

Lincoln: Peacemaker Or Warrior?

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The almost universal perception of Abraham Lincoln is of a kind, big-hearted and almost pacifist personality who, in spite of being caught in the maelstrom of war, never really endorsed its cruelty or harshness. He himself confessed that he had felt shame and remorse as a youth after shooting and killing a wild turkey, a rather common occurrence on the frontier, where people killed game in order to eat. Except for some immature political attacks made as a young man, his manner even with his political enemies was unfailingly gracious and kind. He did not hold grudges and saw no value in revenge or retaliation. Both as a lawyer and politician, he developed a reputation as one who could reconcile and conciliate.

Doris Kerns Goodwin, in *Team of Rivals* describes in a masterful way how Lincoln brought together in his cabinet men who had competed with him for the presidential nomination.¹ She correctly identified that achievement as a tribute to his lack of ego and his ability to work with disparate personalities. When he discharged the disreputable and ineffectual Simon Cameron as Secretary of War, he turned to a Democrat, Edwin Stanton, a surprising choice both because he was a Democrat and because Stanton had humiliated Lincoln years earlier in a court case. Stanton not only snubbed him in the trial, even though they were on the same side, but referred to him as “that damned long armed ape.”² Lincoln patiently tolerated personal attacks, never answering in kind.

Throughout the war, Lincoln continued his kind and empathetic approach. He insisted on reading all court martial cases resulting in the death penalty. Most of the cases involved young soldiers running away in fright (or because they were homesick) or sleeping on guard duty. Lincoln understood the need for discipline and good order, but he found it difficult to endorse the death penalty. In almost all cases, he commuted the sentences and sent the men back to duty. Secretary Stanton regularly exploded with exasperation and rage at Lincoln’s compassion, certain that Lincoln was undermining military discipline.

As busy as he was prosecuting the war and running the government, when Lincoln learned that over 300 Sioux Indians in Minnesota had been sentenced to death because of violence perpetrated on residents there, he required all the legal files to be sent to him. He personally reviewed each case and made a judgment about the fairness of the punishment. He ended up vacating the death penalty in almost

ninety percent of the cases. Because of the inflamed public sentiment against the Indians, his action was very unpopular.

Lincoln was also gracious to his war enemies. Early in the war, he authorized chivalrous acts, such as exchanging particular prisoners or returning bodies of deceased soldiers to their armies for burial.

Even in his direct dealings with the South, he never resorted to revenge or recrimination. He readily acknowledged that only the special circumstances of economics and geography led to the establishment of slavery in the South instead of the North. He claimed no moral superiority because the North did not have slavery. He thought of the Southerners as alienated brethren, fellow countrymen. He never thought of them as enemies to be conquered merely for the purpose of conquest. Even in his last major speech, the Second Inaugural, in March, 1865, he did not speak triumphantly of victory or success, even though the war was almost over; he did not call for revenge and punishment of the South. Instead, he appealed to the country to “bind up the nation’s wounds,” and urged that there should be “malice toward none, with charity for all.” His intentions toward the South, even after four years of bloody war, were kind and considerate.

For all the reasons cited and for the general warmth, generosity and compassion Lincoln exhibited throughout his life, including the dark days of war, in spite of presiding over America’s bloodiest war he is correctly seen as a peacemaker.

But Lincoln was also a warrior. Before his inauguration, he gave little thought to being a military leader. (In fact, while serving in the Congress, he made a speech facetiously referring to himself as a “war hero” with combat injury: he had been stung by mosquitoes while serving a couple months in the militia, but seeing no combat, during the Black Hawk Indian uprising!) He had little interest in military affairs and certainly no significant experience. During the four months between his election and inauguration (the Constitution then provided for a March 4 inauguration), Lincoln showed no evidence of any potential as a commander in chief. He remained virtually silent during the period. While he steadfastly resisted any appearance of groveling before the South just to keep them from seceding, (he observed that he did not think he needed to apologize for having been elected president), he did nothing to prepare for the possibility of war. Clearly he was right to avoid saying or writing anything that might make the secession crisis worse. He did not want anything he wrote or said to be used as fodder in the efforts of extremists to break up the Union.

