

The Indian Policy of Abraham Lincoln

W. Dale Mason

As James M. McPherson notes in his recent *Tried By Fire: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*, “Abraham Lincoln was the only president in American history whose entire administration was bounded by war.” (McPherson 2008) During his four years as president Lincoln was preoccupied with the Civil War but several events occurred that had lasting impact on Indian policy and Indian people. As David A. Nichols notes, “For the most part, the president left Indian matters to the Indian office,” the precursor of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.”(Nichols 1999) An indication of the level of Lincoln’s involvement in Indian affairs is his brief mentions of Indians in each of his four Annual Messages to Congress.

Second only to winning the Civil War and establishing a just post war reconstruction, Lincoln’s highest policy priority was settling the west. The Homestead Act and facilitating the construction of the transcontinental railroad were two means designed to accomplish this end. Neither were concerned with the well being of Indians except to the extent that if Indians were in the way they had to be moved by any means necessary. Nichols writes,

The combination of civilization on the march, sanctioned by God buttressed by white supremacy, and personified in homestead, gold mines, and railroads was too powerful for the Indian. In the white men’s mind he was the opposite - a static, uncivilized impediment to the progress of civilization. (Nichols 1999)

In other words, Indians were an obstacle to manifest destiny in the form of Christianity, mineral extraction, farming, and the transcontinental railroad.

Most presidents have had little knowledge and even less experience with American Indians. Abraham Lincoln was no exception. As Stephen Oates notes, Lincoln shared the paternalistic view of Indians that most Americans held. This was reflected in both his official policy and his interpersonal relations with individual Indians. His grandfather Abraham Lincoln was killed by an Indian in Kentucky, probably a Shawnee, in 1786 near what is now Louisville (White 2009). Prior to his presidency Lincoln had only limited contact with Indians. Most of it took place in the Black Hawk War. Royal Clary, who served with Lincoln in the war, related to Lincoln’s former law partner William H. Herndon an incident that took place during that conflict.

An Indian came into Camp..and our boys thought that he was a spy - sprang to our feet - was going to shoot the man - he had a line or Certificate from Cass.” Lincoln jumped between our men & Indian and said we must not shed his blood - that it must not be our Skirts - some one thought Lincoln was a coward because he was not savage: he said if any one doubts my courage Let him try it.(Wilson 1998)

Lincoln's service in that war lasted three months and was unremarkable. When he was in the House of Representatives in 1848 Lincoln related his limited experience in that conflict by comparing it to that of General Lewis Cass.

If he saw any live, fighting Indians, it was more than I did but I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes. (Roy 1953)

Lincoln's views were reflected in his first debate with Stephen Douglas in 1858 when he referred to them as "inferior. However, he did not go as far as Douglas who, in two debates, called Indians "savage (Roy 1953). In his Third Annual Message to Congress Lincoln spoke of Indians as "wards of the Government" and mentioned civilization and Christian faith as necessary in treating Indians (Richardson 1896).

During his years in the White House Lincoln greeted many Indians personally. In these encounters his paternalism and lack of knowledge were apparent. For example, in a greeting that could be from a Lone Ranger and Tonto episode, Lincoln asked a group of Indians, "where live now? When go back to Iowa." (Viola 1995) David Herbert Donald has speculated that Lincoln enjoyed meeting with Indians dressed in their regalia because "they were exotic and because he rather enjoyed playing the role of their Great Father, addressing them in pidgin English and explaining that 'this world is a great round ball'" (Donald 1995).

In actions that had direct impact on Indians, Lincoln signed the Homestead Act in May 1862 and worked for the transcontinental railroad. The Homestead Act opened the west to accelerated white settlement on lands taken from Indians through treaties. In his Third Annual Message to Congress Lincoln announced that over 1.4 million acres had been opened through homesteading. The following year Lincoln informed Congress that another 1.5 million acres had been homesteaded (Richardson 1896). Treaties with tribes also led to the loss of Indian land for the construction of railroads. Historian David Howard Bain has observed about Lincoln and the railroad,

He was really the godfather of the Pacific railroad. If he had not thought of [the transcontinental railroad] as being a national priority, it wouldn't have been done during the war. (Bain 2008)

During his four years in office Lincoln routinely signed treaties with the western tribes and all provided for the cession of Indian land.

