

Tried By War
Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief

By James M. McPherson

(New York: Penguin, 2008. Pp. xv, 329. Illustrations, notes, index. \$38.00.)

Eminent Civil War scholar James M. McPherson, Princeton University historian and winner of a Pulitzer Prize for *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), and a Lincoln Prize for *For Cause and Comrades* (1997), applies his considerable expertise and talent to a subject surprisingly under-examined: the role of Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief during the Civil War. The fact that so little is written about so important an element of Lincoln's presidency is surprising, and McPherson's book is a welcome closing of that gap.

As the author notes, Lincoln was ill prepared for the job. As McPherson writes, "Lincoln faced a steep learning curve," and was "painfully aware that his adversary, Jefferson Davis, was much better prepared for that daunting task" (p. 2). Yet Lincoln had certain assets as well. He possessed "a keen analytical mind," and a "fierce determination to master any subject to which he applied himself" (p. 2). Given his lack of preparation, the surprise is that Lincoln was "a more hands-on commander in chief than any other president" (p. 5). Lincoln's involvement is especially evident in his control of the five primary wartime functions: policy, national strategy, military strategy, operations, and tactics.

Throughout, Lincoln always focused on his one major strategic

goal: to preserve the Union and restore (even reinvigorate) the spirit of 1776. This defense of republican and democratic government came at a time when democracy seemed threatened and in retreat across the globe. Thus, President Lincoln's message was not merely for an American but for an international audience. He was fighting to preserve self-government.

For Lincoln, there was no time for on-the-job training. Promptly faced with the crisis of Fort Sumter (the first paper placed on his desk called for an immediate decision on what to do about Sumter), it was clear that his decisions would be consequential from day one. And from day one, Lincoln demonstrated skill and insight. "He made mistakes—but he also learned from those mistakes" (p. 266). The talents to grow, to learn from mistakes, and to be flexible and adaptable to new situations and changing circumstances were trademarks of Lincoln's leadership style. Few presidents master the ability to be fluid and readily adapt to change; most rigidly dig in and continue doing what they are comfortable doing, rather than facing what needs to be done (e.g. Lyndon Baines Johnson and Vietnam). A key to Lincoln's success was his ability to bring military tactics in line with his political goals and strategy. He always kept his

eye on the end he wished to achieve, but was flexible in reaching that end.

One of the persistent and vexing controversies surrounding Lincoln as Commander in Chief was his willingness to go beyond the law. Historians differ in their evaluations of Lincoln's wartime policies on civil liberties. McPherson, to this reviewer, skates rather quickly and somewhat superficially over this controversy. He seems a bit too sanguine about Lincoln's legal violations, and while "necessity" is a powerful argument in Lincoln's favor, a more thorough examination, incorporating a stronger stand by McPherson one way or the other, would have been useful. On this McPherson instead steps gingerly, avoiding the hard decisions, which is disappointing; the way Americans deal with this controversy had implications not only in Lincoln's age, but also our own.

McPherson is an excellent storyteller with a great story to tell. The reader comes away once again amazed with the skill and acumen of Lincoln the man and the leader. This

book covers a remarkable man at a remarkable turning point in United States history, and James McPherson once again establishes himself as one of our more insightful Lincoln scholars.

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Lincoln's Censor

Milo Hascall and the Freedom of the Press in Civil War Indiana

By David W. Bulla

(West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2008. Pp. xviii, 340. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.)

Historically, wartime has been the most dangerous time for free speech in American history. That has been true in virtually every war the country has fought since the Revolution,

but the suppression of speech during the Civil War was perhaps the most bleakly paradoxical occasion. In the country's bloodiest war, a war fought to liberate one group of Americans