

## Lincoln as War Leader / *The Supreme Irony.*

### Introduction:

There are more titles in the English language about Lincoln than about anyone else except for Jesus and Shakespeare. But there has been a very noticeable trend in that over the past thirty years or so there are only a few on Lincoln as a war leader. (I suspect one of the reasons for this surprising neglect was the Vietnam War). For example, the conferences held at Gettysburg College on the Civil War (The Fortenbaugh lectures) over the past years have dealt with Lincoln as psychohistory, books on his assassination, sessions on Lincoln's image in photographs and popular prints, one of Lincoln and civil religion, one session on his humor, his economic ideas, one on slavery and emancipation.

But more than any thing else Lincoln was a WAR PRESIDENT. Indeed, he is the only president in our history whose entire administration was bounded by the parameters of war. As we may recall, Lincoln had hardly returned from his own inaugural party where waiting for him at the White House was a letter of Major Robert Anderson at Fort Sumter that stated that unless re-supplied he could hold the fort for only a few more weeks. From this point and for the next 1000, 500 and 3 days there was scarcely one in which Lincoln was not preoccupied with the war.

There is a supreme irony in this because Lincoln hated war and repulsed by all forms of violence.

page two

Lincoln's Attitudes toward violence/ and war:

As a 7-year-lad in Kentucky when his father was away, a flock of wild turkeys approached the Lincoln cabin. Lincoln took a rifle and shot at them through the cracks in the wall and killed one of the birds. That was the last time he pulled a trigger on any larger game.

For a frontier lad to give up hunting was a great sacrifice . . .

In 1832 during the Black Hawk War Lincoln was elected as an officer of volunteers from Illionis district. He saw no action in that war. But he did see men killed by Indians and he described the scene:

As he came upon the men "the light of the morning sun was streaming upon them as they lay heads toward us on the ground. And every man had a round, red spot on the top of his head. . . ." The scalped men were "frightful" and "grotesque."

As to his own record in the Black Hawk War, Lincoln turned his own humor and penchant for burlesquing war and war related topics. His soldiering, he was fond of saying, consisted of "Bloody struggles with mosquitoes" and "Charges upon the wild onions."

He did, however, save the life of an old Indian who came into his camp under a safe conduct but some of the volunteers were intent on lynching him nonetheless until Lincoln, "Captain" Lincoln intervened.

His strongest words and stand against war came with the Mexican War in 1846/8. As a freshman congressman from Illinois he was undeterred in attacxking President Polk for provoking the war. Lincoln raised the question again and again in the Congress about the exact spot where Polk had charged that **American blood was shed on American soil**. Lincoln's insistent on this point earned for him the nickname "Spotty," and earned the contempt of many of his consistuents back home, especially among Illinois Democrats. Although you may remember he was never elected again to national office from Illinois.

Lincoln was repelled by military glory spilling over into politics. (Although as a citizen of the most politicized nation in the world it is surprising he was so riled). As a Whig he was reminded over and over again just how broad the coat tails of the Democratic President Andrew Jackson's were and how the Democrats ran a succession of "warrior-politicos" successfully against "good" Whigs for public office. The Democrats were so successful that the Whigs took to emulating them less they have to fold as a viable political alternative. (Harrison in 1840 and Taylor in 1848).

Lincoln, of course, supported both of his party's candidates. But he still harbored a bitter contempt for "fixing the public gaze upon the exceeding brightness of military glory." At every occasion he lampooned and burlesqued the military records of Democratic national political frontrunners and other traditional displays of martial spirit. For example he laid into that practice of every state and city to trot out the militia--the citizen soldiers--at every national holiday.

He recalled with some relish one of these "fantastic" turnouts in his home town in Illinois:

"We remeber one of these parades. . . at the head of which, on horseback, figured our old friend Gordon Abrams with a pine wood sword, about nine feet long, and a great paste-board cocked hat, from front to rear about the length of an ox yoke, and very much the shape of one turned botton upwards . . . ."

"Flags they had too," he went on, one of which he cited: "We'll fight till we run, and we'll run till we die." "That," Lincoln announced with satisfaction, "was the last militia muster" in his home town.

This repugnance against war and violence explains to a degree Lincoln's refusal to believe in the last ante-bellum days and even after his own election in 1860 precipiated the first phase of Southern secession, that there would be no civil war. (Of course, in this he was of like mind with many if not most Americans in 1860. At least up until the guns of Ft. Morris and Moultrie).