Two of the most important events in Indian affairs during the early 1860s were the Santee Sioux uprising in Minnesota and the removal and confinement of Navajos and Mescaleros on a reservation in New Mexico Territory. The conflict with the Sioux is the one aspect of Indian relations that is most well known. In the summer of 1862 the Santee Sioux in Minnesota rebelled against their treatment by the government and killed several hundred white settlers. The starving Santees charged that the government was violating treaty guarantees when it failed to provide annuities and rations, especially food. After an initial attack on five white hunters by the Sioux, a full scale war broke out. When the US Army finally put the rebellion down two months later, the Indians were put on trial before a military tribunal. Three hundred and three warriors were sentenced to death.

Lincoln told Congress in his Second Annual Message that the Sioux uprising had been "wholly unexpected." (Richardson 1896) He asked General Henry Pope, Commander of the Department of the

Northwest, for a “full and complete record” of those convicted (Roy 1953). In a special report to the Senate on December 11, the president told the legislators how he reached his decision on pardons. He said that among the documents he reviewed was a “joint letter from one of the Senators and two of the Representatives from Minnesota, which contains some statements of fact not found in the record of the trials.” (Richardson 1896) Lincoln went on to tell the Senate that being anxious not to “act with so much clemency as to encourage another outbreak on the one hand, nor with so much severity as to be real cruelty on the other, I caused a careful examination of the records of the trials to be made, in view of first ordering the execution of such as had been proved guilty of violating females.” (Richardson 1896) He found only two to have been guilty of rape. He then distinguished the rest of the convicted between those who engaged in massacres and those who engaged in battles.

Lincoln may have been influenced in his final decision on pardons by Episcopal Bishop Henry Whipple who had asked General Henry W. Halleck to arrange a meeting for him with the president. It was after that meeting that Lincoln issued his pardons.

Notwithstanding the popular outcry for the Indians’ executions, Lincoln told Minnesota Governor Alexander Ramsey that “I could not hang men for votes.” (Cox 2005) After reviewing the cases of all 303 men who were sentenced to death Lincoln sent Colonel Henry Sibley the final list of the 39 Indians to be hanged on December 6, 1862. One man, Tatemina, received a reprieve. The executions of the remaining thirty-eight warriors took place on the day after Christmas in 1862. (Roy 1953) As Cox writes in *Lincoln and the Sioux Uprising*, “Lincoln’s intervention was not the result of a complex political calculation but rather a simple expression of his character.” (Cox 2005)

Unlike his involvement in the Santee Sioux outbreak, Lincoln took no direct part in the events in New Mexico Territory involving Navajos and Mescalero Apaches. As Nichols notes “General James Carleton was given a relatively free hand when he went to New Mexico in the spring of 1862 to deal with the Indian situation.” (Nichols 1999) In July 1863, ostensibly to end Navajo raids on white settlers, Carleton ordered Kit Carson to force them to move to a reservation. Carleton’s plan, according to Prucha, was “to subdue the hostile elements of the tribes and move all to some distant reservation.” (Prucha 1984) Carson burned the Navajos out of Canyon de Chelly. The rounding up of Navajos concluded with a forced march to Fort Sumner in eastern New Mexico Territory. Known as the Long Walk, several groups of Navajos walked 300 miles to be confined at Bosque Redondo, where up to 9,000 Navajos and several hundred Mescalero Apaches remained at Fort Sumner until 1868, three years after Lincoln’s death. While not directly involved in the New Mexico Indian matters, placing Indians on a reservation was consistent with Lincoln’s overall policy.

