Review

MICHAEL D. ROBINSON

Paul Kahan. *Amiable Scoundrel: Simon Cameron, Lincoln's Scandalous Secretary of War*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Potomac Books, 2016. Pp. 367.

The name Simon Cameron usually conjures up any number unflattering adjectives—crooked, devious, and unprincipled, to name but a few—among current historians of the 19th century. Cameron's contemporaries also did not mince their words when speaking of the Pennsylvania politician. James K. Polk considered Cameron "a managing tricky man in whom no reliance is to be placed," while Andrew Jackson considered him "a renegade politician" whose reputation for dishonesty preceded him. In response to a query from Abraham Lincoln about Cameron's honesty, fellow Pennsylvanian Thaddeus Stevens remarked, "I don't think he would steal a red hot stove." Cameron got wind of the barb and demanded an apology, to which the droll Stevens replied, "I apologize. I said Cameron would not steal a red hot stove. I withdraw that statement."[1] Each of these unfavorable statements came from colleagues who belonged to the same party as Cameron at that particular time; one can only imagine the vituperation heaped on the Great Winnebago Chief from his partisan enemies.

Such depictions make rescuing the reputation of Simon Cameron a difficult task for his biographer, but Paul Kahan has attempted to do just that in *Amiable Scoundrel: Simon Cameron, Lincoln's Scandalous Secretary of War*. Kahan seeks to demonstrate that despite the lurid tales of corruption and bribery that hung over Cameron, the Pennsylvanian really represented the typical politician of the mid-19th century. Cameron's efforts to protect and enhance his wealth, his deft usage of the spoils system, and his penchant to jump from one political organization to another mark him as a product of his environment. Moreover, Kahan posits that Cameron must not be tagged as a vapid placeman who had little concern for the people he represented. Throughout his career Cameron championed economic development, internal

1. The quotations from Polk, Jackson, and Stevens can be found in Burton J. Hendrick, *Lincoln's War Cabinet* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1946), 51–52.

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improvements, and tariffs, and over time he developed "rather progressive attitudes on race" (3). Kahan's biography provides a more nuanced view of Lincoln's first secretary of war, but the sordid trail of intrigue that followed Cameron throughout his life makes one question whether or not this captivating individual can be classified as characteristic of the 19th-century public man.

Readers who are familiar only with Simon Cameron's time in Lincoln's cabinet will find the first four chapters, which cover the Pennsylvanian's rise from poverty and obscurity to wealth and notoriety, quite interesting. Cameron's humble beginnings and the death of his father when the boy was young led to an apprenticeship in a Harrisburg newspaper office, which introduced him to the exciting world of politics and served as a springboard to financial stability. With a shrewd mind for finance, Cameron bought into several newspaper ventures and earned enough profit to invest in banks, railroads, and iron furnaces, which served as the foundation for his burgeoning prosperity. Cameron's banking and internal improvement interests naturally led him to support the National Republican followers of John Quincy Adams, but by 1827 the Pennsylvanian's close relationship with Jackson supporter and political organizer James Buchanan attracted him to the party of Old Hickory. Cameron became a rising star in the nascent Democratic Party, earning an 1837 appointment from Martin Van Buren as commissioner to the Winnebago Indians in the Wisconsin Territory. Kahan contends that Cameron saw the appointment "as an opportunity to craft a national reputation for himself and make some money in land speculation," but complaints soon arose about the commissioner's collusion with scheming lawyers who convinced the Indians to grant them power of attorney so that they could pocket the proceeds of their claims (32). Congress investigated the matter and exonerated Cameron, but the scandal tarnished the Pennsylvanian for the rest of his career.

Kahan points out that Congress found no evidence of wrongdoing while Cameron served as Indian commissioner and uses this as one of many examples throughout the book to argue, with limited success, that the politician's reputation as a huckster was undeserved. The more evidence that Kahan compiles to rehabilitate Cameron's image, the more the reader gets the feeling that Cameron involved himself in all sorts of shady deals and political bargaining in order to advance himself and his pocketbook rather than any cause. He jumped from the National Republicans to the Jacksonian camp in the late 1820s, courted Whigs to win political place, briefly flirted with the American Party in 1855, and in 1856 finally became a Republican. Kahan

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chalks up Cameron's peripatetic partisan journey to the "fluidity of political identity" and the "role that personality, rather than fidelity to party, played in building and exercising political power during the nineteenth century" (2).

At each stop along the way, though, charges of bribery and corruption stained Cameron's efforts to secure office. Kahan admits that in his 1855 quest to secure a seat in the U.S. Senate, Cameron engaged in questionable practices, specifically "loaning" money to Democratic wirepullers who might engineer his election without expecting repayment. When his efforts to buy the seat failed, Cameron jettisoned the Democrats and allied with the American Party. Outside of his commitment to the tariff, the Pennsylvanian often took hedging stands on burning political questions like the extension of slavery and immigration, which adds to the aura of self-interest that surrounded Cameron. In his effort to absolve Cameron, Kahan misses an opportunity to illuminate the Pennsylvanian's impressive ability to work a system in which corruption paid big dividends. The rumors that swirled around Cameron certainly had some kernel of truth, yet the slippery Winnebago Chief stayed afloat through it all. One could argue that Cameron's greatest personal accomplishment was not being brought down by the numerous commissions that investigated him over the course of his career. Like New York's Thurlow Weed, he was a shining prototype of what Mark Summers terms the Plundering Generation.[2] Instead of portraying Cameron as a unique master of duplicity and plausible deniability, however, Kahan presents him as another face in the crowd.

