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Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008. Pp. xiv, 430. ISBN 978-0-19-531022-1.

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How effective was President Abraham Lincoln as overall commander of the Union Navy during the American Civil War? This is the question Craig Symonds (U.S. Naval Academy, emeritus) asks in *Lincoln and His Admirals*. Neither scholars nor buffs have shown much interest in Lincoln's handling of naval affairs. Symonds, who has published widely on American Naval and Civil War topics,<sup>1</sup> strives to correct this by modeling his book on T. Harry Williams' *Lincoln and His Generals*,<sup>2</sup> which assessed Lincoln's success as commander-in-chief of the Army. Both historians, rather than retelling narratives of military campaigns, concentrate on Lincoln's interaction with his military commanders and his aptitude for putting the right men in the right positions for success.

The book's first section, "1861: Getting Under Way," begins with a sketch of the dire state of the U.S. Navy at the outset of the war. But Lincoln's choice of Gideon Welles as Secretary of the Navy and Gustavus Fox as assistant Secretary began a nearly miraculous transformation of a very deficient navy into a first-rate power practically over night. In choosing these two men, Lincoln showed early on his acumen for finding able administrators.

Symonds does not spend much time detailing strategic or tactical concepts of the naval war, but does follow a chronological path.<sup>3</sup> He discusses how the United States built a navy quickly and efficiently, facilitating the Union blockade of the Confederate coast that proved so instrumental to victory. Another pressing piece of naval business in 1861—designating an overall commander—was complicated by the fact that the rank of admiral had not yet been introduced to the service. "Commodore" was the highest rank American naval commanders could attain, and a commodore was merely the highest ranking captain in a sailing squadron.<sup>4</sup> Lincoln himself at times formulated strategic plans.

Lincoln began to think about Union grand strategy almost from the first day of the war. On April 25, 1861, the day the 7th New York regiment marched into Washington to ease fears of a rebel coup de main, Lincoln mused aloud to his secretary John Hay about how the administration could regain control of the crisis. "I intend at present," he declared, "to fill Fortress Monroe with men and stores; blockade the ports effectually; provide for the entire safety of the Capitol; keep them quietly employed in this way, and then go down to Charleston and pay her the little debt we are owing her." At the time, Lincoln was still thinking of the conflict as a kind of police action to pacify an out-of-control minority, but still his musings did contain the germ of the holding-and-hitting strategy that subsequently became the Anaconda Plan (101).

In the second section, "1862: Charting a Course," Symonds details the development of the ironclad warship and the tightening of the naval blockade of the Confederacy. Operation Anaconda, first proposed by General Winfield Scott, began constricting access to Confederate ports, both coastal and then in interior river-ways, slowly dividing the Confederacy into smaller and smaller sections, each vulnerable to the Un-

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1. See, e.g., *Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1775-1827* (Newark: U Delaware Pr, 1980) and *The Civil War at Sea* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009).

2. 1952; rpt. NY: Vintage, forthcoming (Jan 2011).

3. See Spencer C. Tucker's *Blue & Grey Navies: The Civil War Afloat* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 2006) for an in-depth analysis of strategic aspects of the war.

4. See N.A.M. Rodger's, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (1986; rpt. NY: Norton, 1996), which is still helpful in understanding eighteenth- and nineteenth-century navies.

ion's land and naval forces. Success hinged on joint army-navy actions that would force the Confederacy to defend multiple fronts.

In 1861, the plans made by Welles and Fox to blockade Charleston and Pensacola directly met with mixed results. In 1862, however, a combined army-navy operation captured Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, severing most of the Confederacy's access to the eastern seaboard. At New Orleans, Confederate guns failed to prevent the Union navy from advancing up the Mississippi River. In that same year, Congress authorized the appointment of (rear) admirals (and two years later, of a vice admiral, David Farragut). On paper, Lincoln's naval war was progressing well. However, behind the scenes, Secretary of State William Seward gave orders counter to those of Secretary of the Navy Welles, nothing new in wartime interdepartmental rivalries. Symonds criticizes Lincoln's laissez-faire approach to dealing with his cabinet members as detrimental to the war effort when an effective use of executive power was called for. Moreover, despite growing success against blockade runners operating out of the Mississippi River and the Outer Banks of North Carolina, Lincoln still had not found a commanding admiral.

In the book's third section, "1863: Troubled Waters," Lincoln's naval policies have seemingly stalled during the middle part of the war with both the army and navy entrenched around Vicksburg, as the Confederacy clung to hold its last, vital portion of the Mississippi. Confederate coastal fortifications continued to resist Union naval bombardment, and blockade runners steamed in and out of Charleston, South Carolina and Wilmington, North Carolina. Admirals like Farragut and David Porter proved daring operational commanders, but both were reluctant to assume overall strategic command.

Lincoln could not afford to let allow his admirals behave like his army generals. The constant bickering among flag officers and the too frequent refusals to attack the enemy became too much for Lincoln. In the absence of a, so to say, admiral-in-chief, he passed his executive decisions directly to his command officers. For example, Lincoln replaced Admiral Samuel Francis Du Pont with Commander John A. Dahlgren to direct naval attacks against Charleston. He showed his growing frustrations with his officers by promoting Dahlgren from commander to admiral, bypassing the rank of captain (239).

The Charleston operation itself proved disappointing—the failure of Union forces to take the city by bombardment was less due to Dahlgren's inadequacies as a military commander than to the navy's inability to act in concert with the army to secure the forts surrounding Charleston, depriving the Union of a proper toehold from which to check blockade runners. By year's end, the naval war was once again showing promise—Vicksburg, and with it control of the Mississippi River, was in Union hands.

In section four, "1864: Full Speed Ahead," the first phase of Operation Anaconda, conceived to control Confederate coastal and inland waterways is nearing completion. In the second phase, aimed at rivers and byways, the Union navy experienced difficulties during its Red River mission, meant to crush Confederate resistance in Texas and Louisiana, as well as in gaining control of the many inland waterways of North Carolina, despite having captured much of the state's coastline in 1862.<sup>5</sup>

As hundreds of new officers took on challenging roles, Lincoln's war efforts were still plagued by the lack of forceful leadership in the coordination of army-navy operations. The solution came with his promotion of Ulysses Grant to overall military commander; Grant now made the executive decisions. Thus, when Lincoln and Welles began to reconsider the prospects of capturing Wilmington, Lincoln simply referred the secretary to Grant (349).

In the fifth section, "1865: Final Harbor," only scattered pockets of Confederate resistance remain. The only Confederate port still open to blockade runners was Wilmington. The final nail in the coffin came with the fall of Fort Fisher at the mouth of Cape Fear River, which forced the Confederates to abandoned Wilmington. Operation Anaconda had proved successful.

A consistent, and consistently directed, Union naval policy was too long a work in progress. Lincoln had found capable administrators in Gideon Welles and Gustavus Fox, and his naval commanders eventual-

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5. See John G. Barrett, *The Civil War in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 1963; rpt. 1995), on efforts by both the South and the North to control the state's waterways.

ly became adept in carrying out their respective duties. But in the end, it was the appointment of Grant to overall command that solved the problem of exasperatingly inefficient army-navy operations. In his most recent book, Symonds has provided a superb study of this evolution of Union naval command during the American Civil War.