While leaving events in New Mexico Territory to the commanders in the field, Lincoln dealt directly with issues concerning the Five Civilized Tribes (Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, Creek and Cherokee) in Indian Territory, especially the Cherokees. The Confederacy deliberately sought to win those five tribes to its side. On the other hand, as Viola notes, “The Lincoln administration evidently at first did not regard the five tribes as a serious military threat and so did little to counter the confederate efforts until too late.” (Viola 1995) Prucha writes that after Union troops were removed from Indian Territory, “The Indians were left at the mercy of the Confederacy, and southern officials were quick to capitalize

on all the points in their favor.” (Prucha 1984) The Confederacy acted much more aggressively than the Union, engaging in treaty making and recruiting tribal members to its military.

Lincoln, however, did have direct contact with Cherokee Principle Chief John Ross who Viola calls the “foremost Cherokee delegate in the Civil War era.” (Viola 1995) Ross stayed in Washington, D.C. from October 1862 to July 1865. Lincoln first met with Ross on September 12, 1862. (Moulton 1978) The Cherokee Principle Chief also wrote a steady stream of letters to the President. Lincoln, in his Second Annual Message told Congress that “The chief of the Cherokees has visited this city for the purpose of restoring the former relations of the tribe with the United States. He alleges that they were constrained by superior force to enter into treaties with the insurgents, and that the United States neglected to furnish the protection which their treaty stipulations required.” (Richardson 1896) Ross had made that point to Lincoln in a September 1862 letter. Ross wrote that the Cherokees were “forced for the preservation of their country and their existence to negotiate a treaty with the Confederate States. What the Cherokee People now desire is ample military protection...and a recognition by the Government of the obligations of existing treaties.” (Roy 1953) Lincoln responded that he hadn’t been able to “determine the exact treaty relations between the United States and the Cherokee Nation. Neither have I been able to investigate and determine the exact state of facts claimed by you as constituting a failure of treaty obligations on our part, excusing the Cherokee Nation for making a treaty with a portion of the people of the United States in open rebellion against the government thereof.” (Roy 1953) He said that he would “cause” an investigation of the matter. It is clear from other correspondence that issues involving Cherokees were brought to Lincoln’s attention. In a January 1863 letter to Ross, Huckleberry Downing and Tahlahlah told Ross that Justin Harlan, Agent for the Cherokees, “says that the President thinks that the Indians have been badly treated in time passed, & sent him (the Agent) with special instructions to see that every thing was done for them which can be.” (Moulton 1985) Ross himself wrote several Cherokees that same month that “at our interviews with the President & other officers of the Govt. we represented the deplorable condition in which our people are placed, in consequence of the failure on the part of the U. States Govt. to afford them protection, agreeably to their Treaty obligations with the Cherokee Nation.” (Moulton 1985)

In January 1864, the Cherokee National Council sent a petition to the President drawing his attention to the condition of the Cherokee Nation and what, in a separate letter to Lincoln, Ross called “grievances, and the evils which have come upon them.” (Moulton 1985) Further, the Principle Chief wrote, “we beg leave very respectfully to ask the favorable attention of your Excellency to the several points embraced in the prayer of the petitions.” (Moulton 1985) Lincoln and the government did nothing to ameliorate the conditions Cherokees faced.

Another tragedy in the history of white expansion into Indian land that occurred during Lincoln’s years in the White House was the Sand Creek Massacre in southeastern Colorado in November 1864. During an attack by the Third Colorado Regiment volunteers under Colonel John M. Chivington over 400 Cheyenne and Arapaho were murdered. There is no recorded reaction by President Lincoln to the massacre, although it led to the resignation of Commissioner of Indian Affairs William P. Dole after Lincoln’s death.

