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Lincoln before the legend

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The rise and fall of Lincoln's opponents in the North

By Jennifer L. Weber

304pp. Oxford University Press. Pounds 16.99 (US $28).

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NO PARTY NOW

Politics in the Civil War North

By Adam I. P. Smith

278pp. Oxford University Press. Pounds 32.99 (US $55).

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In August 1864, the man now venerated as America's greatest President teetered at the edge of history's dustbin. The Civil War, which both sides had believed in 1861 would last only a few months, dragged into its fourth year. The press likened Ulysses Grant, Lincoln's handpicked commanding general, to a butcher, for his relentless tactics in Virginia. William Sherman, meanwhile, bided his time outside Atlanta in a siege that made for lousy political theatre. Behind the lines, urban unrest and runaway inflation combined with class and ethnic antagonisms, further exacerbating war fatigue. With the presidential election just months away, even the staunchest partisans, like Henry J.Raymond, Editor of the New York Times and chair of the national Republican Party, suggested removing the President from the top of the ticket, declaring: "We need a change". Although Lincoln said that it was "best not to swap horses when crossing streams", he agreed that he stood little chance of winning a second term in office. Certain of his impending loss, the President asked the members of his Cabinet to sign a document guaranteeing support for the presumptive incoming administration of his opponent, the Democrat George McClellan.

Recalling this state of affairs means discarding collective memories of Lincoln, who is typically recalled as the nation's most gifted orator (for his debates with Stephen Douglas, his inaugural speeches and theGettysburg Address), among its shrewdestdiplomats (for keeping Europe at bay during the war), its finest Commander-in-Chief (for preserving the Union), and its quintessential populist hero (for retaining his homespun charm despite all of the above); not to mention the moral weight of emancipation. Every American boy and girl learns in school that Lincoln freed the slaves, no matter how many historians protest, insisting that the story was more complicated than that. As for implied

historical competition among presidents, he wasn't a dandy, like Jefferson, a rogue, like Kennedy, or easily confused with a relative, like Teddy Roosevelt. Only Washington and FDR rival him for ongoing popularity. And then there's the assassination: Lincoln died for the country's collective sins, or so the story goes. As much a Christ figure as a secular saint, then, the Lincoln of memory transcends the profanity of American politics for the sanctified status of national saviour.

But hindsight and hagiography offeredLincoln no help in the summer of 1864; the President then seemed poised to fail the Union he loved. Adam I. P. Smith's No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North andJennifer L. Weber's Copperheads:

The rise and fall of Lincoln's opponents in the North return readers to this era, offering fresh looks at the Lincoln years. By focusing on the rough edges of partisanship rather than mythologies smoothed by the passage of time, and by training their gaze on the home front instead of the front lines, these books yank Lincoln back into the earthly realm of popular politics. The President stands undiminished by these treatments; instead he is fleshed out. And what emerges is a clearer picture of many of the key political players, on both sides of the aisle, during the war years, not as giants occupying the grand stage of history, but as partisan warriors.

No President faced greater challenges on taking office than Lincoln. Although he won the 1860 election with a comfortable electoral cushion, Lincoln remained a regional candidate, having not even appeared on the ballot throughout most of the South. Then, still months before his inauguration, seven slave states, led by bellicose South Carolina, seceded, deepening the impression thatLincoln might stand for Union, but only on the North's terms. In fact, he had run as a moderate and planned to govern as one,particularly on the key issue of the day:slavery. The President-elect, eager to persuade the Border States to reject rebellion, continued promising, as throughout the campaign, not to prune back the peculiar institution where it had already taken root, but only to ensure that it would spread no further. To do otherwise, he explained to critics who asked that he forestall war by allowingslavery unfettered access to Western soil, would have rendered the Republican Party and his administration a "mere sucked egg, all shell and no principle in it". For sticking to this middle road, Lincoln received criticism from both flanks. Southerners of allparties, along with many Democrats in the North, attacked him for tearing down the white man's republic. And radicals still in the Union, abolitionists especially, derided him as a "slave hound" - or worse.