LINCOLN AS WAR LEADER

page four

The Lincoln that McPherson depicts in his Odeal of Fire as war president is the president who led the Union in the most devastating war of the 19th century--actually the most devastating war in American history:

1.5 million casualties on both sides

620,000 dead on both sides

It was Lincoln who approved Sherman's plan to march through Georgia and the Carolinas and lay waste to the South--the prime practitioner of "total war."

It was Lincoln who approved Grant's war of attrition against Lee's army at Petersburg.

It was the same Lincoln who urged Sheridan to follow Jubal Early's forces to the death in the Shenandoah Valley.

A different kind of Lincoln . . . . Recognize that the Civil War started out as one kind of war and in time evolved into something quite different.

During the opening stages of the war the North had devised a limited national strategy for victory--very limited, almost a police action to quell a rather large riot and not to suppress a rebellion.

The plan that Lincoln adhered to was the one devised by General Winfield Scott--the so-called Anaconda plan. This called for a blockade of all Southern salt-water ports by the navy and a thrust down the Mississippi to split the Confederacy and surround it ultimately with a noose. All that would be left would be to tighten the noose until the South surrendered or until the Southern unionists were able to rise up and overturn the minority who took the section into the secession embroglio. . . .

LINCOLN AS WAR LEADER

page five

So the North opened the war on the theory not of overthrowing an enemy state or even conquering enemy territory but of suppressing an insurrection and restoring authority in its own territory and to accomplish this with minimum destruction or interference with Southern property. Lincoln was still convinced at the outset of the war that there was a "loyal majority"--a silent majority--that would rise up and overthrow the fireating secessionist minority who would help in the restoration of the Union. I. A

Lincoln choose at the outset a limited war strategy rather than to prosecute a violent, remorseless, and revolutionary war.

But by 1862 it was clear to him--if not to some of his generals--that to restore the Union by ending the secession he would have to wage a total war against the South. To destroy her armies, lay waste to her land, and systematically overtuern her political and social system. To wage a total war and revolutionary struggle.

I think we see clearly this Lincoln in McPherson's work. The President saw clearly that there was a need for a change in the national strategy. He was instrumental in shaping that strategy around the idea of unconditional surrender by the Confederacy. To change the war from a limited to an unlimited one.

We see this in the way he badgered McClellan to destroy Lee's Army of Virginia. His final removal of McClellan refused to use the army Lincoln wanted him to. His grave disappointment with Meade when he allowed Lee to escape from Gettysburg back to Virginia.

Finally, his touchstone policy in evolving the North's war aims from a limited to unlimited war when he announced the Emancipation Proclamation in Fall of 1862. this hit the South where she lived in her peculiar institution.

The Emancipation Proclamation was issued at a militarily startegic time and was an important aspect of military strategy. But the emancipation strategy was more than a military means. It would have been inconsistent with national strategy to fight a war using the weapon of emancipation to restore a Union that still had slaves. Lincoln recognized this. For him and in the fulness of his plans emancipation became a war aim in 1863 inseperable from the restoration of the Union itself. The war had as its second aim the initiation of a social revolution.

LINCOLN AS WAR LEADER

page six

So whatever we might think about Lincoln as a war strategist, etc. it was still Lincoln who steered the North through the uncertain first 18 months of the war toward a unifying Union strategy of total war and emancipation that was ratified by a majority coalition of Republicans and War Democrats in the 1864 election that gave the nation a new birth of freedom.

LINCOLN AS WAR PRESIDENT

*addendum*

Source: Roy Basler, Collected Works, Vol. I, p. 508

Yes sir, that coat tail was used, not only for Gen. Jackson himself; but has been clung to, with the gripe of death, by every democratic candidate since . . . Like a horde of hungry ticks you have stuck to the tail of the Hemitage lion to the end of his life; and you are still sticking to it, and drawing a loathsome sustenance from it, after he is dead. A fellow once advertised that he had made a discovery by which he could make a new man out of an old one, and have enough of the stuff left to make a little yellow dog. Just such a discovery had General Jackson's popularity been to you. You not only twice made President of him out of it, but you have had enough of the stuff left to make Presidents of several comparatively small men since . . . ."