Lincoln engaged in a unique relationship with the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico Territory. In 1863, following the examples of a Spanish King in 1620 and the Mexican government in 1821, Lincoln presented Pueblo leaders silver headed ebony canes engraved with his name. New Mexico's Indian Superintendent Michael Steck had told Lincoln that the Pueblo leaders were anxious to have new canes from the United States. (Simmons 2009) The canes were engraved with the following words: ³⁶

A. Lincoln
 Prst. U.S.A.
 (Name of the pueblo)
 1863

These canes recognized the sovereign status of the pueblos. The canes are still revered in the pueblos today and are used to symbolically legitimize the authority of the pueblo governments.

There was no great difference between Lincoln and Congress in the implementation of Indian policy. This is clear in his Third Annual Message delivered in December 1863. In the same Message Lincoln reveals some of his fundamental goals for Indians. He informed Congress that

The measures provided at your last session for the removal of certain Indian tribes have been carried into effect. Sundry treaties have been negotiated, which will in due time be submitted for the constitutional action in the Senate. They contain stipulations for extinguishing the possessory rights of the Indians to large and valuable tracts of lands. It is hoped that the effect of these treaties will result in the establishment of permanent friendly relations with such of these tribes as have been brought into frequent and bloody collision with our outlying settlements and emigrants. Sound policy and our imperative duty to these wards of the Government demand our anxious and constant attention to their material well-being, to their progress in the arts of civilization, and, above all to that moral training which under the blessing of Divine Providence will confer upon them the elevated and sanctifying influences, the hopes and consolations, of the Christian faith.
 (Richardson 1896)

The last mention of Indians in Lincoln's public papers occurred in a March 17, 1865 Proclamation. Noting that "reliable information has been received that hostile Indians within the United States have been furnished with arms and munitions of war by persons dwelling in conterminous foreign territory and are thereby enabled to prosecute their savage warfare upon the exposed and sparse settlements of the frontier," Lincoln ordered that the individuals engaged in that activity "be arrested and tried by court-martial at the nearest military post." (Richardson 1896) Finally, Lincoln faced the political and bureaucratic muddle of the Indian Office. The highest levels of those responsible for Indian policy were the Secretary of Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Lincoln had two Interior Secretaries during his time in office. The first was Caleb B. Smith, a Pennsylvanian who had seconded Lincoln's nomination for president at the 1860 Republican convention. Smith resigned at the end of 1862 due to

ill health and was succeeded by John P. Usher of Indiana in January 1863. Lincoln named a fellow citizen of Illinois, William P. Dole, as Commission of Indian Affairs.

Below these positions were the highly political and lucrative positions of Superintendents and reservation agents. These were central to what David A. Nichols calls the “Indian system.” The corruption of the system was open and openly acknowledged. “No president,” writes Nichols, “including Lincoln, could escape the demands of his victorious followers for their share of the rewards.” (Nichols 1999) As was common at the time Lincoln responded to the pressures for patronage by relying on the Interior Secretaries, Dole and members of Congress. For example, early in his administration he refused to name the agent for Oregon tribes that Dole recommended because of objections from the state’s two Senators (Roy 1953). Nichols notes that

Because of his preoccupation with the War for the Union, Lincoln knowingly allowed the Indian System to function normally until he died. (Nichols 1999)

President Lincoln broke no new ground in Indian policy or Indian-white relations. He continued the policy of all previous presidents of viewing Indians as wards of the government while at the same time negotiating with them as sovereigns. He made no revolutionary change in Indian-white relations as he did in black-white relations with the Emancipation Proclamation. While he called for reform of the Indian system in his last two Annual Messages to Congress, he provided no specifics and he continued the policy, already in place, of confining Indians to reservations after negotiating treaties. The greatest impact of federal policies on Indians during the Lincoln administration were policies that were not directed at Indians themselves. As discussed, these policies included homesteading and railroad construction. These along with Christianizing and civilizing Indians led to an assimilationist policy and an ever greater loss of Indian land. Finally, any evaluation of Lincoln’s Indian policy must be seen in the context of his larger goals of winning the Civil War and settling the west.

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