While it is certainly understandable that he did nothing publicly to acknowledge the possibility of war, thereby making war more likely, it is inexcusable that he did nothing to prepare for war. War was, after all, more than a hypothetical possibility. By the time he arrived in Washington for his inauguration, seven states had withdrawn from the Union and “[a]lmost one-third of [the Army’s] officers were leaving their commissions to join the Confederacy.”³ Passions were at a fever pitch; southern extremists were

calling for eviction of any remaining federal authority; militias were being organized in the South. With at least the possibility of violence, Lincoln should have inquired, albeit quietly and confidentially, of Winfield Scott, Commander of the Army, how many troops were in the army, where they were located and whether the Capital at Washington, D.C. could even be defended from southern attack and seizure. Lincoln did almost nothing either to inform himself about military resources or to develop contingency plans. In fact, there were only about 16,000 men in the entire army and most of those were stationed in the western part of the country.⁴

Lincoln's failure to act resulted not from lack of intelligence or courage. Nor was he simply passive. Rather he could not bring himself to believe that American citizens would go to war against their own country. He believed that southern secession was the result of the action of the plantation owners. Knowing that most southerners neither lived on plantations nor owned slaves, he could not imagine that independent yeomen would fight to preserve the plantation system. That turned out to be a naïve assumption.

Immediately after he became president Lincoln's lack of preparation hurt him badly. On the very afternoon of his inauguration, he learned that the commander at Fort Sumter had telegraphed to say that his supplies would be exhausted within thirty days and he would need to abandon the federal arsenal unless he got new supplies. South Carolinians were threatening to take military action if the fort were not surrendered. The Lincoln administration made a bad situation worse by its lack of a plan, its inadequate communications and indecision. As Lincoln biographer Ronald White observes: "Lincoln was not prepared to deal with the crisis of Fort Sumter at the beginning of his presidency."⁵

Craig Symonds, in his book, *Lincoln and His Admirals*, confirms that Lincoln was poorly prepared to serve as commander in chief and handled the Fort Sumter crisis badly.⁶ He observes, however, that Lincoln became a quick learner and soon evolved into a particularly effective military commander. When war broke out, Lincoln was inexperienced in military matters and was not prepared for civil war, but in the months following Fort Sumter, he learned much about war and took personal responsibility for the leadership of the Union military effort. He became an effective warrior.

Lincoln had good instincts for military matters. He, more than most of his generals, understood the need for simultaneous military attacks on the South at multiple points, taking advantage of the superior resources of the Union. He knew that launching an attack in only one place at a time permitted Confederate armies to be shifted from one battle site to the next. He soon understood the value of building up naval forces and took an active role in coordinating activities between the army and navy. Since each branch had its own cabinet member, no one, except the president, was in a position to oversee coordination. He did not shy away from his responsibility and played a vital role in the combined work of the army and navy.

Lincoln was involved in tactics, strategy, maneuvers and the development of new weaponry. He often went to the Navy Yard to see demonstrations of new technology and weaponry. Almost every day, he crossed the street from the White House to the War Department telegraph office to read telegrams coming in from the battle areas. He followed the logistics of shifting troops and supplies and intervened at times to influence those movements.

A remarkable example of his military ability came in 1862, when McClellan was moving his army from the Virginia Peninsula to Richmond. Lincoln decided to visit the area around Hampton Roads, Virginia. While he was there, he noticed that a southern battery appeared to be within range of Union ships. He asked if the ships could not shell the battery. Shooting ensued and the battery was surrendered. He then suggested that troops move toward Norfolk to take strategic positions. As soon as the Union troops approached, Norfolk surrendered. While McClellan was miles away, immobile before Richmond, Lincoln, with the few troops remaining at Hampton Roads to protect the ships, was able to personally lead the effort to seize southern positions.

