**Review of *Earnest Men: Republicans of the Civil War Senate***

Even before Abraham Lincoln took office as President, members of Congress loomed large in President-elect Abraham Lincoln’s political planning. Two weeks after the election, President-elect Lincoln met in Chicago with Senators Lyman Trumbull and Hannibal Hamlin. Hamlin would soon give up his Maine Senate seat to become Vice President. Also in the discussions were Illinois Congressman Isaac N. Arnold and William Kellogg as well as Ohio Congressman James Gurley. Over the next several months, most of these men played key roles as Mr. Lincoln determined the composition of his cabinet, sent signals about his presidential intentions, and influenced congressional attempts at compromise with the South. Three of Mr. Lincoln’s Cabinet picks were current or incoming members of the Senate – Secretary of State William H. Seward of New York, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, and Secretary of War Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania.

“It was my good fortune to know him well during the whole period of his administration as President,” wrote Massachusetts Congressman John B. Alley. “He was a many-sided person, and for this reason, perhaps, the estimate by different individuals who had the same opportunities of knowing him, was widely different. Many of the most distinguished men of the country, who were in daily intercourse with him, thought but little of his capacity as a statesman. And while entirely true, it is hard to believe, that those in both houses of Congress who knew him best had so little confidence in his judgment and ability to administer the government. Very few of the members of the Senate and of the House were in favor of his re-nomination for the Presidency in 1864.”1

But Mr. Lincoln studied these men carefully – as he indicated to House Speaker Schuyler Colfax “one night in the telegraph office of the War Department, when he suddenly turned the subject form campaigns and battles to mental idiosyncrasies, discussing the individualities of Thaddeus Stevens, of Charles Sumner, and, last of all, Henry Wilson. After discussing the characteristics of others with a keenness of analysis that strikingly illustrated his own mental powers, he added that a peculiarity of his own life from his earliest manhood had been, that he habitually studied the opposite side of every disputed question, of every law case, of every political issue, more exhaustively, if possible, than his own side. He said that the result had been - that in all his long practice at the bar he had never once been surprised in court by the strength of his adversary’s case – often finding it much weaker than he had feared.”

Not only did Abraham Lincoln study these congressmen, he learned how to work with them to get what he wanted. President Lincoln did not always impart the information that congressmen wanted. One day Democratic Congressman John Ganson of Buffalo went to the White House and told the President: “Though I am a Democrat, I imperil my political future by supporting your war measures. I can understand that secrecy may be necessary in military operations, but I think I am entitled to know the exact conditions, good or bad, at the front.” Mr. Lincoln avoided a direct answer but did not avoid Ganson’s gaze, and according to Colonel James Grant Wilson, looked “at him very quizzically, first on one side of his face and then on the other. He paused and said: “John, how close you do shave!” General James Grant Wilson noted: “The result of that was that we all left in the best of spirits...”

Massachusetts Congressman Henry L Dawes recalled meeting Mr. Lincoln on the morning he arrived in Washington incognito: “I could never quite fathom his thoughts, or be quite sure that I saw clearly the line along which he was working. But as I saw how he overcame obstacles and escaped entanglements, how he shunned hidden rocks and steered clear of treacherous shoals, as the tempest thickened, it grew upon me that he was wiser than the men around him. He never altogether lost to me the look with which he met the curious and, for the moment, not very kind gaze of the House of Representatives on that first morning after what they deemed a pusillanimous creep into Washington. It was a wary, anxious look, of one struggling to be cheerful under a burden of trouble he must keep to himself, with thought afar off or deep hidden which he could not impart even to the representatives of the nation to whose Chief magistracy he had been called and for whom he was to die.”

More difficult was managing the relations between generals and Congress. President Lincoln told freedmen commissioner John Eaton: “Well, you know a raid in Washington is different from what you military men mean by a raid. With you it is an attack by the enemy, – the capture of soldiers and supplies; with us it is an attack by our friends in Congress seeking to influence a change in policy. A company of Congressmen came to me to protest that Grant ought not to be retained as a commander of American citizens. I asked what was the trouble. They said he was not fit to command such men. I asked why, and they said he sometimes drank too much and was unfit for such a position. I then began to ask them if they knew what he drank, what brand of whiskey he used, telling them most seriously that I wished they would find out. They conferred with each other and concluded they could not tell what brand he used. I urged them to ascertain and let me know, for if it made fighting generals like Grant, I should like to get some of it for distribution.”

