
BOOK REVIEW

Lincoln's Last Speech: Wartime Reconstruction and the Crisis of Reunion. By Louis P. Masur. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015. 247 pp.

Richard Hofstadter once wrote of the Emancipation Proclamation that it had “all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading” (*The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* [New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1989], p. 169). Abraham Lincoln’s final speech, remarks on reconstruction delivered two days after Lee’s surrender and three days before the president’s assassination, is liable to the same denigration, both in terms of its plodding prose style and its ambivalent-seeming ethics. In *Lincoln's Last Speech*, Louis P. Masur has written a masterful account of that text, but the book is less a rhetorical analysis of the speech’s style than a patient unfolding of its background.

The great surprise of the April 11, 1865, speech is how little it says about the triumph of Union forces. It would seem that Lincoln failed here to fit his words to his audience and occasion, a key rhetorical objective. Before him that night, after all, were hundreds of ordinary citizens, eager to celebrate the North’s victory and keen to recriminate the South.

But Lincoln does little of that. The majority of the speech, in fact, concerns what now seems like a minor controversy: the refusal of the 38th Congress to seat the recently elected representatives of Louisiana’s loyal citizens. The main question at issue in the speech is this: “Can Louisiana be brought into proper practical relation with the Union sooner by *sustaining* or by *discarding* her new State Government?” (p. 193). For those present that night, this focus must have seemed “peculiar” (p. 163). Also surprising is Lincoln’s approach to the topic, which is full of deflections and disavowals. Referring to his 1863 Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, he reminds his listeners that that plan was only “*a plan*” (p. 190), that he forbears “any public expression” upon the question of whether “the seceding States, so called, are in the Union or out of it” (p. 191), and that he himself would prefer that the new Louisiana constitution be better than it is. Still, Lincoln asks, would it not be wiser to take the new government and try “to improve it” rather than reject it (p. 191), to save “the already advanced steps” rather than run “backward over them” (p. 192)? The nation has no choice, Lincoln argues, but to begin with “disorganized and discordant elements,” especially because there is the “small additional embarrassment” that “the loyal people” themselves differ about Reconstruction (p. 189). Expecting to be congratulated, Lincoln’s audience was chastened.

But if his focus on Reconstruction seems odd, given the context, Lincoln had been thinking about, and acting on, that topic all along. Looking back, we think of Reconstruction as the period *after* the Civil War; but Lincoln had been waging both war *and*

peace from the moment the first states seceded. Masur's history of *wartime* reconstruction thus not only helps us understand Lincoln's preoccupations on the night of April 11, 1865; it helps explain what happened in the years that followed, when the country was left without his leadership.

In eight chapters, Masur walks readers through the story of wartime reconstruction, including the efforts in late 1860 and early 1861 to avert disunion; the official recognition, after war began, of the restored government of Virginia and the new state of West Virginia; the 1862 appointment of military governors in Union-occupied districts of Tennessee, North Carolina, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas, meant to help restore "proper, practical relations" (p. 191) between those states and the federal government; Lincoln's 1863 "Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction" and Congress's own efforts through the winter and spring of 1864 to adopt a different plan, pocket-vetoed by the president in July, 1864; Congress's approval of the Thirteenth Amendment in early 1865, the ratification of which, in late 1865, settled the slavery question once and for all; and the final months of the war, when Lincoln confirmed that he would be as flexible in peace as he had been dogged in war.

As Masur shows, Lincoln's approach to Reconstruction, from beginning to end, was to abjure abstract questions (whether, for example, the seceded states were now territories to be remade by the federal government), support loyal Unionists in those states, make it easy for them to form new state governments and return to the Union, and be as flexible as possible (state by state) concerning Reconstruction but as firm as steel regarding slavery. Lincoln also showed concern, throughout the period, for the newly homeless freedmen. In an August 1863 letter to General Nathaniel Banks, military governor of Louisiana, concerning his wishes for a new state government there, Lincoln wrote, "And while she is at it . . . I think it would not be objectionable for her to adopt some practical system by which the two races could gradually live themselves out of their old relation to each other, and both come out better prepared for the new" (p. 53).

In short, Lincoln was more generous in his plan of Reconstruction than most radical Republicans, who advocated hard terms for reentry; but he was more demanding than most conservative Republicans, Northern Democrats, and prounion Southerners, who saw the cessation of hostilities as the only requirement for reunion, with the former Confederate states simply retaking their place in the federal system, even with slavery intact. Masur shows us how Lincoln, across four turbulent years, threaded this particularly narrow needle.

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