Stephen D. Engle’s long-awaited study of the governors of the Northern states during the American Civil War rejects the widely accepted damning verdict pronounced by historian William B. Hesseltine in his 1948 magnum opus, *Lincoln and the War Governors*. Hesseltine concluded that the governors, collectively and individually, by their meddling and complaining, had hindered President Abraham Lincoln’s efforts to put down the Confederate rebellion and save the national Union. Rather, Engle argues at great length that the governors complemented the president and his administration in mobilizing citizens to fight and win the war. Forming a “crucial partnership” (p. 2) with the president, the governors advanced boldly when sometimes the Lincoln administration was paralyzed by uncertainty. Acting singly and collectively, state executives energetically addressed crises and challenges, offering leadership, ideas, and resources to the cause of freedom. Gathering together, as in Cleveland in 1861 and in Altoona in 1862, as well as frequently traveling individually to Washington, D.C. to confer with the president, they pressured Lincoln to adopt aggressive policies. Shortly after the commencement of fighting, the governors compensated for the administrative weaknesses of Lincoln’s first secretary of war, Simon Cameron, often bypassing him to mobilize the Union army. By July 1861, Engle argues, the “federal-state alliance” (p. 100) had built the foundation for an effective fighting force and grown both federal and state executive power strong enough to muster volunteers to the war effort and succor soldiers in the field, two functions left to the states. Later, the governors often quarreled with the more effective but testy Edwin M. Stanton, in the end gingerly developing a working relationship with the War Department that achieved victory.

Along with pointing out the administrative successes of the state executives, Engle highlights episodes when the governors, in private meetings and in personal letters, strove to dissipate Lincoln’s despair, especially after the numerous defeats suffered by the Army of the Potomac. Unlike too many historians, Engle is not afraid to criticize Lincoln’s performance as president, frequently noting his and his administration’s paralysis in key moments. Fearing loss of momentum against a resilient Confederacy, governors—especially fellow Republicans—drove and prodded Lincoln. Often, as Hesseltine noted with censure, the governors’ efforts amounted to hectoring and lecturing. But, as Engle argues convincingly,
Lincoln had a thick skin and appreciated that the governors were with him and not against him. Engle points to August 1864 as a key period when the war effort had stalled and the Northern people were exhausted. Lincoln feared that he would lose the coming presidential election. It was during this period, Engle argues, that the governors, as party leaders in their states, did not jettison Lincoln but instead rallied their voters around him. The governors’ unprecedented “state-oriented activism” (p. 455) grew in the course of the war and ultimately was welcomed by Lincoln and Stanton. Engle addresses all fifty-nine governors who served during the war, but some executives merit greater attention owing to their significant achievements. Republicans John Andrew of Massachusetts and Oliver P. Morton of Indiana stand out as preeminent stalwarts of the Union war effort; Pennsylvania’s Andrew Curtin merits praise for his compassion for wounded soldiers and destitute widows on the home front. Democrat Horatio Seymour of New York earns rebuke for his obstructionism.

Engle’s research into state archives and manuscript collections all around the United States is prodigious. Sometimes the temptation to use the wealth of documentation he uncovered leads the author to stray from the path of the book’s thesis, meandering in asides and anecdotes that retell the story of the war but reveal little about the federal-state relationship in wartime. As well, the reader stumbles over too many minor factual errors here and there that a thorough copy editor or perhaps an unhurried reread of the draft would have caught. These blemishes aside, Engle’s work offers a valuable and convincing corrective to a long-standing thesis on the war president and the war governors. Historians will profit from Stephen Engle’s efforts to remove the Northern governors, at least most of them, from the doghouse.

STEPHEN E. TOWNE is university archivist at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. His most recent book is Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America’s Heartland (2015).

doi: 10.2979/indimagahist.113.3.07

Wolford’s Cavalry: The Colonel, the War in the West, and the Emancipation Question in Kentucky

By Dan Lee

(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. Pp. xiii, 289. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. $34.95.)

As the author of the second biography of Union Colonel Frank Wolford—the state’s leading spokesman against Abraham Lincoln—Dan Lee provides...