Perhaps more than anyone except General Grant, Lincoln understood the importance of pursuing the enemy armies until their capacity for waging war had been completely destroyed. When General Meade, after the Battle of Gettysburg, expressed pleasure in a telegram to Lincoln that the enemy has been driven “from our soil,” Lincoln exploded: “The whole country is our soil!” He seemed at times to be the only person who understood that even the South was part of “our soil;” it was part of the Union. That was the very premise of the war! He was so convinced that continuing pressure needed to be applied against the South to end the war, giving them no time for rest, that he quietly acquiesced in Grant’s bulldog assaults against the South in the summer of 1864, which resulted in 100,000 Union casualties. He made no complaint; instead, he praised Grant for maintaining pressure on the South.

During the war, when many around him, particularly those in Congress and some of the leaders of northern states, wanted to abandon the war effort or to make peace with the South on almost any terms, he steadfastly refused. Because he was so tenacious in his commitment to prosecute the war to conclusion, while apparently unsuccessful in his efforts to do so, he became extremely unpopular. It was increasingly certain that he could not even be re-elected in 1864. Many in his own party wanted someone else. So certain was he of defeat that he wrote a memorandum acknowledging the inevitability of his defeat, but he rigidly refused to back down on the military efforts to save the Union and free the slaves. As it turned out, military victories at Atlanta by Sherman and in the Shenandoah Valley by Sheridan just before the election secured his re-election. Lincoln continued to spurn all efforts to end the war on terms that would leave slavery in place or threatened the continuation of the Union. As a result of his persistence, over 600,000 Americans died and millions of dollars of property damage sustained.

As a warrior, Lincoln served as commander in chief, directing the military effort of his country. He also must take responsibility for some of the Black Flag Warfare which emerged after 1863. In *Blood on the Moon*, Ed Steers describes the activities that constituted Black Flag War.⁷ It included: violence inflicted as retribution, conspiracies to kill leaders, confiscation of civilian property and the punitive treatment of civilians. Lincoln was a full participant in the decisions to carry out some of those war measures. In August, 1861, he signed the Confiscation Act which permitted the seizure of property, including slaves, used by southerners in the war.⁸ The seizure of civilian property, even slaves, was controversial. In 1862 as Lincoln was considering another confiscation measure, General McClellan, commander of the Union armies, wrote Lincoln: "It should not be a war looking to subjugation of the [southern] people. Neither confiscation of property...or the forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated."⁹ McClellan, like many others in the Union, persisted in the more chivalrous approach to war even as Lincoln became more aggressive in putting pressure on the southerners. Lincoln wrote to one southern Unionist who urged him not to permit confiscation of property: "What would you do in my position? Would you drop the war where it is? Or would you prosecute it in the future, with elder-stalk squirts charged with rose water?"¹⁰

As a part of the Emancipation Proclamation, effective January 1, 1863, Lincoln also authorized the use of black soldiers in the Union army. The Confederates exploded with rage. Jefferson Davis' first reaction was that the black soldiers would be executed, but he calmed and did not promulgate such a policy. While Lincoln did not authorize punitive measures against the South in the early days of the war, he did not shy away from retaliatory measures to counter official southern policy. On learning that the southerners intended to execute any black soldier it captured, Lincoln issued an "Order of Retaliation:"

It is therefore ordered that for every [Black] soldier of the United States killed in violation of the laws of war, a rebel soldier shall be executed; and for every one enslaved by the enemy or sold into slavery, a rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor on the public works and continued at such labor until the other shall be released and receive the treatment due to a prisoner of war.¹¹

Lincoln was never required to enforce his order as the threat seemed to end the promised Confederate executions. Certainly acts of brutality were committed by individuals and military units throughout the war, and they continued after the black troops were introduced. There were multiple instances of black Union soldiers being executed after their capture. The attitudes of both sides seemed to change as the war progressed. The South fought ferociously to defend its territory from invaders. Its passions were further inflamed by rabid racism which could not tolerate seeing blacks in Union uniforms. At Fort Pillow, in April, 1864, black troops who attempted to surrender were massacred by Confederates. A Confederate sergeant in a letter written home shortly after the battle said that "the poor, deluded negros

would run up to our men, fall upon their knees and with uplifted hands scream for mercy, but were ordered to their feet and then shot down.”¹²

Other incidents confirmed that the war had evolved into a much meaner and more brutal affair. In June, 1864, Elder John Kline, the leader of the German Baptist Brethren, a pacifist group, was assassinated in the Shenandoah Valley. Unarmed, a man of peace, and well known to his assassins, Kline was just one of many victims of a war that had become gratuitously brutal.

