

Regional

Civil War, Lincoln engage scholars and public

No event in the history of the United States has been studied as much as has the Civil War. And no political figure has been written about as much as Abraham Lincoln. Yet, it seems that we keep discovering new facts and debating new opinions about these subjects.

We asked some scholars about the latest interpretations of these two historical icons. They were: Eric Alexander, assistant professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and an expert on the Civil War and Reconstruction; Jason Stacy, associate professor in the department of historical studies at SIUE who is an expert on the antebellum United States and Walt Whitman; Mark Neels, a doctoral candidate of the SIUE-SIUC program, who is writing a study of the relationship between Lincoln's Cabinet and the conservative faction of the Republican Party during the Civil War; and Stephen Hansen, professor emeritus in the department of historical studies at SIUE, who is an expert on Lincoln and the Civil War. When asked why these topics still fascinate so many people, Hansen had an explanation.

"I think the Civil War holds so much fascination because it really touches so many questions that are basic to our democracy, about the meaning of freedom, the relationship of the states to the federal government, how people feel about themselves and our nation, and our aspirations for what we want our nation to be," he said. "The Civil War brings all those questions to the surface in a very profound and dramatic way." Lately there has been some discussion on whether or not the American Civil War could have been prevented. Stacy said that he has doubts about that.

"This was a conflict that was a long time coming," he explained. "Up until the election of 1860, and even after the election of Lincoln, I think there were some people who thought it could still be prevented. Abraham Lincoln in his inaugural address implied that he did not want war and if cooler minds prevailed the war could be prevented. So at least rhetorically, up until the very last moment, many Americans believed the violence could be prevented and I think even those that seceded from the Union hoped that it could be peace-



Picture courtesy of Michael Nathe

From left are: Eric Alexander, Mark Neels, Aldemaro Romero Jr., Jason Stacy and Steve Hansen

ful."

□Another issue that has been discussed recently is the idea that even if many people were against slavery, that did not mean that they believed that whites and blacks were equal.

"And that sentiment remained even after emancipation," said Neels. "After the Emancipation Proclamation was put into effect, there was a Cabinet discussion in which the most conservative of Lincoln's Cabinet members are shying away from full

endorsement because they feared that that meant full citizenship for blacks. Some even vehemently opposed Lincoln recruiting black soldiers into the army. After all, it was never a mandate on Lincoln to do anything about race in the country when he was elected in 1860."

□Another issue now debated is whether Lincoln was really a religious person, despite his continued use of religious phrases in his speeches. For Alexander, the 19th century conception of church membership and our

contemporary ideas of church membership are different.

"A deist is somebody who recognizes the existence of God but does not necessarily ascribe to a certain religion," he explained. "Many of the nation's founders were deists, and I think that is a good way of describing Lincoln. If you read his writings over the course of the war, by the end of the war he really begins to view this in mass spiritual terms. He constantly used this language both publicly and privately about God and God's

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

relationship with the war, and the impact of all the death. So I think there are two different sides to this. I think he does become more spiritual personally, and I also think as a politician. I always tell my students, when you think about Lincoln as a politician he was a master at using political rhetoric and especially religious rhetoric." And if there is one thing all historians agree upon about Lincoln, it is his mastery at politics.

"A couple of years ago I took a trip to the battlefield of Antietam in Maryland," said Neels. "As I was standing by the sunken bloody road ruminating on the Civil War, a park guide approached me. He was a veteran of the Vietnam War, and he asked me what I was doing. I told him I was a grad student working on Abe Lincoln and he said, 'Oh really, what do you think of Mr. Lincoln?' My answer was to never underestimate him. He projected this image of 'Honest Abe,' the backwoods yokel from the prairies of Illinois, but the man was brilliant. Just think of all the accomplishments he made as president." Alexander agreed.

"In August of 1862 Lincoln writes a letter published in the New York Tribune, one of the largest newspapers of the day. There he talked about whether or not the war was about emancipation. Lincoln wrote lines like, 'If I could save the Union by freeing all the slaves, I would. If I could save the Union by freeing some of the slaves, I would. If I could save the Union by freeing none of the slaves, I would.' He was making a point to the public that this war is about saving the Union," Alexander explained. "Yet as he writes that letter, at the very same moment in the drawer of his desk there is a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation."

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