Kahan devotes several chapters to the Civil War years, tracing Cameron's efforts to head the Republican ticket in 1860, his mercurial relationship with Abraham Lincoln, and his brief but controversial stint as secretary of war from March 1861 until January 1862. The author situates Cameron's failed bid for the 1860 presidential nomination within the factionalism of the Pennsylvania Republican Party that pitted Cameron's supporters against those of Alexander McClure and Andrew Curtin. Although the state's Republican Party eventually smoothed over its differences and supported Lincoln's nomination in 1860, unity came at a price. Lincoln's handlers reached out to the Cameron faction and agreed to include him in the cabinet, a deal which caused the first Republican president numerous headaches. Kahan nicely explains how Pennsylvania politics weighed upon the

2. Mark W. Summers, *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849–1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

national party's decision-making in 1860, reminding readers of the vast importance of state and local politics in 19th-century political culture.

While the secession crisis developed during the winter of 1860–61, Cameron worked to ensure that Lincoln honored the promise made by his campaign operatives, traveling to Springfield to plead his case before the president-elect. Cameron won over Lincoln, who penned a letter offering him either the war or treasury department. Lincoln's decision drew immediate protest from Pennsylvania's McClure/Curtin faction, and the bewildered president-elect later rescinded his offer, causing Cameron much personal humiliation. Kahan rightly criticizes Lincoln for his poor handling of the Cameron appointment, but he tends to downplay or overlook Cameron's embarrassing activities in the aftermath of the Springfield visit. Upon returning to Washington, Cameron showed Lincoln's letter, probably intended to be kept private, to several friends.[3] Kahan does not discuss Cameron's violation of Lincoln's confidence but instead focuses on the Pennsylvanian's efforts to make the national capital safe for the impending inauguration ceremonies. Nor does Kahan explain why in late January 1861 Cameron, *after* personally meeting with Lincoln, who was averse to compromise, stated on the floor of the Senate that he would support any "proposition to save the country," including the contentious plan of Senator John Crittenden of Kentucky which would have forced the Republicans to abandon their free soil principles and allow slavery to spread into the western territories.[4] This public about-face merits explanation, especially because Kahan contends that since the late 1840s Cameron had been "committed to protecting Pennsylvania's interests by preventing the spread of slavery into the territories" (81).

Despite the bungling that occurred between Lincoln's election and his inauguration, the Republican president did offer Cameron the position of secretary of war. Cameron occupied the post for less than a year, but he left his mark. Unsurprisingly, there were charges of corruption, as Cameron funneled troops and supplies onto the Northern Central Railroad, in which he had a financial stake. Kahan points out that usage of the Northern Central actually cut costs by one-third for the federal government, but contemporaries did not ignore the fact that the railroad's profits mushroomed by 40 percent. Competitors like

3. Russell McClintock, *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 123.

4. Cameron quoted in David M. Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (1942; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 180.

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the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad received no government contracts during Cameron's tenure, which also exposed the war secretary to charges of profiteering. Cameron also assigned Alexander Cummings, a Philadelphia editor, with the task of procuring weapons and supplies for federal troops. Cummings made one questionable decision after another, overpaying for goods and purchasing unnecessary and outdated accoutrements. The appointment of Cummings earned Cameron a vote of censure from the House of Representatives after he left the War Department. "Cameron was no executive," Kahan concedes. "[A]s a backslapping, glad-handing politician, he was used to charming legislators in order to get their votes but he was totally unable to switch gears into being an administrator" (167).

Kahan appropriately points out that despite his faults, Cameron was placed in a very difficult position as secretary of war. He faced the titanic assignment of converting a peacetime army into an active fighting force; he had to enlarge the minuscule War Department so that it might function with some kind of efficiency; he faced stiff competition from a very able Confederate foe; and he had to please a host of political factions that held contrasting views about the prosecution and ends of the war. In short, Cameron's job was nearly impossible, and though he made his fair share of mistakes, one must admit that by the start of 1862 the War Department and "the army were better organized and provisioned than a year before" (157).

Although Lincoln dragged his feet on emancipation during the first couple of years of the war, Kahan insists that Cameron warmly supported taking broad swipes at slavery during his tenure as secretary of war. The author contends that Cameron supported keeping Major General John C. Frémont, who had issued a proclamation in Missouri freeing the slaves of masters opposed to the federal government, in command because the war secretary "agreed with the general that abolition of slavery was a legitimate war aim" (197). By the latter part of 1861, Cameron intimated to abolitionists that he supported granting freedom to every enslaved person who made it to Union lines. Other cabinet members looked at this as a means for the Winnebago Chief to curry favor with radical Republicans, but Kahan credits Cameron with genuine abolitionist sentiments. Cameron went public with his views at the end of 1861 in his annual report, in which he not only recommended freeing enslaved persons, but arming them to fight against the rebels. The report, which Cameron had printed and circulated before he showed it to the president, caused great embarrassment for the Lincoln administration. In response, Lincoln removed Cameron from the War Department and assigned him minister to Russia.

While Kahan provides a much-needed fresh look at the life of Simon Cameron, a couple of issues hamper the book. Some personalities and events are misidentified or mislabeled, a distraction that brings into question some of the conclusions that Kahan draws. For instance, Kahan conflates Cameron's response to Senator Crittenden's efforts to ameliorate sectional tensions in the midst of the 1858 fight over the Lecompton Constitution with the Pennsylvanian's stance on the various compromise measures before the Senate during the secession crisis three years later. Such confusion muddles Kahan's analysis and leaves lingering doubts about other judgments that the author makes. Moreover, portions of the book rely heavily on secondary sources or reminiscences to reconstruct and analyze Cameron's life. One wonders if a more thorough examination of diverse primary source material, especially in the manuscript collections of Cameron's contemporaries, might lead the author to some different conclusions. Even if questions persist about the author's usage of sources and analysis, readers will certainly enjoy reading this biography of one of the most fascinating politicians of the 19th century.