While some acts of destruction such as burning towns had occurred earlier, in 1864 the frequency and scale accelerated. In June, General Hunter of the Union Army burned Virginia Military Institute and the home of a former governor in Lexington. A few weeks later, Jubal A. Early led his Confederate troops into Pennsylvania and burned the city of Chambersburg. There was no legitimate military purpose for either action. Later that same summer, General Grant, General Sherman and General Sheridan agreed on a policy of destruction of civilian areas. Grant directed Sheridan to clear out the Shenandoah Valley of its Confederates and to remove or destroy all crops and livestock in order to deprive the Confederate armies of food and supplies but also to break the will of the southerners. Grant was very clear about the destruction he anticipated: Make sure “that crows flying over [the Shenandoah Valley] for the balance of the season will have to carry their own provender with them.”¹³ On October 7, 1864, General Sheridan wrote: “I have destroyed over 2,000 barns filled with wheat, hay and farming implements; over 70 mills filled with flour and wheat; have driven in front of the army over 4,000 head of stock, and have killed and issued to the troops no less than 3,000 sheep.”¹⁴

Sheridan bragged that when he finished his destruction in the Shenandoah Valley, there would be “little in it for man or beast.”¹⁵ Ironically, even the barn and crops of Lincoln’s cousins living in the Shenandoah Valley were burned by Sheridan’s men. Following practices already well established by both armies, homes were burned in retaliation for guerrilla warfare and entire villages were threatened with destruction for attacks on the soldiers. Now, however, such destruction was authorized without the provocation of guerrilla warfare. Civilians were to be punished for supporting the war effort, and their capacity to provide food and supplies to Confederate armies would be destroyed.

At about the same time Sheridan was burning the Valley, General Sherman made his famous march through Georgia and then through South Carolina. He left destruction in his wake. Famously saying later that “war is all hell,” he intentionally made sure that southerners experienced it as hell, that they suffered so desperately they would want to end the war.

Perhaps the most controversial act of Black Flag War was carried out by Colonel Ulrich Dahlgren who led a raid on Richmond in March, 1864. Thinking that he could enter Richmond by its unprotected southern perimeter, he was intercepted and killed. Found on his body were the orders he read to his troops just before the raid. The orders included his intention to kill Jeff Davis and the Confederate

cabinet! The orders were discovered on his body by the Confederates and made public. Jefferson Davis was so shocked by this act of barbarism that he asked General Lee to inquire of General Meade of the Union Army whether this action reflected the official policy of the Union government. General Meade denied even knowing about Dahlgren's intentions and confirmed that it was not the policy of the Union government. Some have tried to link Abraham Lincoln directly to Dahlgren's intentions to kill Jefferson Davis, even citing it as a likely excuse for the suspicion that Jefferson Davis authorized southerners to assist John Wilkes Booth in his plans to assassinate Lincoln. While Lincoln knew of the planned raid and even met with Dahlgren in the White House before he left for Richmond, there is no evidence Lincoln knew of Dahlgren's intentions to kill Confederate leaders.

By the time the war came to an end, Black Flag War had clearly emerged. Mark Grimsley, however, in *The Hard Hand of War* rejects the view of many that the Civil War had evolved into "all out war."¹⁶ "All out war" means there were no limitations on war. Since war is hell, some argue that there can be no limits and no exemptions to the destruction of the enemy and his property. Civilians are legitimate targets in such a war. Twentieth century wars have certainly involved all out war. Grimsley is right, however, in rejecting that characterization of the Civil War, even though it evolved into a more brutal form. As he notes, there remained throughout the war clear limits on injury to civilians and their property.

