



Lincoln and American Values Symposium

Lincoln's Legacy as Commander in Chief

September 20, 2008

As the only President whose entire administration was surrounded by war, Lincoln became one of the most active Commanders in Chief in U.S. history. This panel discussed Lincoln's legacy as a wartime President and his leadership of the Civil War. Moderated by **Tom Wheeler**, author of *Mr. Lincoln's T Mails: The Untold Story of How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War*, panelists include **Craig Symonds**, author of *Lincoln and His Admirals*; **James L. Swanson**, author of *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer*; and **David Work**, professor of history, Texas A&M University.

TOM WHEELER: Thank you for, first of all, to everybody for staying around for this session. I think you're going to enjoy the folks who are going to be up here with us. I'm Tom Wheeler, and it's my privilege to try and follow in the shoes of Harold and Michael and the great job that they did moderating their previous panels. But because it's the end of the day, we thought we would do this a little differently than the previous panels. And we're going to bring each participant up one at a time, and then he and I are going to visit together for a while. And then as one of the participants say, it's kind of like "The Tonight Show." We'll slide down the couch.

[Laughter]

And the next guest will come up, and then we'll all be able to talk collectively at the end, as well as open up to your questions. You know, we've spent all day today talking about Lincoln and the Constitution, Lincoln and emancipation, and the overhanging message, and the archivist really brought it up as the perfect segue in his last question, is we also had Abraham Lincoln, the commander in chief of the largest army ever assembled in the history of the world.



And that's the topic of this session today, and we have with us 3 noted scholars on that topic: James Swanson, the author of multiple books and treatises, including "Manhunt;" David Work, whose new book is coming out shortly on Lincoln's political generals; and Craig Symonds, who has written multiple texts as well and who has his new book out, available outside--it's not even his publication date yet-- "Lincoln and His Admirals."

So we've got a great group to span the gamut here, and we'll move on without further ado. Will you please join me in welcoming James Swanson?

[Applause]

Now, while James is coming up here, I mentioned "Manhunt," one of the bestselling Lincoln books of all time, and soon to be an HBO 8-part series.

JAMES SWANSON: Eight. Mm-hmm.

WHEELER: That's terrific. We look forward to that. So, James, why is it, do you think, that so much time has been spent slicing and dicing the various aspects of Lincoln's presidency, Lincoln's life? But if you look at the bookshelf of all the books that have been written, so few of them really talk about his role as commander in chief.

SWANSON: It is an odd phenomenon, and it's been true for the last 150 years. There are over 16,000 books about Abraham Lincoln. In the bibliography done in the 1940s, there are almost 5,000, and Frank Williams is now working on the new definitive one. And add to that the trend in recent Lincoln scholarship in the last 15 years or so, the sliced book has become really popular.

Taking the thinnest possible slice from the Lincoln pie and subjecting it to intense and sometimes even tedious analysis. 300-, 400-, 500-page books on a day in Lincoln's life or a particular event. Not that these books are without merit, but when you look at all the 16,000 books, there are really, I think, less than 10 significant books ever written in the last 140 years that relate to Lincoln as commander in chief. 1907, Bates did "Lincoln in the Telegraph Office." In 1926, a British general named Ballard wrote a book on the military genius of Abraham Lincoln.

In 1949, Kenneth Williams started his 5-volume series, "Lincoln Finds a General." And then in 1952, T. Harry Williams did that classic book "Lincoln and His Generals." And Robert Bruce did a good book in the fifties on "Lincoln and the Tools of War," Lincoln's interest in weaponry and technology. And Geoffrey Perret did his book in 2004 on Lincoln as commander in chief. Your book on "Lincoln and the Telegraph Office," which was--that subject was not fully understood until you did your book. And now Craig Symonds' great new book on "Lincoln and the Navy" and Jim McPherson's new book, "Lincoln,



Commander in Chief." Those are the books. Among these 16,000 books, that's really the best.

WHEELER: Why?

SWANSON: It--I don't-- [LAUGHTER]

WHEELER: I mean, it's an unexplored topic. No, it's not unexplored, but it's a topic that's ripe for further words.

SWANSON: Well, it's certainly an odd thing, and you're right to ask. Because if you think about Lincoln and the White House, Lincoln was occupied by war during his entire presidency. From the time of his inauguration in March 1861, to the Fort Sumter crisis and bombardment in April, through all the battles, all the struggles high and low--Manassas, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, The Wilderness, Shiloh, Appomattox--what was Lincoln's presidency but war all the time?

And I started to wonder if that was the central theme--not one of the themes, the central theme of Lincoln's presidency--why so few books? Why don't we think of him more as a great commander, the way we might think of even Grant or Eisenhower or George Washington? And I think it's because what Lincoln did and how he performed his role as commander in chief is in complete conflict with the mythical image of Lincoln as the writer, the poet, the man from the prairies, the lawyer sage from Illinois. Kindly, folksy Father Abraham, who wouldn't hurt a fly. I think it's important to remember, and I mean this without disparaging Lincoln.

I just state it as a fact. Abraham Lincoln is one of the greatest killers in American history, and he did it with ruthlessness and decisiveness.

WHEELER: Necessary ruthlessness and decisiveness.

SWANSON: Yes. Yes. I agree.

WHEELER: OK.

SWANSON: And I think the real Lincoln, the warrior Lincoln, might be so shocking to our mythical image of Lincoln that it hasn't gotten the full attention it deserves.

WHEELER: How much of it do you think--I think it's a very valid point. But how much do you think it is also that there was talk about the DuBois, the "tradition of the man" in the last? The tradition of the man is the results, not the process of getting to the results so



much. And Lincoln as a commander in chief was on-the-job training and wasn't always pretty.

SWANSON: No.

WHEELER: That story doesn't fit with the myth.

SWANSON: Right. You know, we hear he saved the Union, he freed the slaves, and that was wonderful, and it is. But the process was ugly. When Lincoln was elected president, he didn't know what he was doing. He had never administered anything larger than his little law office.

No executive experience, very little legislative experience. He did have great human experience. Lincoln was like a psychologist or a psychiatrist who for almost 20 years on the Illinois prairie in doing his legal cases gained insights into the whole range of human behavior and what people were capable of doing.

That helped him when he was dealing with his generals. But you're right, Tom. When Lincoln came to office, he was paralyzed, at first, by the Fort Sumter crisis. I think he handled it as best as he could, and ultimately he didn't fire the shot. He made the Confederates do it. But Lincoln deferred too much to the generals when he first took office. These were West Point graduates. These were veterans of the Mexican War. These men had commanded thousands of troops, and Lincoln knew he didn't have that knowledge or experience. He knew he had to acquire it, but many mistakes were made early on because he deferred too much to Pope, to McClellan, to all the others who ultimately failed him.

Lives were lost while Lincoln went through this learning process. More lives were lost when he knew exactly what to do but he knew he had to do it to end the war. But by no means was the commander in chief of 1865 the fledgling commander in chief of 1861. People talk in the earlier panel about Lincoln and emancipation and going through this incredible ark of learning and knowledge that led to freedom. The same is true of Lincoln as commander in chief. He made an incredible journey from amateur to, I think, magnificent war leader.

WHEELER: In my book I identify a date, May 24, 1862, when he embraced the telegraph to go out and begin issuing commands. And he had always been "by your leave" before that. But all of a sudden, Jackson coming up the Shenandoah and he says, "Something's got to be done," and he started issuing commands himself. Did you--in your study of Lincoln's leadership, what are the phases that you see him go through?

SWANSON: The phases I see him go through are the frustrations with McClellan, who I think he tolerated far too long. Lincoln had insights that he didn't need to go to West Point



to learn. Lincoln was very modern in his view of war and strategy. I think if you had parachuted Lincoln into the White House in 1941, his methods would've let him fight World War II, or the first World War.

WHEELER: What were those key methods?

SWANSON: Well, one was don't defer to the generals. Become an expert yourself. Know the topography, know the land, know the military theories. Lincoln also was against entrenchments. He believed in a war of movement, a war of action. One great moment in his presidency was when the army moved about 20,000 men in little less than 2 weeks by rail to a key battle spot. Lincoln was fascinated by the new weaponry, the technology: the balloons, the multi-shot rifles, the telegraph office. Lincoln used that telegraph office not to simply sit back and get the news: we won or we lost or we've got 10,000 dead. Lincoln used that telegraph office to travel in his mind to the battlefield and actively command, actively give orders. All those commands to McClellan: you must do something. You must act. You can't just sit there. Lincoln also understood more than his generals the military idea of multiple attacks at the same time. He said to many of the generals, "We have more men than they do." Of course, McClellan never believed it, but Lincoln was right. We did have more than they did.

