

Book review by Walter L. Williams. In *Ohio History*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (Winter, 1979), pp. 97-99.

Lincoln and the Indians: Civil War Policy and Politics. By David A. Nichols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978. vii + 223p.; notes, bibliography, index. \$16.00.)

This book challenges the view that Indian issues were marginal to government policymakers of 1861-65. David A. Nichols focuses on Lincoln and his subordinates, rather than on Indians, but he does not take a one-sided approach from Lincoln's perspective. Conversely, Nichols presents a critical interpretation of Lincoln's handling of Indian issues. Though Lincoln was somewhat more humane toward Indians than many Americans, he administered policies which resulted in extreme suffering among various tribes.

Probably the best part of the book is Nichols' excellent description of the "Indian System," "which was supposedly to aid Indians, but in fact was more of a boondoggle for ambitious whites. The large amount of money in Indian appropriations was a basis for personal gain by patronage office holders and by frontier whites claiming damages by Indians. This money was paid from funds promised to Indians in their treaties, without investigation by the government or without the consent of the Indians. The other part of this system involved private contractors and traders who often used inflated prices and corrupt bookkeeping practices to fleece Indians out of payment for their lands. With kickbacks to the local government agent, it was simple to amass huge profits at the expense of the natives. Lincoln's initial action in Indian affairs was to use the appointments as political spoils rewards, and he took no action to curtail corruption.

The first crisis relating to Native Americans was with the Indian Territory, and Nichols concludes that Lincoln mishandled that problem at every stage. In violation of treaties guaranteeing protection to the Five Civilized Tribes, the president withdrew U.S. troops and left the Indians at the mercy of Confederates. Loyal Indians fled to Kansas, where many died of starvation and exposure because of the indecisive administration response.

The next crisis occurred with the Santee Sioux in Minnesota. Despite being informed of excessive corruption in that agency, Lincoln did nothing to make changes. By August 1862 the Santee were starving, and one of the biggest Indian wars of the century resulted. Nichols argues that Lincoln's move to enlist black troops in the Union army was partly due to the Santee outbreak. Rumors circulated that a coordinated Indian war was developing along the entire frontier

in a conspiracy with the Confederacy to destroy the Union. Although the President resisted execution plans for most of the captured Santee men, he subsequently approved of forced removal of the Santee and the peaceful Winnebago Indians from their Minnesota homelands.

The Santee war caused Lincoln to become interested in reforming the Indian Office in late 1862. Yet he never committed himself to changing the spoils system, and his idea of reform was to "civilize" Indians by making them wards of the government. By 1863 the President had abandoned his flirtation with reform, and left Indian policy to subordinates who emphasized removal and forced acculturation. Lincoln gave highest priority to western expansion, and he never faced the fact that this development would be harmful to Native Americans. Like the majority of Americans, Lincoln believed that "civilization" was inevitably destined to wipe out "savagism." Nichols argues that Lincoln's attraction to Indian removal was similar to his interest in colonization for black Americans; that is, get rid of racial problems without solving them.

While Nichols presents a balanced interpretation in explaining presidential attitudes, perhaps he places too much emphasis on Lincoln. The President held typical reactions toward Indians: to treat them "humanely," but only in the context of taking their lands. The book would have been stronger if it had analyzed the federal government as a whole. Considerable data is presented on individual Congressmen, yet there is no systematic analysis of Congressional voting clusters or debates. Nichols presents too much detail on power games and personality conflicts between leaders (especially in Chapter 3), while Indian reactions are relatively ignored. He asserts that Indians suffered greatly, but there is not enough evidence to demonstrate the actual results of these governmental policies. Nichols has a distressing habit of re-using quotes in different chapters, but otherwise his writing style is clear. His analysis of Lincoln's attitudes is convincing, and he makes a needed contribution to Civil War and Indian history.

Walter L. Williams

University of Cincinnati