Historian Allan G. Bogue wrote that members of Congress “had their own ideas of how the war should be fought, different in significant respects from those Lincoln stubbornly maintained. Many of the lawmakers were little trained in the legislative arts...and were undisciplined – disorderly schoolboys,’ as the friends of one Speaker of the House put it.” Disorderly or not, the President had something the congressmen needed – political patronage. Nevertheless, historian William D. Mallam argued that President Lincoln had few friends in Congress: “Perhaps one reason for this absence of a personal following in the House and Senate was that curiously Lincoln seems to have made little effort to conciliate Congress.” Mallam wrote: “In the main, the conservative Republicans of 1862 were men of strong convictions, who rather than cast them aside, would, as the event proved, get out of politics. For the most part they were lawyers who felt a devotion to the Constitution amounting almost to awe. Anxious to keep the war one solely to preserve the Union, they were wary of alienating both the Border States and their own anti-negro constituents by countenancing emancipation. They considered slavery wrong, but had none of the flaming zeal to abolish it of the true radical. In all of this their views coincided with those of Lincoln, but their convictions were more uncompromising than his. They were more conservative.”

Illinois Congressman Elihu Washburne maintained of the President: “While he is a great statesman, he is also the keenest of politicians alive. If it could be done in no other way, the president would take a carpet bag and go around and collect those votes himself.” Historian Allan Nevins wrote: that President Lincoln “was always ready to manage Congress by giving its members jobs, letting them romp a little with contracts and appropriations, and lending them a hand at logrolling. He especially valued his Congressional spokesmen, like faithful William Kellogg of Illinois and headlong Frank Blair. Nobody showed more consummate skill in dealing with politicians of varied types, often crass, selfish, vain, or corrupt. In time he was to exercise this skill masterfully in handling the ambitious Salmon P. Chase, the unscrupulous Bent Butler, the self-centered Sumner, and the dictatorial, tempestuous Stanton. His magnanimity never failed – he gave even his sleepless rival and frequent detractor, Chase, the Chief Justiceship – but neither did his skill. When he turned from the politicians to the people, however, his attitude was one of deference to a higher power. While he knew that he must take the responsibility for decisive enunciations of policy, and did so, he also knew that he did not manage the people, in the last analysis, they managed him.”

Presidential favor was too important for many congressmen to want to be permanently alienated from Mr. Lincoln, no matter how much they differed with his policies. Even a harsh critic like Thaddeus Stevens sometimes need a presidential pardon for a constituent. Allan Bogue wrote: “Although the representatives and senators spent many mornings touring the executive departments on behalf of their constituents, they well understood that troublesome or urgent matters might be resolved more easily if they rallied the president to their aid, or if he could be induced to intervene.” Bogue noted that the President was astute enough to have congressmen put their requests in writing so that they would share responsibility for his actions.

Historian Mark Krug wrote that “there is evidence that Lincoln did not usually resent the pressures put on him either by the radicals or the conservatives. This crossfire pressure, often served him well, because it protected his freedom of action. He was not averse to telling the radicals that he had to give consideration to the views of the conservatives and vice versa He made this clear in a letter to the radical faction in Missouri headed by Charles Drake, to whom he wrote: ‘The Radicals and the Conservatives each agree with me in some things and disagree in others. I could wish both to agree with me in all things; for then they would agree with each other, and would be too strong for any foe from any quarter. They, however, choose to do otherwise, and I do not question their right. I, too, shall do what seems to be my duty,’”