And Lincoln raised this simple point. If we have more men and they have fewer men and if we attack in different places but all at the same time, we should prevail. Why couldn't 10 of his generals figure that out before he did?

WHEELER: But there's an issue there, also, where that concept is breaking with traditional military thought, that it was the objective--you know, there was this place that was an objective--and he kept saying no, it's the army that's the objective.

SWANSON: Yes. How many telegrams are there or letters--you would know this better than I--of Lincoln saying to McClellan, to Meade, and to others, "You don't understand. It's not Richmond. It's not that city, it's not that port. Lee's Army is the objective. Focus on Lee's Army." Lincoln thought he was done with those problems when he got rid of McClellan, but he even had to tell Meade, "I've told the Army of the Potomac over and over again it is the Rebel Army." Destroy that Army. Don't capture the city. Don't drive Lee back to Richmond to entrenchments. Get him in the open and crush him. One of those great telegrams Lincoln sent out: the Confederates were stretched out over 60 miles on the march, and Lincoln said, "Can you not break him somewhere?" Because at any point on that line, the Union would've had superior forces. I think what made Lincoln a great commander in chief was his knowledge of human nature.

What I said about him learning about people on the circuit-murder trials, liable, property disputes, lies, truths--he saw the gamut of human nature, and I think he had a way of reading the psychology of his generals. And when he found a Grant, found a Sherman,



found a Sheridan, found a George Thomas, Lincoln knew that they were akin to him and his view. Grant was so against the capture of the cities. Grant didn't even think of the war as this battle is fought, it's over, we fight another battle. Grant thought in broad terms of a larger theme campaign, combining naval, army, multiple actions in different parts of the nation. I think Lincoln was very modern in that thinking.

WHEELER: What's the role--you know, we've been talking general, general, general. What was Lincoln's leadership role as it relates in the lower ranks, down the ranks?

SWANSON: That's where he was magnificent, and that's where he suffered from the great contradiction. Lincoln loved the soldiers. Those moving stories of him visiting troops at hospitals, talking to them.

That one particular day he went to a hospital and refused to leave until he shook the hands of several thousand soldiers. It crushed him to know that he was sending them to their deaths. Lincoln was not like the generals in World War I of France and England and Germany who almost with impudent glee or vigor would send their men to the slaughter. Lincoln hated to lose those men. He loved them, he loved the army. He was comfortable with military affairs. He was comfortable with the generals he liked. Sometimes we've had presidents who don't like the military or are afraid of the military or don't respect the military. Lincoln respected it, he loved it, and the soldiers knew it. That Father Abraham mystique arose during his lifetime. It was not one of the myths that began after the assassination. The soldiers knew somehow in a Walt Whitman-esque way that he was for them.

They knew he pardoned many men from death sentences. They knew he tried to help their families. They knew that he would receive their relatives when they visited him in the White House to ask for help. So the soldiers knew that Lincoln was behind them.

Of course, he got the majority of their vote in the re-election campaign of 1864. Lincoln had a common touch and a simple way of viewing things that turned out to be more sophisticated often than the generals could see. One of my favorite examples of that is when McClellan had to take some boats through a lock in a river. And the boats are brought there, and it's discovered that the boats are 6 inches wider than the lock, and Lincoln said something.

I brought this one quotation because it's so funny, and it really shows Lincoln's great simplicity. He says, "I'm no engineer, but it seems to me that if I wish to know whether a boat would go through a hole or a lock, common sense would teach me to go and measure it."

[Laughter]



McClellan and his engineers didn't do that. How could this simple man with 1 1/2 years of education, no knowledge of military affairs--one of Lincoln's geniuses was a simplicity that allowed him to look at something and see it as it was. And many times his generals couldn't do that. Lincoln so often could see the obvious that wasn't obvious until he said, "It's so obvious. Look, the solution is right there." That was certainly one of the cores of his leadership.

WHEELER: And, you know, thinking again to relationships with generals, and you were talking about how he would go visit the wounded, but he also liked to get out into the field to see the generals out in their tents or in their headquarters. And one of the things that struck me was that particularly with Hooker, every time he would do that he would sit down and, in essence, write a memo to the file that says, "Here's what I told him, here's what he told me," almost as if he had a total lack of confidence in Hooker, specifically, turning around and delivering on what they had agreed on. I mean, that's a--that's a leadership burden that nobody should have to bear.

SWANSON: Well, the problem is Lincoln often knew that somebody had to go before he could or chose to get rid of them. Sometimes he needed to fire one of the political generals. He was enough of a practical politician to know he had to give commands to some of these regional guys because of the ethnic vote they could bring or the support they could bring from their state or Democrat support.

But Lincoln knew that sometimes he had to tolerate these people even though he knew they should go. He knew McClellan had to go months before he got rid of McClellan. But one thing he thought was, "And replace him with who?" And the army loves him because he trained them well. At one point Lincoln was being besieged by some generals, "Get rid of this guy, get rid of him," and Lincoln said, "That's fine to tell me that, but I've got to have someone. Who, if not him, who?" There was a low point where Lincoln, I think, was so frustrated with the generals, he ticked off their names. "I've got this one, this one, this one, this one. None of them will fight. None of them will do as I ask." And you know from the telegrams he would send them repeated reminders. "I told you attack. I told you do it. Is this your personal bodyguard? What are you doing with all those horses?"

His great letter to Hooker saying, "Go forth and give us victories." His letter saying, "You tend to be overcautious. You must overlook that and go forward."

Lincoln was very frustrated. There was a limited pool of these generals. He didn't have thousands of people to choose from. Essentially, he had a general officer staff of, I don't know, 30 to 50 people, and beyond that maybe 15 to 20 elite commanders, and that was his pool to choose from. And until some of them thrust themselves forward through their own genius--like Grant in the West, like Grant recognizing that he had a partner in Sherman, like Grant recognizing the greatness of Sheridan--Lincoln had limited options



from which to choose. And that's why sometimes he didn't get rid of some of these guys before he knew he had to.

WHEELER: You have just set up the perfect segue to David Work. David is a professor at Texas A&M. As I said, his new book coming out is "Lincoln's Political Generals." We'll pick up right there. Please welcome David Work.

[Applause]

DAVID WORK: Thank you.

WHEELER: OK, David, if you can't point to the left field wall and stroke that one out after James has set you up like that. But let's talk about Lincoln's--first of all, the sources of his generals, OK?

What was the experience curve in the United States Army when Lincoln came to town, and what did he have to draw on to begin with?

WORK: Well, in 1861, he had approximately a thousand or so West Point graduates in the North in and outside the army. Not all of those who were outside would come back to join the army, so he has a very limited pool, especially of West Point or military educated commanders in the North. Furthermore, to make matters worse, virtually none of these men had command experience above commanding a company. Most of them had commanded companies perhaps out in the West, you know, on frontier duty. There were a few who had commanded brigades and divisions, a very, very small few, during the Mexican War. And he had Winfield Scott who had commanded about 15,000 men, the largest army ever assembled during the Mexican War.

But Scott was in his 70s, could barely ride horse, if at all. He obviously wasn't going to take the field. Some of these other commanders who had commanded brigades like John Wool, was in his--about 70, as well. So as far as actual command experience, Lincoln's pool of potential recruits was very, very small. It's a very limited group of men he has to choose from, and you got to remember they don't just have to staff command positions. They got to, you know, staff positions, all the officer positions in the war.

WHEELER: So he's got, like, 5 generals in the army when the war breaks out, and a couple of them go south, OK?

WORK: Two go south.

WHEELER: And by the end of the war, there have been a thousand generals, or some number--



WORK: Over 500.

WHEELER: OK, a large number of generals. And that's a big void.

WORK: Sure.

WHEELER: Now, is there a—did West Point prepare people? A lot of criticism about political generals—we're going to get to political generals in a second. But did West Point really produce generals?

WORK: No. They produced lieutenants to serve in the army and engineers. It was—in fact, engineering training was one of its major focuses in the curriculum. I believe there was one class that focused on tactics that was taught during your 4 years at West Point. Otherwise, you were taking engineer courses, foreign language, especially French, drawing classes. I mean, obviously in the summer, they would conduct drills, so they knew about military discipline. They knew how to establish a camp. They knew how to march at least small bodies of troops.