Whether or not Lincoln designed the acts that might be considered Black Flag warfare or simply acquiesced, he was an aggressive warrior. He insisted on prosecuting the bloody war to its end; he refused to compromise on slavery and the preservation of the Union; he would not be deterred from a successful conclusion of the war. When many around him faltered, he remained the warrior-in-chief!

Abraham Lincoln approved the actions of Sheridan as he did the even more wanton destruction by General Sherman in Atlanta and South Carolina. In both cases he wrote the generals to congratulate them on their victories. In the case of Sherman, the destruction was immense. The general estimated damage done by his troops in Georgia "at \$100,000,000, at least \$20,000,000 of which inured to our advantage, and the remainder is simple waste and destruction."¹⁷

Lincoln, the gentle, kind peacemaker was complicit. As eminent historian James McPherson observed: "Lincoln was a compassionate man, but like Sherman and Sheridan, he had concluded that the devastation of Southern resources, even at the cost of civilian suffering, was necessary to overcome the rebellion."¹⁸

William Lee Miller is even more explicit in acknowledging Lincoln's endorsement of the destructive policies: "These aggressive actions by the American army were all encouraged by the commander in chief."¹⁹ Miller also deals specifically with the issue of whether Lincoln supported

Sherman's destructive policies in Georgia and South Carolina: "Yes, fundamentally, he did.... When he comprehended what Sherman was doing on his march through the Deep South, he endorsed it."²⁰

Beyond the destruction of civilian property, the tremendous military carnage of the summer of 1864, particularly the completely unjustified slaughter at Cold Harbor, did not cause Lincoln to retreat from prosecuting the war. Miller observes: "Despite such grisly occurrences and severe losses, Lincoln supported Grant and urged him on."²¹

One can fairly ask then whether Lincoln was a peacemaker or a warrior. In Miller's words, Lincoln may aptly be described as "an unmalicious warrior."²² While it may seem that Lincoln endorsed any means to win the war, in fact, there were significant limitations in the Civil War that kept it from becoming all out war. As observed earlier, Mark Grimsley rejects the description of the Civil War as "total war," noting that civilian deaths and gratuitous physical injury and death of civilians were avoided rather consistently.

Mark Neely, one of the greatest Lincoln scholars, agrees. He observed:

When all was said and done...the President and much of the society he directed to victory in the Civil War, came down on the side, not of retaliating for atrocities, but of avoiding atrocity...[T]he relative absence of atrocity from the history of the Civil War remains to this day one of its most remarkable qualities. It is wrong to think of the war's "destructive," "terrible," and "hard" qualities, vividly real though they certainly were, as the things that call out to us for historical explanation more than their opposite. What needs explanation and description now is the remarkable restraint of the people who had organized and mobilized such vastly powerful armies. And President Lincoln's role in retaining those traditional limits of war needs reaffirmation more than ever.²³

William Lee Miller agrees. He notes that Lincoln's restrained rhetoric, not blaming the South or threatening revenge, his refusal to retaliate punitively, even after threatening to do so in response to the southern threats to execute black soldiers, and his refusal to plan for punitive action against southern generals and leaders all set a tone of restraint. He concludes: "It requires a distinct moral and intellectual discipline to achieve the combination that Lincoln achieved as war leader: the ability to prosecute the war with persistent energy to subdue the will of the enemy, without indulging in the passionate simplifications that war engenders."²⁴

Miller goes on to say:

Lincoln was quite explicit in disavowing vengeance. In the draft of a letter to Secretary of War Stanton in March, 1864, the president said, "[The government] can properly have no motive of revenge, no purpose to punish merely for punishment sake." On November 19, 1864 he wrote to General William Rosecrans: "I wish you to do nothing merely for revenge, but that which you may do shall be solely done with reference to the security of the future."²⁵

In fact, Lincoln was both a reluctant and aggressive warrior; he was also a kind, compassionate and empathetic peacemaker. The genius of Lincoln was his ability to see the moral dimensions of the struggle. Preserving the Union was a moral imperative; it justified the terrible war. For him, saving the Union was more than preserving territory; it related to the very nature of self-government by free people. He believed that if the American experiment could not survive, self-government was unlikely to be successful anywhere. He also properly concluded that if secession were permitted, there would be no end of it. Any state wishing to pull out of the Union would be free to do so.

