

# Review Essay

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## *Works on the Civil War Congress*

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William C. Harris. *Lincoln and Congress*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017. Pp. 165.

Fergus M. Bordewich. *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020. Pp. 450.

This is the perfect time to read about a Congress that remained resolute during a period of profound crisis to keep America great. Two books provide different perspectives on the relationship of the Civil War Congress and President Lincoln that drew extraordinary legislative feats from chaotic times. Distinguished authors William Harris and Fergus Bordewich provide lively, perceptive accounts of clashing personalities and values coalescing to propel Union victory and a vastly improved future for the country.

The Civil War was a test of the still-novel idea of government by the people. Could the United States survive a divisive war and restore national integrity with principles that, as Lincoln suggested, would make it worth saving? The vital role of Congress in securing those principles has been eclipsed by the vast archive of scholarship on Abraham Lincoln as an exceptional leader. The legislation that destroyed slavery and advanced human rights was defined by Congress and pressed upon the president. Without the restraining presence of the southern delegations, the Civil War Congress passed landmark legislation that would transform America. Laws were enacted to settle western lands, complete a transcontinental railroad, promote higher education with land-grant colleges, create a national currency, disrupt the viability of the slave system through confiscation acts, add two new states to the Union and, finally, abolish slavery. All this was accomplished while creating the means to raise a massive military force and prosecute an existential war.

Lincoln scholar Harris and historian Bordewich have authored books that examine how Congress responded to the Civil War as an

opportunity to shape a unifying vision of the nation's future. They tell the stories of the men credited with passing the series of bills that qualify the 37th and 38th congresses (1861–1865) as among the most legislatively significant in history. However, Harris and Bordewich have distinctly different perspectives on the nature of the working relationship between Congress and Lincoln. They divide over a persistent scholarly debate on the role of the Radical Republicans.

Eighty years ago, historian T. Harry Williams published an analysis of the Radical Republicans in relation to other factions in Congress. The Radicals were abolitionists who dominated both the House and Senate. Professor Williams defined them as men of morality and principle who, on the issue of slavery, would not compromise. In their passionate advocacy for an absolute solution to end slavery, the Radicals had to overcome a president who was the most pragmatic politician of his time. They were revolutionaries, Williams asserted, who made political war on President Lincoln over emancipation.

It is well documented that the relationship between Lincoln and Congress was often tempestuous. Those who write about this period usually do so through this lens of political conflict. Harris and Bordewich stake out their distinct positions very clearly beginning with their titles. Harris believes that shared objectives made it necessary for the Radicals and Lincoln to collaborate in the legislative and military victories during the war. Despite their disputes, it was Lincoln *and* Congress working together who achieved the ultimate triumphs.

In his title abbreviated as *Congress at War*, Bordewich refers to several types of political battles forced by the Radicals, and not just the shooting war with the Confederacy. Bordewich shows that confrontation was a tactic used by Radicals to spur the president to forceful action, exhort the army to wage aggressive war, and overcome less zealous factions in the Capitol. Congress was *at war* with Lincoln, peace Democrats, and Union generals, as well as with the seceded states. Bordewich builds his plot on the compelling stories and insights derived from heated confrontations in Washington, D.C. Harris disputes Professor Williams, while Bordewich sustains him. Readers benefit from the distinctions.

Harris is a productive scholar who has contributed greatly to Lincoln studies. In *Lincoln and Congress*, he has written the essential narrative about the enduring successes of their relationship. In five succinct chapters, he describes the leading figures and milestones of the Lincoln Administration and Congress through each year of the war. He portrays several of the well-known Radical confrontations with Lincoln that he says led to misperceptions of a troubled relationship. One such outburst was over war policy when Senator Ben Wade of

Ohio accused Lincoln of being responsible for every military blunder of the war. "You and this government are on the road to hell, sir," he raged, "and you are not a mile off this minute!" Lincoln deflected the charge, noting "that is about the distance from here to the Capitol." It is possible that Harris's substantial Lincoln research and his admiration for the president's eventual command of the situation may have softened his assessment of Lincoln's concern for the Radicals' behavior.

Harris credits many congressmen with helping to foster so much important legislation. He uses Radical leader Rep. Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania to demonstrate the complexity of congressional collaboration. In this telling, Stevens defined the abolitionist positions and was alone unafraid to push his vision for racial equality. In the winter of 1862, Stevens was hard-pressed to name a single Lincoln supporter in the House. His chronic outrage at the president's inadequacies subsided only as Lincoln publicly pressed for the 13th Amendment after his re-election. Stevens was often the necessary advocate for uniting factions on such measures as the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act. His style of transactional bipartisanship better defines the congressional relations with Lincoln, Harris writes, than a few incidents of "dynamic tension."

*Lincoln and Congress* was published in the Concise Lincoln Library Series by the Southern Illinois University Press. These editions are intended to give the reader "the opportunity to quickly achieve basic knowledge of a Lincoln-related topic." *Lincoln and Congress* meets the objective by providing a comprehensive yet tightly written narrative. Harris has a command of this topic to deliver a high-quality, high-level review in a slender 165-page volume.

