

Lincoln on War: Our Greatest Commander-in-Chief Speaks to America

Harold Holzer, Editor

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Precisely 150 years ago, on March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office as president of a hopelessly divided United States. Nine southern states had already seceded, and in only a month Fort Sumter would fall to the Confederacy, ushering in the Civil War.

Lincoln's was the only presidency cloaked entirely in war (he was assassinated only seven days after Lee's surrender at Appomattox). But was he a dove, as many politicians over the years have suggested, who had war thrust upon him; or a hawk, as an equal number of politicians and many of his contemporaries have declared, willing, and perhaps even eager, to strike with the sword to quash an unlawful rebellion?

In Harold Holzer's meticulously researched study of Lincoln's speeches, proclamations, letters, and unpublished notes, Lincoln reveals himself to be both and neither, a brilliant pragmatist who refused to be categorized. He was also, Holzer makes clear, the man who almost singlehandedly saved the Union as we know it today.

Harold Holzer is inarguably America's greatest living Lincoln scholar, author of more than twenty books on Lincoln and the Civil War. In each of the dozens of this book's entries, beginning with letters from the young lawyer running for Congress to a jubilant note to his wife the very day of the president's death, Holzer sets the stage and provides some historical context, but wisely lets Lincoln speak for himself without passing judgment.

And *Lincoln on War* leaves no doubt that Lincoln was speaking for himself. Every entry, with the exception of a few proclamations, is taken from the president's own handwriting, complete with mark-overs, cross-outs, margin notes, and abysmal spelling (Holzer notes that Lincoln consistently misspelled "Sumter," as well as "inauguration" and "defense"). But what Lincoln lacked in spelling and grammar, he made up for in rhetorical prowess. He was the first literary genius to occupy the White House, and his words resonate deeply today.

One of Lincoln's earliest examples of his skill with words, and one that some scholars use to demonstrate his anti-war sentiment, was as a freshly minted congressman in 1848. He spoke eloquently of "the exceeding brightness of military glory—that attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood." In context, however, it is clear that Lincoln was not speaking against all war, but specifically the Mexican War, which he and his fellow Whigs decried as trumped up by President Polk to win re-election.

Lincoln returned to "dovish" speeches during the final year of his life, when a Union victory seemed assured and he needed to heal the incredible wounds of war. But during the war, especially in the early years of 1861 and 1862, he could be tough as nails, admiring Union soldiers for "their clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet." In a letter to Vice President Hamlin in September of 1862, lamenting the unwillingness of some Northern governors to send more troops as required by his proclamation, Lincoln wrote, "The North responds to the proclamation sufficiently in breath; but breath alone kills no rebels."

Lincoln was a man of eloquence in a time when his eloquence was largely ignored. Holzer reminds us he wasn't even the featured speaker at Gettysburg. Lincoln knew the power of words—by the mid-1850s, he had stopped using the term United States and referred only to the Union or the Federal Union, because it was the union, not the individual states, that he was trying to preserve.

Lincoln despised war, but saw its occasional inevitability. In his second inaugural address, he said of the two sides to the conflict, “One would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish.”

Lincoln accepted what in the same speech he called “the scourge of war.” Holzer points out that he was a bundle of contradictions—a man of peace who never led in peacetime, a devoutly religious family man who was forced to send hundreds of thousands of men and boys to their deaths. He was both ambitious and humble, a man who loved a good joke and also suffered from depression.

Lincoln on War is a book that can be enjoyed by all, but will be especially treasured by Civil War scholars who may be reading some of the personal notes and letters for the first time.

JACK SHAKELY (March / April 2011)

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