As the war continued, he saw an opportunity to attack slavery, and emancipation added to the moral dimensions of the struggle. Those purposes – preserving the Union and freeing slaves – remained the focus of his energy and attention. To achieve these goals, he knew that the war had to be prosecuted to the point that southerners lost their capacity to fight. While he probably experienced a great deal of personal anguish over the suffering of southern civilians, he did not disagree with Generals Grant, Sherman and Sheridan that the civilian capacity to support the Confederate armies must be destroyed. After the war had gone on for a couple of years, Lincoln was no longer naïve about the willingness of southerners to support the plantation owners. He realized that almost all southerners fervently supported the fight against the Union. He would need to deal with the entire southern population in terms of capacity for war.

Abraham Lincoln's handling of the military effort to defeat the South is not an example of total war; rather, it is evidence that, as incompatible as the terms appear, Lincoln imposed moral restraints on a bitter civil war. If he had inflamed passions with hot rhetoric condemning southerners, making harsh threats about retaliation, promising punishment and revenge, or if he had unleashed a policy of total war against the South, the war would likely have been even more savage, and the country might never have recovered from the bitterness of the war. It is appropriate to evaluate whether adequate moral restraints were employed in the Civil War, not just for reasons of historical interests and analysis, but to develop an ethic for war. Similarly, it is appropriate to look at the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan, the saturation bombing of European cities, the use of napalm or drones or other agencies of war to consider whether they are reasonable and necessary means to the successful prosecution of a just war or whether they simply retaliate, punish and inflict wanton destruction. We dare not concede that war, as cruel and destructive as it must be by its very nature, must necessarily lead us into the abyss of barbarism. Lincoln imposed moral restraints on the savagery of war and hence was both warrior and peacemaker.

NOTES

- ¹ Doris Kerns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).
- ² David H. Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) 186.
- ³ Ronald White, *Lincoln, A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009) 412.
- ⁴ White, *Lincoln, A Biography*, 412.
- ⁵ White, *Lincoln, A Biography*, 398.
- ⁶ Craig Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 35.
- ⁷ Edward Steers, Jr., *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).
- ⁸ White, *Lincoln, A Biography*, 488.
- ⁹ White, *Lincoln, A Biography*, 488.
- ¹⁰ White, *Lincoln, A Biography*, 488.
- ¹¹ Steers, *Blood on the Moon*, 42.
- ¹² Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, A Narrative: Red River to Appomattox* (New York: Random House, 1974) 112.
- ¹³ James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008) 245-246.
- ¹⁴ McPherson, *Tried by War*, 246.
- ¹⁵ McPherson, *Tried by War*, 246.
- ¹⁶ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- ¹⁷ McPherson, *Tried by War*, 254-255.
- ¹⁸ McPherson, *Tried by War*, 255.
- ¹⁹ William Lee Miller, *President Lincoln, The Duty of a Statesman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008) 359.
- ²⁰ Miller, *President Lincoln, The Duty of a Statesman*, 360.
- ²¹ Miller, *President Lincoln, The Duty of a Statesman*, 359.
- ²² Miller, *President Lincoln, The Duty of a Statesman*, 364.
- ²³ Miller 355 quoting from Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Retaliation: The Problem of Atrocity in the American Civil War," 41st Annual Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture, Gettysburg College, 2002, 28-30.
- ²⁴ Miller, *President Lincoln, The Duty of a Statesman*, 368.
- ²⁵ Miller, *President Lincoln, The Duty of a Statesman*, 368.