But as far as—and I guess you should say many of them would've supplemented this with readings outside of this. They would've checked out military texts and military histories. You know, like, in the Confederate Army, Robert E. Lee, we have his records at West Point where he read a lot of that work. But as far as formal training for strategy and tactics, there would've been very little at West Point.

WHEELER: So the fact that he turns around and appoints political generals is not that he is passing over a whole corps of people who have been trained in strategy and tactics and are sitting there, but that he's going to a corps of individuals who have an extent management experience because they had to be political leaders? I mean, I'm asking the question to question more.

WORK: Yeah, that's certainly—in some of their cases, that's certainly true. That they—you could argue that—he could argue they had experience organizing parties, they had experience running campaigns, they had experience running government. Nathaniel Banks had been governor of Massachusetts for several years, you know, so they did have management experience of handling large groups of people. Obviously politics was a very different profession from the military, but this gave them some sort of managerial talent that a lot of West Point commanders might've lacked.

WHEELER: And also happen to knit together the fabric, the political fabric, that he had to hold together during the course of the war.

WORK: Oh, most certainly. The assignment of political generals as their title determines—implies, excuse me—is very much determined by Lincoln's reading of the political situation



in the North.

As someone commented in the last panel, Lincoln was a politician, so he would've seen his role as commander in chief not just in military terms but in political terms, and that would mean building a national coalition with which to wage a civil war. And that means you have to first secure the loyalty of Republicans, all Republicans.

You know, the Republican Party did have factions, and he had to ensure that they would support him. And then, of course, you have to secure the loyalty of the Democratic Party, or at least its leadership, a large segment of its leadership, to Lincoln's war policies. And then there were various ethnic groups, Irish and German, some of whom did not view the war very favorably. And Lincoln wanted to try to secure those groups to the war effort, as well, by appointing prominent members of the Irish and the Germans to high command.

WHEELER: So as you sit back from your vantage point, studying particularly the political generals issue, what do you think were Lincoln's great contributions as commander in chief?

WORK: Well, first off, as I mentioned, the ability to create a national coalition to wage the war.

WHEELER: So that's interesting. So his greatest commander in chief contribution was political?

WORK: Certainly I think that that's true because the commander in chief is the president, which is an elected position, so it's inherently political. You cannot escape that just because he's now the commander of the army, that there is a large aspect of political questions that have to be answered as commander in chief.

I mean, if you want to fill your army up, you have to convince people to fight.

I mean, especially in the 19th century, where even when they instituted a draft, they left loopholes for people to get out of it. They weren't going to completely compel people to join the army, so he has to form that national coalition. You know, he does that through creating political generals. Another, probably the most famous method he used, was through his speeches and his letters, which are, you know, perfectly timed and written to build support for the conflict.

WHEELER: So he had to hold the nation together. That makes sense for political generals. The tradition at that point in time also was quite different from the tradition today.



The army today, the generals that work their way up through the ranks, they spend all their time preparing for that moment. In the Revolution it wasn't that way, in any of the other activities that we had been engaged in previously. The Mexican-American War, it was not that way.

WORK: Not completely.

WHEELER: And so the model that was there was, of course. This is the way it gets done.

WORK: Well, certainly as far as appointing political generals or civilians to military commands, high commands, there's never any indication that Lincoln questioned that, that he thought it might anger somebody or it might seem out of place.

You look at all the Revolutionary War generals, and almost all of them had been civilians. You know, Nathanael Greene never had any military experience at all.

The War of 1812, you think of Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison. The Mexican War, you did have the professional military class by then. But Polk very--the Congress, excuse me--created, I think, 13 new general positions to staff the army. Polk filled every one of those positions with a Democratic politician.

So although there was a professional military caste he could call upon, Polk used politics to fill those positions, and that would serve as, you know, an important precedent for Lincoln. That, you know, you're not bound to this professional military class, you know, that you can use it for political reasons.

WHEELER: So now let's tie this together with what James was talking about insofar as his learning experience. Do you think, David, that, in part, the reliance on political generals was tradition as well as lack of experience in being a military leader: ergo, I will follow tradition? But as he learned how to lead and how to be a commander in chief, that he then developed a skill set to help him pick better leaders?

WORK: Yes, certainly. I mean, one of Lincoln's greatest attributes as a human being, not just as a leader, was his capacity to grow. In everything he did, you know, his experiences made him into the far superior by the time he finished that. And if you look in the Civil War, he starts off appointing lots of political generals to stay on that particular topic.

But as the war progresses, he appoints fewer, and he's much more willing to fire them. And in 1864, he's willing to fire them completely. You know, men like Nathaniel Banks and Benjamin Butler and Franz Siegel, who had managed to survive for 3 years despite a lot of ineptitude, Lincoln's finally saying that's it. We don't need you anymore. So some of that has to do with his ability to pick out new leaders to fill their positions.



Some of it, though, is still political calculation. He fires Nathaniel Banks, who had presidential ambitions after the National Republican Party nominates Lincoln. It's the same thing with Franz Siegel. Siegel was a prominent German Republican. He fires Benjamin Butler, a prominent War Democrat, after Lincoln is safely re-elected in the fall of 1864. So there is a sense that he--it's not just that he's being able to pick out better human talent to fill those positions, but that he now realizes that he doesn't need these political generals anymore to support him. That, essentially, he's gotten what he needs out of them, and he can now discard them.

WHEELER: They've served their purpose, and now I've got a corps of people who have been tested in battle...

WORK: And have succeeded.

WHEELER: And have grown themselves from which to choose?

WORK: Because if you see—you know, look at Franz Siegel. He gets whipped badly in the Shenandoah in the spring of 1864. And then Phil Sheridan is put in there, a man who's worked his way up from the ranks, you know, officer ranks, and has earned the praise of Sherman and Grant, and is put into a position of trust now in a very sensitive area, which the Confederates had always used the Shenandoah as a way to threaten Washington. And now that they can put Sheridan in there, he, you know, ends that threat.

WHEELER: Well, I'll tell you what. Let's leave the ground war here for a moment and get Craig Symonds to come up here, and we'll go to sea with "Lincoln and His Admirals." Craig Symonds.

[Applause]

CRAIG SYMONDS: Thank you, thank you. My wife dared me to do a Stephen Colbert entrance.

WHEELER: I was going to say--yeah, exactly. But you're then supposed to turn and go like this.

SYMONDS: Well, I--I copped out at the end. Yes?

WHEELER: Craig, before we go to sea, react to what you just heard.

SYMONDS: Well, I absolutely agree that Lincoln grows and develops as commander in chief while he's in the office, and he does it incrementally and he does it over time and he does it by experience.



I'm not so sure that his fundamental approach to the idea of his role as civilian commander in chief changes. What changes is his ability to assess the people he has working for him. It's true that by the time he gets the command team in place that finally wins the war-- Grant, Sherman, Sheridan--that he now realizes he can step back again. He had been increasingly intruding in ways that ran against his instinct.

This May 24 telegram where, for the first time, he's going to order James Shields to move west from McDowell's Army, and he's going to have Fremont come from the Valley. And he's chess master on a map and he can see how the pieces fit together and he's adopted the role now of commander in chief in fact, as well as commander in chief in name, but he's never really comfortable with it, and Jackson gets away in the Valley. It does not work out for him, and he gets this letter from one of his political generals, Carl Schurz, who was a prominent German Republican. He says, "You know, Mr. President, you didn't handle that very well. You know, you can't look at a map and say that he can--it's not going to work," and Lincoln backed away from that.

And I think his instinct was to back away, and he couldn't because circumstances didn't allow it. When he got Grant, when he got Sherman, circumstances allowed it. He backed away, he turned the war--happily, I think, with a weight coming off his shoulders--to Grant and the experts and let them take over the war.

WHEELER: But back to the Shenandoah Campaign. It wasn't that it was a bad plan. I mean, it was a pincer movement, right? If--if Fremont had marched half as fast as Jackson marched escaping, right? But we won't re-fight the--

SYMONDS: It's true. Lincoln responded to that by saying, you know, why can't our men and our armies march as fast? It is unmanly to say that we cannot do it. And you can feel the frustration in his voice. As you read it on the paper, you can feel it. But the end product is, and, of course, you began that sentence by that magic word "if." You know, his armies didn't move as fast as the enemy. Jackson's foot cavalry absolutely, you know, out-marched his men, and I think Lincoln decided, "I don't like doing that." You're right, it should've worked, but it didn't.

WHEELER: But he had to keep doing that until Grant came East.

