

## “Lincoln the Commander”

From the article, “Lincoln as Commander In Chief”, by James M. McPherson

Lincoln was once quoted as saying: “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, given him power.” Of course, power has a way of causing corruption; that is, the **abuse of power**. Even in the present day, some (citizens) have argued that the President abused his war powers in Iraq...and perhaps elsewhere.

The essence of his quote is the theme that I would like to concentrate on; or on the use (or abuse) of power. When I think of “abuse” of power in some historical sense, the immediate impulse is to turn to the few apparent cases of barbaric or tyrannical leaders that laid a *heavy hand* on their citizenry – or used a combination of dictatorship and deception to control the masses while wielding their plot or plan.

As Lincoln took office, the matter of impending war was obviously priority; yet, he was not trained or experienced – having limited duty in a militia during the Black Hawk War of 1832. How could a President with no reasonable military experience lead as Commander? Perhaps Lincoln may have ask the



same question and did what he had done all his life when it came to education or learning; he began to train himself. As the author of the article writes:

He read a large number of strategic works. He pored over the reports from the various departments and districts of the field of war. He held long conferences with his generals...He worked hard to master the subject just as he had done to become a lawyer.

A unique feature of the war was that it was civil or internal; it was between peoples of the same pre-existing nation. This aspect alone made this war of such pressing import that it could rarely be compared with anything in books – or even in the experience of the country.

Many of the leaders were veterans of the Mexican War, but even so, had not engaged in a carelessly-described feud. For that reason, he accepted the strong association of public and military strategy; or in other words, that national strategy (the Republic) and army policies had to be integrated because the war had ensued over the differences of the national policy – one region to another.

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As the author points out, this national policy was carefully packaged from the beginning (of his administration) **so as to lay cause of the war on preservation of the nation** – and not slavery. To give any cause to slavery would have disenfranchised the border-states; thus, would have weakened the frayed Republic further. This policy – or political position – meant that contraband slaves (or fugitives) would be returned to their plantations – essentially excluding the issue of slavery.

As the war progressed however; and perhaps in part because of the limited progress toward its desired end, Lincoln shifted (or interjected) slavery as an issue. With the Emancipation Proclamation, slavery was abolished in the southern states – which would potentially lead to anarchy and chaos – and, in turn, weaken the infrastructure and civility of the south.

Lincoln was thought (if not known) to be personally against slavery; but not until mid-war, did he shift Public policy to incorporate slavery as a cause or issue. Yes, slavery was no doubt a matter of morality, but Lincoln viewed it as strategic to the war’s end. Now concerned about the potential for it’s own civil or internal war (insurrection and chaos), the south was further disabled to maintain its resistance and resolve against the Federals.