeches got more concise and energetic as he travelled to Washington DC (346).

On this trip to DC, assassination was a constant fear. Some cases, notably New York City, there were “crowds, cannon and cheer” (348) on the way to the Capitol. However, the “peril ... of death” (382) did exist. In the Baltimore Plot (which may or may not have existed), Lincoln stealthily travelled through the city, switching trains late at night (397-405). Given the death threats sent to him and the vitriol of Southern newspapers, this was most prudent.

Overall, I learned a great amount from this book. Two things in particular can help me in the classroom. First, the pro Southern cartoons of Adalbert Volck. These editorial cartoons mock Lincoln mercilessly. I will use these in the class to provide the ‘other side’ of the Civil War. Second, I want to incorporate some of the writings of Henry Villard, a writer for the New York Herald, and someone who covered Lincoln during the winter of 1860-61. These writings are an enjoyable, easy to read way to learn about Lincoln’s personal qualities.

Without hesitation, I would recommend this book to any person interested in American history. It provides a vivid portrait of Lincoln, his personal qualities, and his

ability to handle multiple crises at the same time during a dangerous period of American history.

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