SYMONDS: He did, more than he wanted to. And there are examples of where Lincoln, you know, gets on the edge of intervening, and then backs away again. The famous letter that he writes to George Gordon, "Meet After Gettysburg," Lincoln was so hopeful that Gettysburg, with the news of Vicksburg coming so soon afterward, that with the complete destruction of Lee's army in Pennsylvania, this would do it: the war could be ended.

Tens of thousands of lives, hundreds of thousands of lives could be saved. And instead of that, Meade lets him escape. And he sits down at his desk and he writes this letter and



says, "You held the enemy in your hand and all you had to do was close it and the war would've been ended, and I'm immeasurably disappointed as a result." And then he looked at that letter and he said, "This is the first guy that's given me a victory in 3 years." He folded it up, put it in an envelope, and put it in his desk where it stayed, instead wrote him a telegram of congratulations.

So I think he was realistic enough to say, yes, our armies ought to be able to do those things the enemy does, but I have to deal with this army and these generals.

WHEELER: So, Craig, is one of Lincoln's great leadership traits his patience?

SYMONDS: Absolutely. I mean, one of the things--you must've read my book.

[Laughter]

You know, we have this tendency to think of Abraham Lincoln as somebody who has a clear vision of where he wants to go and knows exactly how he wants to get there and has his program in mind and marches steadily forward down this preordained path and achieves victory and emancipation and apotheosis at the end of the war and it's all been--no, that's not the case. Lincoln was trying it out, figuring it, and he often wasn't sure how far he could go before he bumped into the reality of political pressure from one of these elements of the patchwork quilt that was the Republican Party in 1860 to 1865. He needed the War Democrats. He needed the former Whigs. He needed all of those people, and he could only go as far as that coalition would allow him to go. He knew the general direction, but he didn't have a chart pathed out that was so clear, that he knew step by step how to get in that direction. And often he waited for that boundary to move a little bit, and he could move up to the edge of that boundary, and it moved a little more.

You see it in the Fort Sumter crisis. He hears the news the day after his inauguration. Robert Anderson doesn't have enough food to survive, he doesn't have enough men to defend the position, and the United States Army doesn't have enough men to bring it to him. Crisis, and yet he doesn't act for quite a long period of time. The great problem, of course, of his administration, if not of American history, is slavery. He knows the direction in which he wants to go, but he can only act as far and as soon as public opinion and circumstances will allow him to go, and he's often willing to out-wait those circumstances. So patience is a key element to Lincoln's management of both the war and the policies.

WHEELER: So you taught forever at the Naval Academy?

SYMONDS: I did.

WHEELER: And you were shaping the minds and leadership talents of the next generation of Naval people?



SYMONDS: Boy, are we in trouble.

[Laughter]

WHEELER: How did you tell them, and what examples did you use as to where patience ends and you got to say, "Excuse me."

SYMONDS: Yeah. Well, of course, the young men and women that I was teaching at the Naval Academy were being trained to be professional Naval officers, not politicians. Although, I've heard a rumor that Naval Academy graduates occasionally become politicians.

[Laughter]

And they were more interested, really, in the field commanders. They wanted to know--and the guy they ended up admiring, of course, was Robert E. Lee. Because Robert E. Lee was able to do amazing things with less than one would expect to be necessary to achieve those things. And Grant and Sherman and others. And Lincoln was, I think, for many of them, still--to flip the phrase that Thomas Connolly applied to Lee--the marble man. He was the great hero, the mythical character of American history. They invariably admired him, but they were impatient with his patience with George McClellan.

George McClellan is the villain of the war for my students. You know, he was not decisive, he was whiny, he was self-centered, he was all the things that Naval Academy midshipmen think they are not. And therefore, they had no sympathy for him whatsoever and they thought Lincoln should've sacked him behind immediately. And so I think they were less patient than Abraham Lincoln was with circumstances, but they're young, too.

WHEELER: So let's go to sea. Let's start with Lincoln's relationship with Gideon Welles and his leadership there, and then let's go on beyond that with you as our guide.

SYMONDS: OK, I think a little context is appropriate here. I don't want to make the argument that the Civil War is a naval war or that Abraham Lincoln's involvement with the Navy was the dominant issue of his administration. There were between 2.3 and 2.5 million Union soldiers in the war and 118,000 navy sailors that for which he was responsible.

So that gives you some sense of the degree to which the issues on his desk, whether he was in the telegraph office at the War Department or in what we now call the Lincoln Bedroom in the White House, were focused on the land war. But often the role of the Navy, you know, came on to his table, sometimes diplomatically. When a troublesome naval officer at sea, like Charles Wilkes, would stop a British ship and take British



ambassadors off and create an international crisis, Lincoln had to deal with that. Or in dealing with the problem in the Far West, where there was no protocol whatsoever.

Remember, the act that created the Department of Defense is 1947. We went all the way through World War II with the Army and the Navy being coequal and entirely separate branches of government. The Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Navy both sat on the Cabinet. There was only one human being in the entire country that had simultaneous command over both the Army and the Navy, and that was the president of the United States. So when the Army and the Navy bumped heads, and I don't just mean on the football field, but I mean on the battlefield as well, the only person who could step in and say, "You do this, and you do that," was Abraham Lincoln, and that forced him into taking an active hand.

So there were circumstances that came up that compelled him to be activist commander in chief in dealing with his naval bureaucracy, as well as with his army bureaucracy, and Gideon Welles was at the top of that naval bureaucracy. Now, keep in mind Gideon Welles has become kind of a figure of fun for a lot of students of the Civil War. He was a bit of a comic figure, Father Neptune. He was completely bald. He wore this brown wig that he bought when he was about 45, and now he's 58 and his beard is snow white. So there's brown hair and this white beard, and he's fooling no one with this outfit. And he had a tendency to get emotional. He was--you know, he'd get all puffed up and flustered, and William Henry Seward in particular would kind of chuckle at him behind his hand because he thought Welles was kind of a fool.

But Welles was no fool. Welles and Seward are the only 2 members of Lincoln's cabinet to survive the entire war and into Johnson's administration after the war, and Welles knew what he was about. He took a lot of criticism from the newspapers for the ferocity of the blockade, for letting the Confederate raiders apparently have their way on the high seas. But he ran, pardon the phrase, a tight ship, and Lincoln appreciated that. And Lincoln appreciated his loyalty. He appreciated his enthusiasm, his passion. And in the end they became very close, and partly because, if I can just finish up, because their wives became very close. Mary Welles and Mary Lincoln became--I don't know if they were best friends, but they were certainly very close friends. And when the Lincolns' children were ill, and particularly after Willy died, it was Mary Welles who went over to the White House and stayed in Mary Lincoln's bedroom to comfort her through that crisis.

WHEELER: And Welles was also quite a diarist, right?

SYMONDS: A wonderful diarist.

WHEELER: So now take Welles' dairy and turn it so that Welles is painting a picture of the leadership of Abraham Lincoln for us, will you?



SYMONDS: Yes. Well, one of the great things about diarists--some people write diaries thinking, "Ah, the posterity will read this and understand what a wonderful man I am," and others do it as a way of just letting off steam and it just comes out, you know, onto the page, and the latter was what Welles did. So it's extremely candid, sometimes almost embarrassingly so, and not necessarily always flattering of Welles.

But the key theme that runs through it is his vision of Lincoln as a man of too generous a heart for the cads that surround him, and particularly William Henry Seward. He thought Seward was always taking advantage of Lincoln's generosity of heart and his kindness of spirit, and he tried to protect Lincoln from that. He saw himself as Lincoln's protector in the cabinet.

WHEELER: Interesting. The--one of the things that Lincoln also did well, it seems, is to be very direct. You had a hard time misunderstanding "hold on with a bulldog grip and chew and choke as much as possible." What's that say about leadership? What's the model that you bring to a commander in chief? What's the model you wanted your midshipmen to think about?

SYMONDS: Well, what I told my midshipmen is that words matter. And I think it mattered a lot for Lincoln. Lincoln often wrote things down. We heard people mentioning that he would write these memos. And, you know, sometimes an event would take place, and he would sit and almost--what we'd call a memorandum for the record, you know, to make sure whether it was because to keep Hooker, you know, honest, or whatever the reason it was. He would often write these memos, some of which he actually sent, many of which he did not.

