

Review

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Stephen D. Engle. *Gathering to Save a Nation: Lincoln and the Union's War Governors*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016 (pprbk., 2020). Pp. 725.

For more than half a century, the Union war governors were mostly neglected by historians. William B. Hesseltine's classic Progressive study, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, stood as the definitive interpretation from its publication in 1948 until the early 21st century. Scholars generally accepted his argument that President Abraham Lincoln outsmarted and outmaneuvered the governors of the Northern states as he almost single-handedly saved the Union. In Hesseltine's view, the governors resisted Lincoln's nationalist efforts to centralize power and secure the country from the rebels. But the president always proved to be a superior statesman with a superior genius and won the political battle over the state leaders as well as defeating the Confederacy. This devastating assessment cast the governors in a bad light and made them seem insignificant in comparison to Lincoln. When this portrayal was coupled with the academic turn away from political history in the latter half of the 20th century, the governors faded into the background. To be sure, they were mentioned in broader studies, and some of them occasionally earned a dissertation or journal article, but there were almost no biographical treatments, and no new interpretative works appeared to challenge Hesseltine's account.¹

In the last several years, however, the resurgence of Civil War political history has brought new interest to the state executives and their work during the rebellion. In addition to biographical studies of the individual leaders, there have at last been interpretive disputes with the traditional narrative. William C. Harris offered fresh insights in *Lincoln and the Union Governors*, his 2013 contribution to the Concise Lincoln Library, arguing that although their relationships with the president were complicated, the governors generally agreed with Lincoln's nationalist position and cooperated with his administration.

1. William B. Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

In this view, then, the Union governors were partners with the president and helped to defeat the rebellion and save the republic. While Harris challenged the Hesseltine interpretation, his book was brief by design and did not fully explore how the state executives operated and cooperated with the federal authorities. Thus, while the thin volume offered important correctives and struck at the very heart of the longstanding view of the governors, it was not sufficient to fully overturn the orthodox view.²

At last, however, a work that reshapes the historiographical landscape has appeared. Stephen D. Engle's massive book completes the task of challenging and overturning the Hesseltine interpretation. In 481 pages of text, Engle offers a full-scale revision of the historical literature and backs up his argument with a staggering 130 pages of endnotes and an exhaustive 69-page bibliography listing an impressive array of both primary and secondary sources. The result is a tour de force that should serve as the definitive interpretation for the next generation and beyond.

Like Harris, Engle argues that the governors mostly cooperated with the national government and helped save the Union. In this complex account, Lincoln and the governors were not adversaries, and he was not trying to diminish their role or outmaneuver them. Rather, he needed and relied on them and they, in turn, needed and relied on his administration as they worked together to defeat the rebellion. The war not only expanded the power of the national government and the presidency, it also extended the reach of state authority and the control of the governors. Across the country, power was centralized in state capitals and governor's offices even as the influence of the national regime eclipsed the dominion of the lower levels of authority. Despite some disagreements and misunderstandings, the national and state governments worked together effectively and accomplished not only victory in the war, but also redefined and reshaped the relationship between the different levels of authority in the United States. In their dealings with Lincoln and the national authorities in the government and military, the governors helped create the contours of modern federalism. In so doing, they both furthered the nationalism that they shared with the president and preserved part of the State's Rights

2. William C. Harris, *Lincoln and the Union Governors*, Concise Lincoln Library (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013). One example of a new biography is my own study of Indiana's war governor: A. James Fuller, *Oliver P. Morton and the Politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Civil War in the North Series (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2017).

tradition that had dominated the early decades of the republic and the American commitment to popular sovereignty.

Engle demonstrates how the governors mobilized their states to preserve the Union, answering Lincoln's call for troops to put down the rebellion by coordinating the equipping, training, and transportation of the vast numbers of volunteers. Throughout the war, governors proved to be effective recruiters of soldiers, although some proved better at this than others and, ultimately, the Union had to turn to the draft to enlist enough men to fight the rebels. Several of the state leaders earned the appellation "The Soldiers' Friend" for their continuing efforts to provide the uniforms, arms, food, and medical care that the troops needed. But such work occurred in cooperation with the national government, as the War Department oversaw and directed the gargantuan task of making and maintaining large armies.

The long-forgotten Union governors—including Republicans like John Andrew of Massachusetts, Oliver Morton of Indiana, Andrew Curtin of Pennsylvania, Samuel Kirkwood of Iowa, Richard Yates of Illinois, and Israel Washburn of Maine and Democrats like Beriah Magoffin and Thomas Bramlette of Kentucky, John Brough and David Tod of Ohio, and Horatio Seymour of New York—are brought to life in this account. The story is largely a political narrative and Engle tells it well, navigating through the often complicated details to discern the issues involved in the tangled web of personalities that made up federal-state relations. While some problems could be blamed on partisanship—when Democrats held a majority in a legislature or took a governor's seat, they were more likely to resist the efforts of the Lincoln administration—others rested in the humanity of the men and the context of the particular situation. Engle understands that governors could be touchy, prickly, or offended, even as they agreed with the overall goal of preserving the Union. These political leaders had to deal with the consequences of federal actions—whether it was increased taxation, conscription, or emancipation. Even those who supported Lincoln in these matters had to figure out how to do so in ways that minimized or maximized the political fallout, depending on their particular state and situation. The state executives also responded to threats from Confederate invasions that came northward and expressed their fears and acted against the Copperheads within their state borders. The book is at its best when Engle shows just how related the political situation was to military affairs. He carefully shows the reader that events on the battlefield shaped the issues on the home front, but also recognizes that political matters helped shape the military effort. This is not a political story told in a vacuum

but is instead a reliable guide through the maze of messy democracy, overlapping jurisdictions, and interpersonal relationships.

To be sure, there are matters here with which scholars will quibble. Biographers and experts on state history will no doubt find minor errors and disagree with specific explanations—that is almost inevitable in such a long book with such a wide-ranging scope. Some historians will take issue with Engle's conclusion that the war revealed that there was a North and will insist that regionalism within the Union was actually underscored by the conflict. For example, recent trends in the re-emerging history of the Midwest challenge the notion that states like Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois were truly Northern, while Christopher Phillips has defined a borderland area—the Middle Border—that included the southern tiers of those Midwestern states as well as Kentucky and Missouri.³

This book should also inspire more studies of the era's politics—we need more biographies of the war governors and other neglected leaders at both the state and national levels. Some important figures have older biographies and now need revisiting, while others have never had a full examination. Such work will confirm and extend what Engle has done and might challenge parts of his analysis. But this interpretation promises to become the definitive account for the next generation of scholarship. Engle has effectively overturned the old Progressive narrative and replaced it with a complex and nuanced story that will stand the test of time.

3. Christopher Phillips, *The Rivers Ran Backwards: The Civil War and the Remaking of the American Middle Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).