Fergus Bordewich is both journalist and historian with a particular interest in the first century of culture and politics in the United States. He brings a popular writer's flair to describing the controversies between Congress and Lincoln. Bordewich takes the main points of dispute, such as the Wade-Davis bill on the future of reconstruction, and develops a very lively story of clashing temperaments and contending values. Lincoln vetoed this attempt by Congress to assert stringent rules for post-war reconciliation. Bordewich gathers the explosive reactions from congressmen howling that the traitor-loving, usurper president "must be gotten rid of." Here, the abolitionists' anger boils until they realize that with the elections near, it was either Lincoln or a Democrat. Bordewich stages the debates and confrontations to reveal progress as resulting from these emotionally bruising conflicts.

By highlighting selected leaders, Bordewich traces the development of relationships and policy themes. He explores the character,

personality, and beliefs of Benjamin Wade, Thaddeus Stevens, Clement Vallandigham, and William Pitt Fessenden. Through these four legislators, Bordewich reveals the influence of the culture and the layered politics of how the deals were done.

Senator Fessenden was a conservative Republican from Maine and was chair of the Senate Finance Committee. His stature and natural caution gave him the gravitas needed to create coalitions around money issues. Together, he and House Ways and Means Chair Stevens worked to assure that the war did not end prematurely for want of revenues. They assisted Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase to create the concept and political will for both a federal currency and a national income tax. Fessenden was thought to be indispensable to the implementation of these fiscal innovations. When Chase resigned his cabinet position in mid-1864, Lincoln immediately nominated Fessenden to head the Treasury. Fessenden learned about this only after the Senate had already confirmed him.

The peace Democrats, called Copperheads, opposed the war and efforts to end slavery. Their leader in the House was Clement Vallandigham of Ohio. Here Vallandigham represents the anti-war themes and concerns for unfettered executive power that made Lincoln particularly vulnerable to criticism. Vallandigham was a brilliant debater and gifted public speaker. Bordewich deploys him to dramatize the persuasive power of peace rhetoric to create turmoil as many grew weary of a seemingly unending war. Senator Wade was also critical of Lincoln, but for not using enough of his power. Wade longed for "an overthrow of this imbecility [Lincoln] when we could place the power in more competent hands." In the darkest days of the war, Bordewich displays Lincoln as pitiable within the vise of Copperhead pressures for immediate peace and Radical demands for total war.

Radical tactics pushed Lincoln to act more quickly on emancipation, Bordewich contends. But Lincoln was surely impatient to end slavery. He had declared before his election that Republicans were dedicated to achieving "a higher object than that of mere office." He knew that either slavery or the American ideal had to die. Lincoln feared that acting against slavery prematurely meant losing the war. This made the president the greatest enemy of the Radicals' ambition for swift revolution. Did Lincoln choose the moment to act, or was he compelled by pressure politics? Lincoln denied reacting when he later said that emancipation would not have been sustained by the public if he had ordered it even a few months earlier than he did.

Emancipation did not end the Radicals' campaign. They quickly moved to secure civil rights for people of African descent. Radicals readied for further battle as Lincoln announced his willingness to

reconcile with states that merely accepted that slavery was dead. Senator Wade told of his relief when Lincoln's assassination put a man with tougher views in the White House. Harris, too, doubts that Lincoln, had he lived, would have become more forceful in demanding Black voting rights during Reconstruction. But true to his premise in *Lincoln and Congress*, Harris leaves open the possibility that Radical leaders might still have been successful in convincing Lincoln to expand civil rights during his second term.

Even though they describe many incidents that seem to presage later, even current conflicts, these authors again part ways in their predictions. Harris is wary about drawing any longer-term lessons from this exceptionally turbulent era. In discussing his book at a recent Lincoln Institute meeting, Harris declined a question that invited him to make a comparison between events in Congress during the Civil War and today. Staying in his academic lane, Harris demurred, saying, "The 21st century is not my bag."

Bordewich is optimistic that the Radical Republicans "have something to teach us about how our government can function at its best in challenging times." He has presented his case believing that the Radicals became an irresistible force in pursuit of an absolute moral principle, the death of slavery. The argument seems better made for the uniqueness of the times that required aggressive acts. Had the south not seceded, the Radicals would have remained an ignored, frustrated minority faction in Congress. But they seized a rare moment in history to bring the United States in line with the moral standard of all western civilization. When the south returned, Congress could not long protect voting rights and equal justice for the formerly enslaved. Having passed heroic laws, the Radicals, or so the lesson might be, are necessary to secure changes, but are not sufficient to sustain them without a broader coalition.

Harris and Bordewich have written compelling, enjoyable books that reveal the inner workings of Congress during the Civil War from differing perspectives. They each invite us to reimagine an institution that today is not often credited with dynamic leadership. They present what is possible in Congress when a galvanizing moral principle becomes a tool in the hands of talented, selfless leaders. Whether Congress was at war or in collaboration with Lincoln, remarkable deeds were achieved. These wonderful books present new insights into the people who courageously asserted the highest moral values in uncharted times to re-create the United States on the basis of principles that made it worth saving for all time.