But I think it was a way of clarifying his own idea of what needed to be done. And when he faced a crisis, such as in the Fort Sumter crisis, he often called his cabinet together and said, "All right, everybody, take out a piece of paper," something like a pop quiz. Everybody, take out a piece of paper. We're going to take 10 minutes right now. I want you to write down what we should do." And then he would read aloud what people had written. It sounds very much like a classroom. But he understood that if you articulate very specifically what it is--putting it down on paper, using the words to describe as clearly and accurately as possible what is the problem, what needs to be done to solve the problem, and how can we go about doing that-- those things matter.

And, you know, Lincoln, of course, was a man who learned, I think, to express himself by Shakespeare and the King James Bible, so it has a certain biblical cadence to it as he writes. But it's mainly that the precision with which he wrote that was important. And when he--as you say, when he gave an order, it was hard to misunderstand what that order was because he was very careful in the words that he chose and the words that he used. Words matter.



WHEELER: So let's back up. Let's go back to sea for a second. So your new book is "Lincoln and His Admirals."

SYMONDS: Right. Well, I'm stealing a title from T. Harry Williams.

WHEELER: Yeah, you're playing off of T. Harry Williams. Right, right. But--but commander in chief of the armies has been chewed over a lot.

SYMONDS: Yes.

WHEELER: Commander in chief of the navies far less so until--

SYMONDS: Not at all.

WHEELER: Right--until that you came along with this.

SYMONDS: Well, Article II, Section I of the Constitution says it's the very first of the enumerated powers granted to the president. "The president of the United States is commander in chief of the Army and Navy of the United States." It doesn't say "Army," it says "Army and Navy of the United States." The difference is that in the 19th century before the Civil War, American ships served as essentially representatives of the nation in far distant ports with which American merchants traded: the Far East, the Brazil Station, the East China Station, and so forth.

So just as army officers spent much of their career on these 79 forts out on the western frontier where they commanded a company and were bored and so forth, naval officers often spent their entire careers 3,000, 6,000, 7,000, 11,000 miles from the United States, and thought of themselves, I think as a result, as representatives of the United States. They were completely out of communication with Washington. If a crisis came up, they had to decide, "What is in the best interest of the United States as I understand it?" Many of these people are lieutenants, they're 35, 40 years old, and yet making decisions that will commit the United States to a particular policy position.

Now, there's a couple of things that come out of that. One of which is, interestingly enough, although the majority of southern-born army officers go south to fight for the Confederacy, the majority of southern-born Navy officers remain loyal to the United States. A cynic would say it's because the United States has more ships for them to command. It's a careerist move, and I'm not dismissing that entirely. But in part, I think it's because they spend their lives out there where even if you're from South Carolina, if you're on the East China Station, everybody says you're a Yankee. And the flag that flies over your head, of course, is the Stars and Stripes, and I think that is one of the reasons why that became true.



WHEELER: So how do you--so one of the things that I tried to develop in my book was the impact of the first time that a political leader could reach out and touch a commander in the field. That a commander in the field was the closest thing to a living god there ever was, OK, because his word, that was it. Men died, countries fell, you know, whatever the case may be. The telegraph in the land war changed that. The point you were just making is that in the naval war, that was not the case.

SYMONDS: Ah. But now I want to finish the second half. I said in the United States Navy up to the time of the Civil War. But remember, the Civil War was fought along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and on the inland waterways of the United States, where telegraphic communication is not instantaneous. It's not like Grant leaving a wire behind him as he advanced in the Overland Campaign so he can keep in touch in almost a real-time basis, but you can communicate. The wire, telegraph wire, between Hampton Roads, Virginia, at the tip of the Virginia peninsula, and Washington, D. C., remained intact. Therefore, Lincoln could communicate with--I mean, for example, the great story of Edwin Stanton absolutely panicking entirely when the "Virginia," formerly the "Merrimac," came out and sank two Union ships in Hampton Roads. That reaches Washington in less than an hour, and Stanton runs around like the world is coming to an end because he's heard about it.

Now, in the old days, that would've happened 3,000 miles away and he wouldn't know about it until it'd been a month later. So it does change the naval war, as well, and particularly in the western rivers, where the Army and the Navy have to cooperate, and the only guy who can make that happen is the president of the United States, and he has telegraphic communication with both.

WHEELER: I guess what I was thinking of was more in terms of out there at sea. Once you're at sea, it becomes an individual's call. It becomes the captain of the ship's call, period, and how does that change the leadership dynamic?

SYMONDS: Well, it doesn't change the leadership dynamic for that handful of ships--18, 20 or so--who are out hunting down the Confederate raiders. Because they are out of communication, and they are still God in command of their-- they can hang a sailor if necessary. They are in charge of life and death. I'll tell a quick story, and that is that when the Transatlantic Telegraph was completed after the Civil War was over--there was no Transatlantic Telegraph communication during the war.

But when it was completed after the war and then you could connect all the way across Europe and Asia so that the commander of the Far East China Station could be contacted by telegraph by the president of the United States, he wanted to resign. He said, "I'm a damned errand boy at the end of a telegraph wire." Well, nowadays, of course, we have instantaneous, you know, globe-encircling communication. The president of the United States can pick up the phone and talk to the captain of a ship in the Persian Gulf in real time. So the rule of the naval officer changes dramatically, and the Civil War is where it



changed. Civil War sits on--we all know this--it sits on a pivot point of technology, and one of those technologies is communication, and war would never be the same again.

It's one of the things that makes the Civil War so fascinating. It's a Sir Walter Scott war. It's a Napoleonic kind of war in many respects. It's also the Somme and Ypres and Verdun in many respects. And James mentioned some of the new technology: you know, the balloons, or observation balloons, trains, obviously railroads. And the naval war, armor plate, rifled shells, even a submarine, for crying out loud. So this is where the character of war tips from what it had been to what it's going to be.

WHEELER: OK, let's use that, then, as the launching-off point to get the rest of the team back in here, and then we're going to turn and start looking for you all at the microphones. But if the Civil War was, as Craig appropriately states, a war of change, what was the greatest example of Abraham Lincoln's understanding and seizing upon that, and I've already called mine. What was the greatest example of Abraham Lincoln seizing upon that change and making it work as commander in chief?

WORK: Well, I think strategically may have been the big thing. I mean, there's a big debate about the idea of total war. The definition: historians argue about that. But essentially the idea, especially of battering your enemy, a war of attrition, Lincoln hit upon that very early on. He knew they had more men. He knew that they could outlast the Confederates if it came to that. Not that he wanted to, but he was willing to be as ruthless as possible, and eventually he would find the commanders in Grant and Sherman and so on who would fight that war. And if you see the future wars in the 20th century, they will be fought along those similar lines of very much wars of attrition.

WHEELER: James, you first surfaced that idea of Lincoln as the great killer.

SWANSON: Well, I think of a couple of moments involving Grant, and then something rare into civil liberties. There's an interesting turning point, I think, when Grant wanted to go north, Big River near Vicksburg, and Lincoln sent Grant that telegram that said, "I thought it was a mistake when you wanted to go north on that river. I thought you should've done this." And then Lincoln says, "I'm writing to you now to say you were right, and I was wrong," and that's a great document. It sort of encapsulates Lincoln's thinking that I found my man, and he will be coming East. He had to entice Grant here. Grant didn't want to do it at first. Then Lincoln decided he would give Grant the full support. And by that, I mean--this is not in words or telegram, but Lincoln decided this. Lincoln decided that no--how many battles Grant lost, however many Union men he lost, including killing 7,000 at Cold Harbor in less than an hour, Lincoln wouldn't back down from his support of Grant. Somehow he must've communicated that to Grant, that no matter how many of our guys die, no matter how long you take, just keep out there, fight, kill, destroy them, and I'll never hesitate giving you my support.



I think that's when Lincoln really understood that the only way to win was to kill as many of them as possible, no matter how many men we had to lose. Mary Lincoln called Grant a butcher. The newspapers wanted him to remove Grant. Mary Lincoln said, "He's a madman, get rid of him." Lincoln told all of them, "I will never get rid of Grant because he fights, he wants to win, and ultimately he is going to win."

WHEELER: But in part it was because they had agreed on that ahead of time. Whereas the previous generals he thought he had some kind of--he thought they had some kind of understanding of what he wanted from them and they didn't deliver. And this guy: they had agreed, and, by God, he delivered.

SWANSON: Well, when that Grant message electrified and in some cases horrified the nation, "I intend to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer," Lincoln sensed the confidence Grant had. But if Grant lost a battle, if he lost 7,000 men in an hour, he wouldn't go into his tent and cry. He wouldn't have some kind of a nervous breakdown like some of the generals did. He wouldn't be reluctant to fight again the next day if he had to.

