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SEWARD: LINCOLN'S INDISPENSABLE MAN

*** 1/2 out of ****

BY **WALTER STAHR**

\$32.50; Simon & Schuster

Anyone who savored author Doris Kearns Goodwin's best-selling book *Team Of Rivals* will surely be poised to learn more about William Henry Seward, perhaps the key member of Lincoln's cabinet. Writer [Walter Stahr](#) (*John Jay: Founding Father*) gives Seward his due in this intelligent and illuminating biography of one of the most important political figures of the 19th century and perhaps the only man of his era who could convincingly

claim to be even more polarizing and hated than Abraham Lincoln.

All the rebels in the south who wanted to split the nation in two and destroy the United States forever certainly hated Lincoln. But they hated the (in)famous Seward just as much and for far longer. Their animosity was joined in heartily by a good chunk of Northerners as well, both the conservatives who thought he was too radical and the radicals who thought he was too appeasing. It's not surprising Seward lost the Republican nomination to Lincoln; it's only surprising how very close he came to winning.

The book begins with a flash forward to that terrible night when John Wilkes Booth came damnably close in his plan to assassinate both President Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State Seward.

Then we step back to his childhood and follow Seward chronologically throughout his life -- the son of a prominent but stern local man who went from a small town in upstate New York on to a career as a teacher and then lawyer and public servant.

Seward is a practical man and right on so many issues we take for granted today that it's easy to admire him. Many of his stances ultimately helped Seward politically at certain stages of his career as both governor of New York and Senator. But they were not originally popular and almost certainly laid the groundwork for blocking his most cherished goal of the presidency.

Seward spoke up for religious freedom, especially for Catholics back in an era when Catholics were despised and distrusted by many. Seward was an ardent defender of immigrants. Throughout our nation's history, each wave of immigrants has been demonized and feared (often loudest by the wave of immigrants that preceded it). But Seward consistently recognized immigrants as the lifeblood of the nation.

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He was also smart on supporting both the Catholic school system (a key player in helping many immigrants and minorities get a leg up in this country), the need for a public school system for all and, in a reversal of himself, an ardent supporter of public works programs like the Erie Canal extension. On and on, with issue after issue, Seward proves prescient. But, of course, the issue above all in the 1800s was slavery and the plight of blacks.

As a lawyer, Seward famously played a key role in several trials, though doing so likely meant the end of his political ambitions. Perhaps the most controversial was his defense of William Freeman, a young black man who was released from prison and almost immediately entered a home and slaughtered a family including the husband, the pregnant wife, the wife's elderly mother and their two-year-old daughter. Newspaper accounts blamed the horrific crime in part on Seward's defense of another man named Henry Wyatt, a prisoner in that same prison who stabbed a fellow inmate but whom Seward painted as driven insane by his torture and treatment. Ultimately, Wyatt would be executed and Freeman convicted as well, but Seward would be both burdened and rewarded with a reputation as "a defender of the defenseless."

On slavery, Seward was seen as almost viciously anti-slavery. The truth was that he was a committed abolitionist, but not a radical one. His wife was far more unwavering and extremist though, to be clear, Seward even harbored runaway slaves at one point. (He especially despised the fugitive slave laws that forced northerners who objected morally to slavery to support it legally.) Seward saw slavery as doomed to fail and was willing to stop its spread and patiently wait out its dying, helped along perhaps with government aid to slave owners ready to be compensated for the loss of their "property."

Nonetheless, Seward was seen as the national figurehead for abolition and was despised by the South as a result. Indeed, despite coming tantalizingly close, he lost the nomination to Lincoln primarily because his (relatively more moderate) views were so well known while the less prominent Lincoln hadn't been forced to stake out opinions. If nothing else, reading this book will make a laughingstock of the foolish idea that the Civil War wasn't about slavery. Incident after incident tore the nation apart, from the forming of new territories to the slaughter of innocents in raids to the admission of states to fugitive slave laws to war with Mexico and on and on and on, all of them revolving perilously around the the issue of slavery. Entire political parties were formed on the basis of supporting and opposing it. Seward would prove a consistent and moderating influence on Lincoln throughout the war, an irony utterly lost on the South.

Seward's most important role took place after losing the nomination. He campaigned tirelessly for Lincoln and Stahr makes a convincing case that Seward's contributions were key to Lincoln winning the White House. Once ensconced as Secretary of State, Seward grew from initially thinking he could "guide" Lincoln (i.e. have all the power with Lincoln as a figurehead, a rather grandiose absurdity) to admiring Lincoln tremendously and aiding him immeasurably, down to careful parsing of major speeches. Seward's signal achievement was what didn't happen: through his diligent efforts during crisis after crisis, he soberly and smartly worked to keep foreign powers out of the war and to never officially recognize the Confederate States of America as a sovereign country. If that had happened -- if England or France in particular had sided with the South -- the United States likely would never have triumphed.

This perspective allows Stahr to train a fresh perspective on the Civil War. But Seward's work wasn't done. He endured the frustrating tenure of Johnson, who invariably and frustratingly ignored most of Seward's moderating suggestions. But Seward did manage to expand the nation, primarily through the purchase of Alaska, an act dubbed "Seward's folly" much later (at the time, it was lauded in the press) and ultimately seen as a smart buy.

Garrulous, charming, poorly dressed, prone to flattery, stooping to buy votes and political favor in the manner of the time but not notably corrupt in his dealings, Seward could be tiresomely pleased with himself. But as Stahr's biography so ably demonstrates, he had every reason to be. He wasn't just Lincoln's indispensable man; throughout his career Seward was an indispensable man to the nation, as well.


Here's the trailer to Steven Spielberg's upcoming film *Lincoln*. You can glimpse actor David Strathairn portraying Seward.

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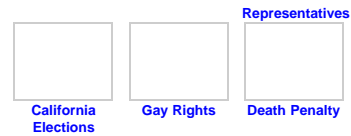


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More and more we seem to yearn for statesmen. Our history books are filled with them, with Secretary Seward among the top of the list of greats.

This is indeed a marvelous book, and much needed. But it also reminds us that we have today a lack of statesmen. Sure, Seward was partisan, but when necessary put nation ahead of party. Today our officials only put party ahead of nation and the people.

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