

## Lincoln's Wartime Mentors

If ever Lincoln needed reliable mentors it was during the first chaotic and frightening weeks of the Civil War. The country was unraveling rapidly during the winter and early spring of 1861, and all eyes were on the White House to see what the newly elected president would do to prevent total national disintegration. Seven states were in open rebellion against the government, and soon four more would join them. Congressmen, Senators, Army officers, and Supreme Court Judges were resigning their positions and heading to their southland homes. *Something* had to be done, and quickly. But what? In short order, Lincoln had to define—for himself and the country—the legal parameters of his authority to quash the rebellion, promulgate a convincing national policy on responding to this unprecedented crisis, and finally devise a military strategy that could effectively carry out his administration's goals. This was a tall order for an Illinois lawyer whose total experience in national government was a single term in Congress—and whose military experience was negligible (Lincoln did serve in the so-called “Black Hawk” War of 1832, but that was essentially a local police action against a band of half-starved Indians who were simply trying to retake their traditional hunting grounds from white settlers. Hardly relevant for a P.O.T.U.S. about to undertake a full-blown modern mechanized war against a powerful enemy.)

Lincoln found it easier to lay out and justify his legal right to put down this giant insurrection than to grapple with the other issues before him. After all, the Constitution—which he swore to “preserve, protect and defend” during his inauguration ceremony—unambiguously states that the executive “shall take care that the Laws be faithfully executed...” Surely the laws *weren't* being carried out in the rebellious states. And Congress—now firmly in the hands of Lincoln's fellow Republicans—clearly had the legal authority to “call forth the Militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel invasions.” On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1861, Congress granted Lincoln all the necessary wartime powers to carry out these provisions. If Lincoln needed any further assurance that he was acting

well within the bounds of his legal and moral authority, he likely found it by reading accounts of Washington's suppression of the Whiskey Rebellion, and by reading Alexander Hamilton's Federalist essays, particularly Numbers 16 and 25. What better mentors in a dark time than the Founding Fathers?

Lincoln found it much harder to find reliable and capable military men to advise him on how to actually destroy the rebels. In the first years of the conflict his officers proved unequal to the task. Generals McClellan, Halleck, Hooker, Meade and Burnside all were unimaginative men, lacking in the necessary aggressive instincts required to take on "Lee's Miserables." As he had done so often throughout his career, Lincoln hoped to find mentors from the past through reading; consequently he immersed himself in books by a number of European military "experts." He borrowed dozens of such works from the Library of Congress dealing with Napoleon's strategies, and other earlier wars. None proved to be much help, however. America's Civil War was unlike those earlier conflicts, and Lincoln was left to thrash out an effective strategy almost on his own. He was repeatedly frustrated and baffled by the fact that none of his West Point trained officers could grasp the enormity of the problems facing the Union army, and it was only when he discovered an unassuming and relatively unknown commander from the western theatre that he found the keys to victory. Ulysses S. Grant, and his fellow westerner William T. Sherman, understood what it would take to win the war, crush the Confederacy, and restore the Union. It wasn't going to be pretty, they told their Commander in Chief, but it was the only way. Lincoln rejoiced, having finally found his military mentors.