The other turning point, I think, was when Lincoln decided and said, and I'm paraphrasing now, "I'll never give up. I'll have to die. We'll have to be conquered. I'll have to lose the election. The Congress and all the people will have to turn against me. I will never give up."

WHEELER: Craig?

SYMONDS: Well, you were asking how in examples of Lincoln's recognition that it was a new kind of war, a different kind of war? I was thinking in terms of technology, and what popped into my head was Lincoln's support for an armored warship and particularly for the "Monitor."

I mean, you know, when news of the construction, or rather reconstruction of what had been U.S.S. "Merrimac" into C.S.S. "Virginia" in ironclad down in Hampton Roads, when news of that became general knowledge in the North, Gideon Welles put out requests for people to submit ideas for an armored warship. And the most revolutionary of them--I guess that's kind of a pun, isn't it, the revolving turret.

But the most revolutionary proposal to come in was from John Ericcson. And it was revolutionary, and Ericcson was kind of on the outs with the government because he'd had kind of a spotty record in previous inventions that we don't need to go into now. But in any case, the guy who made himself a spokesman for this proposal, a fellow named Cornelius Bushnell, brought the model into the White House and showed it to Lincoln.

Lincoln was a gadget man. Lincoln was, for all his prairie folksiness, was a man who was interested in new technologies. And he saw, I think almost at once, that this armored



vessel with its heavy guns was a breakthrough of sorts. And he took it upon himself to go to the meeting of the Ironclad Board the next day, where he was not expected, and spoke up on its behalf. And without that, I'm pretty sure that vessel would not have been adopted, the "Virginia" could've taken command of Hampton Roads, and who knows what consequences would've ensued? And I guess it's characteristic of Lincoln that he didn't tell the Board, "I want you to do this." What he said was, "Well, looking at this model, it reminds me of what the girl said when she stuck her foot in the stocking: strikes me there's something in it." And he let them infer from that that here the president was supporting this particular piece of technology. So that's just one.

But I think Lincoln recognized generally--and of course your book on his use of the telegraph is as good an example as any, but you claim that for yourself.

WHEELER: I preempted that. But my theory was I said that if he were around today, we'd call him an early adopter because he inherently understood technology. He's the only president to hold a patent. You know, he understood these new ideas. And what electronic communications did was allow him to change the nature of the presidency from being something that sat back here and got delayed reports of what was happening out there to something where he could impose his will out here. But more importantly--and this is because doing this, using the telegraph as a magnifier for your voice to go out there, is really kind of obvious.

I think what Lincoln's really great insight was, he used it as a listening device. He would go to the telegraph office, he would read every telegram that came in, even if it wasn't addressed to him, and that's how he kept himself. And then he would insert himself in those instances, even uninvited, where he thought his leadership was needed, and I think that's the modern leadership paradigm.

SYMONDS: Can I add to that, though? I think one of the things that Lincoln also did very well but not every president has done is he took advantage of the old form of information gathering. Lincoln was an inveterate newspaper reader. He would come in in the mornings, and the first thing he did before he checked the mail was sit down and read as many newspapers as he could get his hands on. Because he wanted to see--and he read the opposition papers in particular because he wanted to see what bad things they were saying about him. He listened not just to his commanders in the field. He listened to the public. And we tend to make fun, I think as a society, of politicians who put their finger in the wind, but Lincoln was one of them.

Lincoln, as I said earlier, wanted to know how far he could go in the direction that he believed it was necessary to go, and he wouldn't know how far that was unless he listened to public opinion. And one of the ways he did that was by reading the newspaper.

WHEELER: Great point. OK, let's go, and we'll start listening. Yes, sir? Over here.



MAN: I'm a student of history, but I get facts a little bit messed up without research.

But my memory serves me that early in the war, Winfield Scott came forth with a strategy to Lincoln called The Anaconda, which was a concept of wrapping around and squeezing. And that's why put the Army of the West used the Navy to start blocking. It doesn't seem like until Grant and Sheridan making the swing that that concept really took hold. Do you think it was dropped? Do you think Lincoln didn't explain it to his staff? Was there no understanding of a real strategy to follow up on that or was it just dropped?

WHEELER: David, and then Craig.

WORK: It was basically dropped because Scott's plan was to surround the Confederacy and then wait. Strangle them, cut them off from trade, and then wait however long and they'll surrender. Lincoln, for political reasons I would argue, knew that wasn't acceptable. That they had to go on the offensive, that they had to have field armies invade the South and to try to conquer as much of a victory.

MAN: You don't think that the squeeze was the offense part of that?

WORK: Well, part of the problem was is that to many people in the North--remember, this is May, June. Horace Greeley's "New York Tribune" is screaming, "On to Richmond! We're going to hang Jeff Davis from an apple tree, a rotten apple tree." And this is in the newspapers. As just pointed out, Lincoln's reading this in the papers. He himself also wants offensive action. I think Lincoln realizes the value, the strategic value of Scott's plan in a long war. That, you know, capturing the Mississippi, as he eventually will say later, it's the key. We have to take Vicksburg. We have to do this. A blockade had already been declared, but it just--he never adopted it as a formal policy. He felt he had to create some field armies and attack Richmond. "We have to go on the offensive. Public opinion demands it." I think Lincoln personally thought they could defeat the Confederacy very early on. Especially before First Bull Run, he thought they could win the war fairly quickly. That was the general sentiment. So nobody was thinking, as Scott was, of a long war.

Eventually after the defeat at First Bull Run, after a few more setbacks, Lincoln would realize this is going to be a long fight and he would basically adopt the Anaconda strategy, although not officially.

MAN: And that's what Sherman did going to Atlanta, swinging through it, right?

SYMONDS: To a certain extent, yes. First of all, there's no document that is The Anaconda Plan. It's not like you pull out a plan: "Anaconda, Sub I, Category." It emerged over time, and Lincoln declared a blockade on the 19th of April, 1861, very early on. Lincoln knew instinctively, as did Scott, of course, that the axis of the Mississippi River is going to be crucial to the suppression of the Confederacy. And Scott put these--the



closest thing there is to a document that actually summarizes The Anaconda Plan was a May 2, 1862, letter that Scott writes to McClellan when McClellan is commander--general in chief. Not commander in chief, but general in chief of the armies and has supplanted Scott in that capacity, and Scott is telling him here's the view of the administration.

But I think David's right. It remains a blueprint. I think that's a better word. It remains a blueprint of Union strategy through most of the war. The only major modification—the blockade obviously is the major naval effort of the war. It's the single largest military undertaking of the United States in its history to that time. You know, some 350, 400 ships blockading 3,500 miles of coastline with 100,000 sailors on board: it's a huge undertaking. So that's there, and it becomes stronger and stronger as the war goes on. The Mississippi Campaign continues until Vicksburg falls, so that's a continuous element. What's different, of course, is this notion that Scott had, being a Virginian himself, that if you establish a field army in Northern Virginia, it will compel the Confederates to confront you there, and they'll essentially immobilize each other.

Lincoln was under this great pressure from the public to do something, to act. And Lincoln, finger in the wind, feeling that pressure, told Irvin McDowell, "You are green, it is true, but they are green also. And, you know, you may claim you're not ready, but you have to go." This was one of those moments where Lincoln does step in, and afterward maybe feels he pushed a little too hard.

So I think the blueprint is always there, but not quite the way that Winfield Scott envisioned it.

MAN: Yeah.

WHEELER: Sir?

MAN: Yes. With regard to naval appointments, it seems to me you can have political generals if there are people who've had some experience with associations and organizations and universities and companies for the skills that you develop that way. I think it's very hard to sail a ship at that time as a political admiral. I mean, not to say that admirals don't have political connections, but nonetheless it seems to me that you need a certain amount of basic technical knowledge so--

SYMONDS: Yes, in the army, anybody can be in the officer, but in the Navy, you're supposed to actually know something. That's true. That's a very good point. But your point is absolutely correct.

MAN: So I wonder about, you know, finding enough people to be able to man all of the ships that you're going to try to have.



SYMONDS: Well, there were 500, give or take, 500 generals in the Union Army during the Civil War. At no time were there more than 8 admirals, so the numbers are much smaller to begin with.

Now, of course, admiral is a brand-new rank. There had never been an admiral in the history of the United States until the time of the Civil War. We had a notion as a society, and it comes from our Whig background, that admirals are instruments of empire and political suppression, so we don't want any of those guys. Generals can be heads of militia units and that's OK. That's safe for American democracy. So we don't have any admirals until the Civil War, and Farragut is the first. And for most of the war, there are only 6 of them, and none of them were political generals in the sense in which we use the term-- "political general"?