Sometimes, Mr. Lincoln had to moderate among quarreling congressmen. President Lincoln wrote Kansas Senator Samuel Pomeroy in May 1864: “I wish you and Kansas Senator James Lane would make a sincere effort to get out of the mood you are in. It does neither of you any good. It gives you the means of tormenting my life out of me, and nothing else.” Sometimes, Mr. Lincoln had to moderate among members of his Administration and members of Congress. One lightening rod for congressional criticism was U. S Marshall Ward Hill Lamon. Historian Henry Greenleaf Pearson wrote: “In retaliation for the remarks of [Senator Henry] Wilson and other anti-slavery senators. Lamon issued an order to the effect that no senator unprovided with a permit from him should be allowed to visit the [Washington, D.C.] jail. The President finally intervened in the squabble and forestalled action on the part of Congress by ordering Lamon to clear the jail within ten days of all cases held on suspicion; to receive into custody no fugitives unless upon arrest or commitment pursuant to law; and to retain these not beyond thirty days.” Conflict between members of Congress and Lamon led President Lincoln to say: “I have great sympathy for these men, because of their temper and their weakness; but I am thankful that the good Lord has given to the vicious ox short horns, for if their physical courage were equal to their vicious dispositions, some of us in this neck of the woods would get hurt.”

The friction between the President and Congress was natural, reported aide William O. Stoddard. “The United States contained by one President, and he was necessarily dictatorial in war times; and his name was Abraham Lincoln. It was not always pleasant for some other man, strong of will and conscious of capacity and of good purposes towards himself and his country, when brought into sudden contact or collision with an unyielding power he had never felt before.” Historian William E. Gienapp wrote that “it was not just coincidence that Lincoln’s most decisive assertions of presidential power usually occurred when Congress was not in session: the initial call for troops, the institution of the blockade, the revocation of Frémont’s proclamation, the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, and the announcement of the preliminary emancipation.” Gienapp added: “Still, Lincoln’s relations with the legislative branch, while at times strained, never broke down completely, and in particular they were better than under either his predecessor, James Buchanan, or his successor, Andrew Johnson. This more harmonious relationship reflected in part the fact that Lincoln was much more tactful and flexible in his approach.”

The Lincoln Administration, however, was not entirely passive where Congress was concerned. “The evidence indicates that the Lincoln Administration was not as hermetically sealed from Congress as many presidential scholars would have us believe,” wrote political scientist Jon Schaff. “The Lincoln administration clearly attempted to influence the passage of important pieces of domestic legislation. It had the most profound influence of economic measures, the Legal Tender Act and the National bank Act. On other legislation – the Homestead Act, the Land Grant College Act, the Pacific Railroad Act, and the Revenue Acts of 1861 and 1862 – the administration was largely on the outside looking in.” Lincoln scholars Frank J. Williams and William D. Pederson wrote: “Not only did the Republican Congress back up Lincoln’s actions, its members came to power with a legislative agenda that set precedent for FDR’s historical ‘First Hundred Days’ in dealing with the Great Depression. Based on both the South’s secession and his own broad interpretation of the Constitution, Lincoln signed into law three pieces of legislation in 1862 which are ranked by some among the top ten pieces of Congressional legislation in history. They were legislative landmarks crafted to broad the emerging middle class and assist it in its collective effort to rise in society.” The legislation included the Land Grant College Act, the Homestead Act, and the legislation for the transcontinental railroad. Historian James A. Rawley observed: “By late 1862 Congress and the president had gone far to reshape the American economic and social structure. Together they had erected the framework for the emergence of modern American and freedom for black slaves.”

More importantly, President Lincoln took a personal and powerful interest in legislation concerning slavery and reconstruction of the South. His veto of the Wade-Davis reconstruction bill in July 1864 caused an uproar among Republicans. Bogue noted that “Lincoln justified his veto on the basis of expediency – the fact that it would nullify progress already made – rather than on the constitutional location of the power to effect reconstruction.” When the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery came up for a second vote in the winter of 1864-1865, Mr. Lincoln took an active interest in lobbying for its passage in the House working with Ohio Congressman James Ashley, who was a frequent critic of his policies.

Review of: Bogue, Allen. Earnest Men: Republicans of the Civil War Senate. Cornell University Press. 2009.