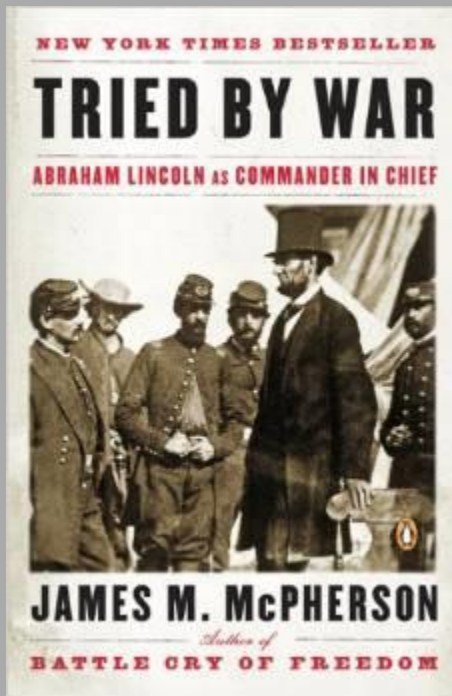


Book Report

Tried by War – Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief

by James M. McPherson

The Penguin Press (2008)



I recently finished viewing a Great Courses series titled “Masters of War: History’s Greatest Strategic Thinkers” taught by Andrew R. Wilson, a professor at the U.S. Naval War College. In his concluding lecture Professor Wilson recommended reading McPherson’s book to learn about the ideal way that strategy is developed and implemented between civilian leadership and the military. Please allow me to second the professor’s recommendation since you could not do better than this excellent book by McPherson, who of course is a best selling historian of the Civil War. McPherson, who is also a Pulitzer Prize winning author, is probably unequalled in using words to paint the big picture, connecting the dots as well

as anyone living today.

Often as we read various books about the Civil War it can be difficult to put people and events into meaningful contexts. One good example is that of the comings and goings of Ambrose Burnside, a military general, who seems to appear inexplicably in any number of circumstances during the course of the Civil War. Given his apparent inaptitude at Antietam how does he later deserve promotion to command of the Union Army of the Potomac? And how does he end up with an independent command at Knoxville in the autumn of 1863?

And then there is the case of Benjamin Butler, a political general, who is distinguished by a decidedly mixed record in a variety of situations, including two tours at Fort Monroe. Were these transfers promotions or demotions? Given some of his failures, why was he able to stay in important commands for almost the entire length of the war?

And what about U.S. Grant, who had difficulty even finding someone who could sponsor Grant's return to active duty in the army, yet steadily climbed through commands with increasing responsibility until he was appointed as General in Chief of the entire Union Army?

Although McPherson provides clear illumination about the career movements of these and several other generals, this is not a book with much biographical material. Nor for that matter does it provide much detail about specific battles (although McPherson is quite capable to describe battlefield tactics; see for instance his great book, "Crossroads of Freedom," which brilliantly chronicles the critical battle at Antietam.

Instead it is a book about national purpose and strategy, especially as envisioned and implemented by Lincoln who came to office with scant military background or experience. McPherson makes clear that Lincoln made some early mistakes but soon educated himself about military history and strategy; well before his generals caught on to the concept, Lincoln realized the war would not be won by capturing the enemy's capital – as had been the European tradition -- but would be won only by a full-scale effort to destroy the enemy's will to pursue the conflict any further. As a specific example, this meant that capturing Richmond was not the objective; instead capturing and destroying Lee's army was, or should have always been, the objective, something that McClellan, for instance, for all his military credentials never understood.

The reader of this book will learn of Lincoln's frustration with generals who did not, or were unable to, share Lincoln's vision of how the war should be conducted. And although Lincoln may have been the most hands-on commander in chief of our nation's history, he still had enough sense to know that the military Union effort had to be commanded only by generals. The trick was to find the right generals who understood Lincoln's philosophies and policies, and were willing to subordinate their own notions and/or egos to accept and comply with Lincoln's mandate.

With easy-to-follow, straightforward prose McPherson guides us through the almost constant shuffling of generals, some reassigned to lesser positions, some assigned to outposts away from the Civil War, and some simply released from further duty and military responsibilities. Eventually Lincoln assembles his team of generals, Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, and

Thomas, who not only understood the grand strategy but moreover had the competence and willpower to get the job done for Lincoln, and by extension, for the nation.

This book of 270 pages, plus another 13 pages of outstanding photographs, is an excellent choice for any reader at any level, whether focusing upon the Civil War as armed conflict or upon Lincoln as one of our greatest presidents. McPherson scores yet another hit, and we who want to know more about such matters are all the better for it. And, as an extra bonus, Lincoln's trials and tribulations as Commander in Chief help to put current events into clear context, a perspective that is too often muddled by the endless chatter from too many talking heads on cable news channels, most of whom wouldn't know the difference between a hand grenade and a baked potato.

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