None of them were political admirals in the sense in which we use the term political generals. There were admirals with political connections. I'll just mention one very briefly, and that's Samuel Phillips Lee. Samuel Phillips Lee was the best connected admiral in the United States Navy. He was third cousin of Robert E. Lee: that's not necessarily a good connection on the Union side. But his wife was Lizzie Blair, Lizzie Blair Lee, who was the sister of Montgomery Blair, Lincoln's Postmaster General, and the sister of Frank Blair Jr., who was a corps commander in Sherman's Army and the daughter of Frank Blair Sr., who had been in Andrew Jackson kitchen cabinet and was an advisor to Abraham Lincoln.

So he's connected, and he tries to use those connections in the way political generals would to get himself promoted. But you know what? It doesn't work. Lincoln does not interfere in the hierarchy of military command structure in the same way that he did interfere with the command structure of the Union generals. For political reasons he just doesn't do it, and maybe it's because it's so small a group or maybe they're just isn't enough political pressure there for whatever reason. But there is no equivalent to the political generals in the Navy.

MAN: Yeah. Literally, Craig, when you're saying about the admirals, we're talking just that. But you have also the fact that you have the command of naval ships. You know, whether somebody's a lieutenant, a captain, a commodore, and then commanding naval squadrons. What trouble did they have in finding enough people to fill all of those...

SYMONDS: Well, obviously, the same kind of trouble the Army had in mobilizing from a small number: from an army of 16,000 to an army of 2.5 million. The Navy goes from 42 ships to 671 ships. Now instead of 42 commanders, ship commanders, you need nearly 700 ship commanders. And a lot of those guys who commanded the small gunboats, for example, were people who came straight from civil life. People who got commissions as acting volunteer lieutenants would be the title. So they didn't come through any kind of military infrastructure. They had no military training whatsoever. Enlisted men weren't—



there was no boot camp for enlisted men. They just came on board and people showed them which rope to pull on. So a lot of it was ad hoc, as you would expect it to be.

WHEELER: OK, let's go over here.

MAN: Uh, this is your left-wing sociologist again, but this time I'd like to be looked at as a Civil War buff. And I am not going to--well, I am going to ask a question this time, a question which has already been answered by the present speakers. I'm going to make 2 statements, and then ask the question. Statement one: we've already heard Lincoln being described as a master politician. Statement two: I'm going to quote a military theorist called Clausewitz, which some of you are familiar with. He said that war is politics by other means.

Question: is Lincoln's success as a commander in chief--is a key to his success the fact that he was a master politician?

WHEELER: James?

SWANSON: Well, sure. If you include in the definition of a master politician somebody who knows how to read other people, someone who can almost read their thoughts and master others, bend others to his will or persuade them or banish them. Politician in that he was always learning. He was always learning the law. He was always learning how to deal with people. He was always learning the military technology. I think both are true. Becoming a master strategist made him become a better politician and war leader. He had to become his own Chief of Staff in 1862 and '63, but also his reading of the politics of the nation. What would the people take? What would the country take? How many losses would they take? When could he fire a general? It's both. Being that great politician, that instinctual politician, made him a better battle commander, but making himself into a better battle commander gave him more political options and a more powerful political life.

WHEELER: You two, you want to pile on that?

SYMONDS: Want to go?

WORK: I would agree with that.

I mean, I stated earlier that being commander in chief was a descent of a very much and essentially political position, you know, because he had to assemble the national coalition to fight the war. He had to constantly understand what the opposition party was up to to try to counter that or to enlist them into it or co-op their ideas. He had to be the master propagandist, essentially "The Gettysburg Address" and other war letters, to re-enthuse



people to continue supporting the war effort. So his abilities as a politician are very much, I think, key to his success as a commander in chief.

SYMONDS: Two quick things. One is about Clausewitz. It's an absolutely impenetrable read on war. But there's one key, crystal-clear piece of argument in it, and that is that winning a war means achieving the objective, not fighting battles and killing more of the bad guys. Always keep in mind what the political objective is while you're fighting the war, and that will help you fight it more efficiently. And Lincoln knew that instinctively, and we know he didn't get it from Clausewitz because Clausewitz was not translated into English until after the Civil War. It was available in German in 1831, but not in English, and Lincoln didn't read German. So I think he did appropriate Clausewitz's key idea, and I think he did so on his own instinct without being dependent on a philosopher of war for that idea.

WHEELER: Now, there is a new factoid. Yes, sir?

MAN: What was Lincoln's role in the decision to terminate the exchange of prisoners?

SYMONDS: Want me--

WHEELER: Go ahead.

SYMONDS: Well, the exchange of prisoners began to break down early, but it didn't break down completely until 1864. And Lincoln did play a role in that, but Grant probably played a bigger role. There were a couple of factors involved here. One of them is racial, and that is that by now you have black troops in the field, and the Confederates were saying that escaped slaves--what in the Northern parlance were called "contrabands"--would not be treated as prisoners of war. Free blacks, they might be, but contrabands would not be. They were escaped slaves and would be returned to their owners or put at hard labor. Lincoln responded, retaliated if you would, by saying, "For every one you put at hard labor, we will put a Confederate P.O.W. to work at hard labor, as well." And so there was this back-and-forth threatening, and that broke it down a little.

But that might have been resolved, except for the fact that Grant could count. And what Grant could count was we outnumber them roughly 2 1/2, 3 to 1 on the field. If we exchange one for one, they benefit much more than we do. So the cold calculus of prisoner exchange is there's really no reason for us to bend over backward to make this happen, and I think he convinced Lincoln of that. Lincoln was unwilling to compromise on the question of black P.O.W.s, and Grant's un-eagerness to continue the exchanges one-for-one, I think, were both factors in the breakdown of that. And you could call either of them heartless. People remained in prison who could've been exchanged during the war.



Now, early in the war, of course--and this is another example of why the Civil War is such a tipping point culturally. Early in the war when you captured a bunch of prisoners, if you said, "All right, everybody raise your hand. Promise you won't fight anymore, and then you can go home," and they did. But, of course, it becomes a total war, and then people were jumping parole and going back to fight and so on. And that broke down, and soon prisoner exchange breaks down, as well, but I'll make one last note about that. And that is those individuals who had the most to gain by renewing a prisoner exchange--that is, the American Union P.O.W.s held in Andersonville Prison Camp in Georgia held a mock election in the fall of 1864 and voted 85% for Abraham Lincoln to be re-elected, knowing that it meant their continued incarceration in camp, to win the war.

WHEELER: Yes, sir?

MAN: Quick statement, then a question. Apparently, I may be the last question or so. Representing the audience, I want to compliment this panel and your two predecessors for a tremendously stimulating day. This is, just in my view, just totally marvelous.

[Applause]

Now, the question is you talked about the bad political generals: Commissary Banks and the Beast Butler and people--Franz Siegel. Were there any good political generals?

WORK: Yeah, there were several. John A. Logan, a Democratic politician from southern Illinois, rose in the ranks from a colonel all the way to major general, command of a corps at the end. U.S. Grant praised him. Sherman even praised him. Grant said Logan had the capability to command an independent army, although he never got the chance. Frank Blair--we mentioned the Blair family. He proved to be an excellent general who rose to corps command. James Wadsworth in the Army of Northern Virginia proved to be a decent division commander.

So there were several excellent, or at least good, political generals. Then there were some who never saw combat. Lincoln used them purely in administrative positions. John A. Dix, who actually was the highest ranking volunteer general of the entire war. He held a series of administrative positions in Virginia, in Maryland, and eventually in New York City, and he proved to be very efficient in managing those territories for Lincoln.

MAN: I like General Chamberlain, too. Whether he was a political general, I don't know, but a good guy.

WHEELER: You could even argue that Ulysses Grant was a political general, OK? He did not--he was not a Lincoln appointee and he was not appointed as a general. However, it was a political appointment that got him started.



WORK: We could argue that all the generals were political appointees.

WHEELER: I guess that's true, also.

SWANSON: But without the support of Congressman Washburne of Illinois, who adopted Grant and put him forth whenever he could to get Lincoln's attention.

WHEELER: Yeah, that he did. We got another one over here. Yes?

