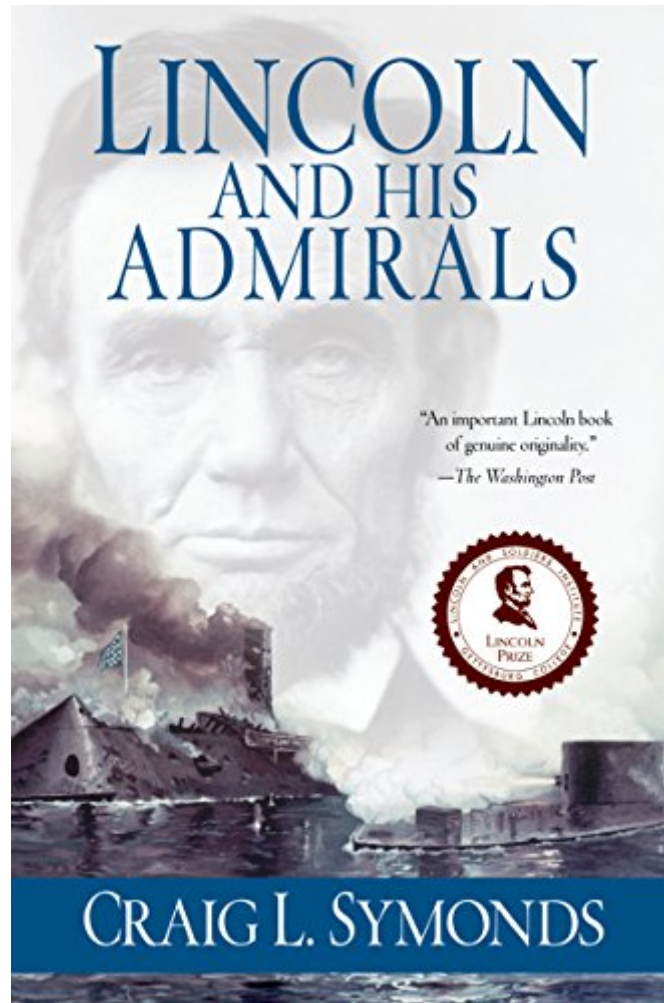




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Lincoln And His Admirals



Synopsis

Abraham Lincoln began his presidency admitting that he knew "but little of ships," but he quickly came to preside over the largest national armada to that time, not eclipsed until World War I. Written by naval historian Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals* unveils an aspect of Lincoln's presidency unexamined by historians until now, revealing how he managed the men who ran the naval side of the Civil War, and how the activities of the Union Navy ultimately affected the course of history. Beginning with a gripping account of the attempt to re-supply Fort Sumter--a comedy of errors that shows all too clearly the fledgling president's inexperience--Symonds traces Lincoln's steady growth as a wartime commander-in-chief. Absent a Secretary of Defense, he would eventually become de facto commander of joint operations along the coast and on the rivers. That involved dealing with the men who ran the Navy: the loyal but often cranky Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, the quiet and reliable David G. Farragut, the flamboyant and unpredictable Charles Wilkes, the ambitious ordnance expert John Dahlgren, the well-connected Samuel Phillips Lee, and the self-promoting and gregarious David Dixon Porter. Lincoln was remarkably patient; he often postponed critical decisions until the momentum of events made the consequences of those decisions evident. But Symonds also shows that Lincoln could act decisively. Disappointed by the lethargy of his senior naval officers on the scene, he stepped in and personally directed an amphibious assault on the Virginia coast, a successful operation that led to the capture of Norfolk. The man who knew "but little of ships" had transformed himself into one of the greatest naval strategists of his age.

Co-winner of the 2009 Lincoln Prize
Winner of the 2009 Barondess/Lincoln Prize by the Civil War Round Table of New York
John Lyman Award of the North American Society for Oceanic History
Daniel and Marilyn Laney Prize by the Austin Civil War Round Table
Nevins-Freeman Prize of the Civil War Round Table of Chicago

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Customer Reviews

This book is impressive for a number of reasons. First, it is an academic work that is highly readable and will be of equal interest to readers be they scholars or general history fans. Think, James McPherson's "Battle Cry of Freedom," on the water. More importantly, Craig L. Symonds manages to say something new about Abraham Lincoln, which is darn impressive. This book examines the President's role as commander-in-chief to the U.S. Navy. Lincoln's relationship with the navy has been largely ignored over the past century and a half, and it is easy to understand why. The major battles between North and South were fought on land and those engagements determined the fate of the nation. Symonds shows us, though, that Union naval dominance influenced the course of the conflict. At Fort Sumter Lincoln was initially unsure of how to use his naval power. As the war continued, he directed that the Army and Navy work together in what are now called "joint operations." This coordination became important in the capture of New Orleans and Vicksburg. Symonds did not write an operational history of the naval war, but these actions bled into areas other than the military. The blockade of the southern coastline raised important questions involving matters of trade and diplomacy. These issues often involved disputes between Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles and Secretary of State William H. Seward, which Lincoln had to adjudicate. It is a testimony to Symonds' skills as a historian that he develops both sides of the issue and presents Wells and Seward as understandably human characters. Lincoln faced many of the same issues with the admirals that he faced with the generals.

If this book is not a finalist for a major award in Lincoln and Civil War history, we will have a gross injustice. This intelligent, interesting, readable book is one of the most original informative Civil War histories I have read this year. The author is retired from the U.S. Naval Academy after 30 years of teaching. During that time, he won both the Naval Academy's "Excellence in Teaching" award

(1988) and its "Excellence in Research" award (1998). This shows in his ability to construct a sentence that contains a lot of information without boring or losing the reader. His portraits of the players are excellent. We never lose sight of the fact that they have not read the history book and do not know what is happening. Each crisis has the feel of current events unfolding as we read. Lincoln's management style is fully developed and we understand what a masterful politician he is. The fighting between the departments of State, War and Navy are fully developed and completely understandable. While the book is written from the Navy's perspective, the author never takes sides and faithfully reports the whole story. Most Civil War history ignores the Navy's role. This book gives us a detailed history of naval operations and the development of combined Army Navy actions. Lincoln never had a quiet day as President. He had just sat down when the problem of supplies at Fort Sumter dropped on him. The author provides a detailed account of the decision-making and the problems associated with that action. His account of the Trent Affair could be one of the best accounts in existence. The same can be said of his Red River Campaign and his discussion of the impact of cotton on the war. This is not a book of blazing guns!

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