So began a series of bruising rhetoricalskirmishes obscured in many histories of the period by the din of the shooting war. As Smith explains, "electoral politics . . . became more than ever a battle over who constituted the legitimate nation". Democrats pointed to Lincoln's intermittent disregard for civil liberties, implementation of conscription, and support for emancipation, and claimed he had no respect for theConstitution. By these lights, the President was nothing more than a usurper of an office once occupied by champions of limited government, like Jefferson and Jackson. Lincoln, by contrast, sacrificed the nation on the altar of black freedom - no matter that he only began pondering emancipation more than a year after Confederates fired on Fort Sumter. Republicans responded by crafting a message intended, more than ever, to capture moderates; they predicated campaigns on anti partisanship, sent out candidates beneath the banner of the so-called Union Party, and seized the coveted mantle of nationalism. Beyond that, Lincoln and his supporters demonized the opposition, charging Democrats, especially the party's peace wing, not merely with bad judgement but with disloyalty. Opposing the President in wartime became unpatriotic, treasonous even.

Weber finds some truth in such claims. Without hard numbers - "because this was long before polling began, we are left to view public opinion through a gauzy lens" - she relies on qualitative evidence in suggesting that the corrosive power wielded by peace Democrats, or "Copperheads", amounted to more than Republican paranoid fantasies.

Anti-Lincoln, anti-emancipation, anti-draft rhetoric divided the North and made raising troops harder, she finds, constituting a real threat to the Union war effort. To counter this menace, Lincoln suspended habeas corpus, occasionally censored the Democratic press, and deployed conscripts as partisan shock troops. Weber notes of soldiers using the first absentee ballots in the nation's history that they not only voted for Lincoln in overwhelming numbers,

but also shaped politics in their home communities, effectively intimidating the opposition while drumming up support for the President. As the Union GeneralFrancis P. Blair noted, the army was a “great political, as well as war machine”. All of which deepened Democratic suspicion ofLincoln, who increasingly seemed a tyrant waging war on the Bill of Rights.

By the late summer of 1864, the pattern had become rote. Democrats painted Lincoln as radical, an enemy of white America, and responsible for an increasingly unpopular war. Lincoln, in turn, ran as a moderate Union man, while administration loyalists questioned the Copperheads’ patriotism. Through August, McClellan, despite being as ineffectual a candidate as he had been a general, seemed destined for victory. But then Sherman finally took Atlanta on September 2. At nearly the same moment, the Democrats inserted a peace plank into their party platform, making themselves appear as disloyal as Republicans claimed. Lincoln then pulled off the most presidential of moves: he made his administration synonymous with the nation. In November, he became the first President since Jackson to win a second term, capturing all but three states for a 212-12 electoral landslide. Lincoln’s victory secured the Union and his legacy.

No Party Now and Copperheads arescholarly books - though uniformly wellwritten, each is analytically fine-grained, rooted in archival evidence, and driven by argument rather than characters. Still, given the current political climate, they might interest a broad audience. With the US once again framing its military affairs in millennial terms, politicians in both parties stake the fate of the nation, if not freedom itself, on the outcome of elections. The current administration, drawing on a tradition born duringthe Civil War, smears its foes not for policy shortcomings but as cowards and enemies of the state.

Dissent, in this context, is disloyalty rather than a pillar of democracy. This is not the “politics of personal destruction” we hear so much about in the United States. It isthe politics of national destruction, something more insidious that makes enemies of compatriots. During Lincoln’s presidency, when this discourse became the norm, the nation’s fate really did hang in the balance. More than 600,000 people lost their lives, including Lincoln, felled by an assassin,John Wilkes Booth, who had mbibed theargument that the President threatened the Republic.

Booth, a horrible by-product of his era’s politics, viewed the murder of Lincoln as an act of civic virtue; he thought his bullet might save the Union.

Sweeping away collective memories of a glorious Civil War, Adam Smith and Jennifer Weber remind readers that these were troubled times. And that the era’s legacies, not just enduring myths, shape our politics still.