WOMAN: Dr. Symonds made a brief comment about Southern military officers and their choices to stay in the United States military or go to the Confederate States of America military. And I was wondering if any of you would like to reflect further about how military, professional military officers specifically, made those decisions. I'm not a Civil War buff, and I've--but I'm really interested, particularly in George Thomas and how he made that decision.

WHEELER: OK. Who wants to try that? Go ahead.

SYMONDS: Um, yeah. Remember the whole tipping-point question again. The United States becomes what it is today, a single, centralized nation, because of the Civil War. I mean, partly it's simply logistics: supplying, feeding, equipping 2.8 million men in the field. Maintaining a navy of 671 warships centralizes authority and control and our whole conception of the United States and its authority as a nation. Now, it's different from what it was before 1860. Shelby Foote has said that what changed in the Civil War is we used to say "the United States are," and afterward you would say "the United States is." And I mention that because the extent to which any given individual thought of himself as a Virginian first and an American second or a Maine man first and an American second changed, you know, over the period and from state to state. There were a number of Virginians, the most famous of them perhaps being General Thomas, who simply decided that they were Americans first and Virginians second.

The most famous man who made the opposite decision is Robert E. Lee, and for most people those were individual decisions. As I mentioned earlier, the percentages of those southern--about 30% southern-born army officers--career army officers, now West Point graduates--stayed with the Union. So 70% went South, but 30% stayed with the Union. So there were a number, George Henry Thomas being one of them, but there were others, as well, who--

WORK: Winfield Scott.

SYMONDS: Winfield Scott was a Virginian. Of course, he'd spent 50 years in the uniform of the United States: pretty hard to overturn that and go South. But Robert E. Lee had spent nearly 40, so that's true. That's a good point. And the percentage is very different



for the Navy. There, nearly--you know, the majority of southern-born navy officers remained loyal to the Union for whatever reasons, as I discussed earlier. But it was a very personal decision, and I think it depended on the extent to which one conceived of oneself primarily as a Virginian. Lee, a Virginian. My God, the Lees of Virginia: how could you not conceive of yourself as a Virginian? But you know what? Samuel Phillips Lee of Virginia stayed with the Union Navy. So as I say, it's a very personal--

WHEELER: Let's follow up on this about Thomas. Did he suffer because--I mean, the--did he--

SYMONDS: Ah.

WHEELER: Yes, right.

SYMONDS: Depends on who you talk to.

WHEELER: Yes, that's what--

WORK: Some of his family disowned him. I know his sister I don't think ever talked to him again.

MAN: I was born 12 miles from where he was born, and he was born 3 miles from where Nat Turner started his...

WHEELER: Uprising.

MAN: So I think, you know, there's a lot of emotion there. And there is a lot of natural persuasion that there is fear, and as FDR says, "The greatest thing we have to fear is fear itself." There was great fear, too.

SYMONDS: I don't know if everybody heard that. He was suggesting George Henry Thomas was born very near the area where the Nat Turner rebellion took place in 1831, and that crisis of fear provoked by that rebellion led to a reaction against him for the choice that he made. But I think the repercussions--

WHEELER: How about the other side of it?

SYMONDS: Turned the other way around, as well. There were some in the North who never quite fully trusted Thomas. There was some thought that he should've had army command much earlier than he did. Even General Grant was a little bit suspicious for whatever reason. It may have been just a personality conflict, but there's some hint in the



letters that Grant was not so sure this Virginian was a guy you could really give an army to. So I think the repercussions fell both ways on Thomas. Yeah.

WHEELER: Well, let's close up here with one generic topic about Abraham Lincoln and his leadership as commander in chief. And separate his growth as a leader, which is basically what we've been talking about here, with his growth as a manager. It's not as cosmic, it's not as sweeping, but he also grew significantly, a man who arrived in this town with zero management skills--or at least management experience. He had monumental skills that he proved, zero experience. When you think about his growth as the man who led the federal government, who managed the federal government, what do you think about?

SWANSON: His desk was a mess. There was a folder that said, "If you can't find it anywhere else, look in here." Last year I had held a note in my hand that he wrote to one of his assistants, and he said, "I recall a few weeks ago I had a folder about this. I can't find it anywhere. Do you know where it is?" He was that way as a lawyer, too. His law office was a mess. Lincoln was not a man of paperwork.

He was a great reader. As you say, he read the newspapers. He went to the telegraph office. He wrote 90% of his letters personally in longhand. His staff drafted some of them, but Lincoln handled his own correspondence. But I don't know how good a manager he would've been if he didn't have absolute command authority over the army. Or at least--as Truman said about Eisenhower, "Poor Ike. He thinks just because he was a general when he's president, he's going to say do this, and someone's going to do it."

[Laughter]

I think because Lincoln did have command authority as commander in chief, he managed sufficiently well. But it was not his nature, it was not his instinct to keep massive files, keep track of paperwork, to organize a staff system. And remember, this was a time when the president of the United States ran the civil government, ran the war, and his staff consisted primarily of 2 or 3 male secretaries. Heads of cabinet might have a personal assistant: Seward had his son. Congress was not what it is today, that city on a hill of 20,000 people working for the 435 Representatives.

Lincoln's White House staff was so tiny, it was almost nonexistent. And he had to do a lot himself, keep track of a lot of things himself, and I don't think he was a great business manager in the sense that we would think of it in the modern terms of leading a corporation or leading some kind of entrepreneurial launch or startup.

WHEELER: David?



WORK: Well, I think he's a good manager as commander in chief because, to sort of play off what James just said, is that he doesn't really worry about the civil government too much. Because he appoints strong men to run those departments. You know, he's got Chase in Treasury, he's got Seward in State, he's got Meigs at the Postmaster. Many of these men thought they were far more superior to him. They thought they should be president. And this is one of Lincoln's strengths: is he didn't care about their egos, and he had the confidence that he could manage them, and that they would do their job so he could focus his energy on this big job of commander in chief. And he only got involved in their departments if it really called for a presidential decision.

Otherwise, his attitude was just, "Leave me alone. I've got a war to run." And another thing that helped, as well, is in the 1860s, people didn't expect as much of their president. They didn't expect him to manage the economy: you know, back to what's happening recently. They didn't look to him when things fall apart in Wall Street. "Well, Mr. President, what are you going to do?" They didn't look to him to manage Congress. Congress was still very much seen by many people as the source of power in Washington, especially in peacetime. That was where legislation was made, so Lincoln didn't have to deal with those things either. He could focus on managing the war effort.

WHEELER: Craig?

SYMONDS: Let me just say, first of all, that yesterday I had an opportunity to see James' study in his home, and James has similar organizational habits of Abraham Lincoln.

[Laughter]

I think in talking about Lincoln as a manager or as a leader, what he's managing and what he's leading is not the file folders, but the people. And it's his people-interactive skills that gave him his greatest strength in either category. A couple of things. When people came into Lincoln's office, almost always to ask for something, they came in and, more often than not, Lincoln was unable to give it to them. And yet when they left that office, they left thinking, "What a fine fellow this man is." He could stroke folks. He knew how to do that. He was very good at it. Generals, admirals, politicians: that's management, as well as leadership. When he visited the army, he was taking the temperature of the army. Not just the generals face to face--well, not quite face to face with McClellan unless Lincoln was sitting. But when he met face to face with his generals, he was getting, gauging their temperatures, but also taking the temperature of the army. When he rode along the ranks of the men and looked into their faces and shook their hands, he was measuring them. And his ability, I think, to take the measure of the individuals he worked with, either in a management environment or in a leadership environment, and be successful in doing that and be very patient in doing that was the key to both his management and his leadership.



WHEELER: You know, I would take and put all of this together. I agree. I talked about his listening well. I think to be a good manager, you have to listen. And he went out--as James started telling us right at the outset, he went out and spent time out in the field listening. He walked around to all the agencies that were around the White House and would drop in, and the biggest thing that he would do there would be listen, OK?

The Ironclad Board, when he stops in and physically presents himself. The way he used the telegraph as a listening device at more than as a speaking device. That the key to managing is first to be able to listen because that's what then gives you the answers to be this politician that you need to be to provide the kind of leadership.

I think we've all said that in kind of different ways. Ladies and gentlemen, what a great privilege it's been to sit up on stage with these three. Thank you, gentlemen.

WORK: Thank you.

SWANSON: Thank you.

[Applause]

WHEELER: Thank you, thank you all, for coming. Thank you, Budge and Russ, for being the sparkplug behind this. Thank you, Alan. Thank you, Susan, for making this all work. And, ladies and gentlemen, there are refreshments out in the back. Thank you to you for coming.

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