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Tried by War by James M. McPherson

In Tried by War, James McPherson once again provides an interesting, fact-filled book of the Civil War. In this book, he tackles the issue of Abraham Lincoln as commander-in-chief. In his preface, he notes that this aspect of Lincoln's presidency has often been ignored at the expense other areas. As proof, McPherson recalls a 1994 conference on Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg College that included sessions on psychobiography, the Indian Wars, his images in photos, humor, and slavery. For a presidency that was defined by the Civil War, the fact that his role as commander-in-chief is not mentioned surprises James McPherson. James McPherson accomplishes his goal of thoroughly analyzing Abraham Lincoln's performance as Commander-in-chief of the Union Army.

McPherson's thesis stated in his introduction is that Lincoln was the most involved commander-in-chief of the presidents. He organizes his thesis around the five functions which Lincoln performed as commander-in-chief. These were in diminishing order of his involvement: policy, national strategy, military strategy, operations, and tactics. (p.5) While the book logically follows the Civil War chronologically, McPherson regularly refers back to the five functions as commander-in-chief.

McPherson defines policy as the political goals of the nation in time of war. In many ways this is the most interesting aspect of McPherson's book. In the opening chapter, McPherson uses newspaper articles and Lincoln's speeches to demonstrate his

policy in the months after his election and before the inauguration. As Lincoln was preparing for the inauguration, he was keenly aware that the nation was placing his words under a microscope. McPherson demonstrates this effectively when discussing a speech in Philadelphia. Lincoln stated “there will be no blood shed unless it be forced upon the Government. . . . I shall endeavor to preserve the peace of this country so far as it can possibly be done.” (p 12) McPherson notes the qualifying clauses in this speech may not have reassured everyone. Knowing that he needed to pacify the Border States, Lincoln continued to follow a policy of reconciling the Union and preserving slavery if necessary to do so. This policy changed as the war continued. McPherson makes a strong case for the practicality of abolition in the Union’s war effort. When Lincoln began to recognize the need for destruction of the old South, he gained further support of some Northerners through his Emancipation Proclamation.

According to McPherson, the Emancipation Proclamation also played a large role in the function of national strategy. National strategy is the mobilization of the political, economic, diplomatic, and military resources to achieve the war aims. McPherson effectively demonstrates throughout the book the ways in which Lincoln balanced politics with military strategy. He does so most effectively concerning the issue of slavery. McPherson demonstrates how the national strategy evolved to include the freedom of slaves. Politically, this was a strong move as it assured the support of the most radical Republicans. Economically, slaves were the backbone of the Confederate economy. McPherson effectively ties this issue together with policy as well as military strategy, as he demonstrates the effectiveness of attacking the resource of slavery. Once

again, McPherson demonstrates well that Lincoln was realized his role as commander-in-chief required the goals of the country, and therefore his, to change over time as needed.

When it comes to military strategy, operations, and tactics, McPherson shows the tremendous involvement of the president. On several occasions, McPherson describes Lincoln being awoken in the middle of the night to be informed of the success or failure of a strategy. Lincoln constantly was recommending strategies based on his studies of the landscapes and war. According to McPherson, Lincoln realized that his military experience did not match that of Jefferson Davis, a West Point graduate and veteran of war. McPherson effectively demonstrates Lincoln's self education on military strategy and how it evolved throughout the war. As Lee's army crossed into Pennsylvania in June of 1863, Lincoln advised Gen. Hooker to avoid getting entangled upon the Rappahannock River like an "ox jumped half over a fence, and liable to be torn by dogs, front and rear, without a fair change to gore one way or kick another." (p 179) By 1863, Lincoln was more forcefully involving himself in the operations of the armies. Despite his more forceful involvement, Lincoln's suggestions were often ignored. In the summer of 1864, McPherson describes Lincoln's frustrations once again as military commanders allowed the Confederates to escape across the Potomac. Lincoln stated "Wright telegraphs that he thinks the enemy are all across the Potomac but that he has halted and sent out an infantry reconnoissance, for fear he might come across the rebels and catch some of them." (p 226) As commander of the army, Lincoln was slow to react to the stubbornness of McClellan and his refusal to pursue the Confederate Army.

The most surprising fact of the book was the inability of Lincoln to control his generals during the first half of the war. While the frustration of McClellan's lack of

movement with the Army of the Potomac is a well known fact, it is still surprising to see how often McClellan was insubordinate. McPherson relays a story in which McClellan snubbed Lincoln actually retiring to bed while Lincoln was awaiting him for a conversation. McPherson portrays Lincoln's frustrations with such vividness that the reader cannot help but become frustrated with McClellan as well. In September of 1862, Lincoln urged McClellan to "Destroy the rebel army, Lee's army and not Richmond, is your true objective point." (p 268) McClellan never seemed to grasp or being willing to carry out the strategy suggested by Lincoln. One must question his constant overstating of enemy forces and wonder whether he was knowingly overestimating. This constant hesitation or insubordination would cost McClellan his position. Lincoln then turned to Burnside and Hooker neither of whom were capable of commanding. General Meade would eventually take command of the Army of the Potomac and command it until the war's conclusion. Despite this Lincoln most certainly was not always pleased with Meade's performance. Can you imagine Lincoln's frustration ten months later when he unsuccessfully implored General Meade to destroy the rebel army and end the rebellion? (p 268) This was another request that would not be followed. McPherson wants the reader to see the effectiveness of Lincoln as commander-in-chief but the reader cannot help but see his failure to truly command his generals. At times, the reader may find themselves doubting the thesis of McPherson. In his epilogue, McPherson acknowledges the difficulty of portraying Lincoln as a strong commander-in-chief in relationship to his handling of the generals. He writes, "Another hallmark of Lincoln's conception of military strategy and operations remained unfulfilled until he had the team of Grant, Sherman, Thomas and Sheridan in place by 1864." (p 268) Despite Lincoln

recommending this strategy to Halleck and Buell in January of 1862, Lincoln was not successful in convincing his generals to follow his strategy of using two Union armies on exterior lines to counter the Confederates and capture or destroy them. (p 269) This strategy was not carried out until 1864 by Sherman and Grant. Stated another way, it took Lincoln three years to effectively convince his generals to follow his strategy.

As the book progresses, McPherson adeptly supports his thesis by showing how Lincoln masterfully balanced most roles as commander-in-chief. Lincoln provided the nation with a nationally strategy that was fit for the moment. McPherson demonstrates this most effectively as he shows how the slavery issue eventually became the strategy of the union. The emancipation of the slaves became a necessity in order to reaffirm Northern support for the war as well as weaken the South economically. The allowance of African Americans to serve in the Union Army showed Lincoln's willingness to once again change policy to meet the national strategy. McPherson describes not only how this helped Lincoln retain the support of Radical Republicans but also how it filled the need for more soldiers at a time when the North was having trouble raising troops. This practicality of Lincoln is perhaps the quality which McPherson most successfully demonstrates in his book.

James McPherson's book, Tried by War, is an excellent book for those interested in the role of Abraham Lincoln as commander-in-chief. McPherson assumes that the reader has a strong knowledge of the Civil War and its battles. If the reader does not, the book could become confusing as McPherson jumps from theatre to theatre in order to expand on Lincoln's roles. The book assumes too much background knowledge for use in the typical high school classroom, however, it would be a wonderful addition to

Advanced Placement courses' reading lists. McPherson's insights into Lincoln's frustrations with the generals are great starting points of discussion. It would be interesting to hear the students' viewpoints on Lincoln as commander-in-chief after reading his difficulties with handling the generals.

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