

August 2018

Book Review: Amiable Scoundrel: Simon Cameron, Lincoln's Scandalous Secretary of War by Paul Kahan

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Recommended Citation

Talbert, Bart (2018) "Book Review: Amiable Scoundrel: Simon Cameron, Lincoln's Scandalous Secretary of War by Paul Kahan," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 94 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol94/iss2/14>

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Kahan, Paul. *Amiable Scoundrel: Simon Cameron, Lincoln's Scandalous Secretary of War*. Lincoln: Potomac Press, 2016. xxiv + 367 pages. Hardcover, \$55.50.

Paul Kahan, a lecturer at Ohlone College, provides more than a biography of Simon Cameron, Pennsylvania political boss and Lincoln's first Secretary of War. His work also uncovers the political machines and the "spoils system" so prevalent in American politics during much of the nineteenth century. Kahan wants to "get past Cameron's reputation" (p.1) as an unscrupulous political manipulator and put his unprincipled actions "into a larger historical context." (p.4) He also attempts to prove that, in spite of Cameron's own words and the findings of many historians, the Senator had "rather progressive attitudes on race." (p.3) The author draws on Pennsylvania and United States government documents and a wide array of the correspondence between the principle players of the period, including Andrew Jackson, Clay, Polk, Buchanan, and Lincoln. He relies heavily on secondary works like Potter's *The Impending Crisis*, Nevins's *The Emergence of Lincoln*, Sandberg's *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, Meneely's *The War Department*, and especially the Crippin (1942) and Bradley (1966) biographies of Cameron.

Cameron, born in 1799, is portrayed as a good family man, but also someone who "loaned" politicians money in return for special legislation and used his position of public trust to punish anyone who opposed him. The early successes of this newspaperman, banker, and industrialist in the politically-seedy but pivotal state of Pennsylvania made him an important national figure by his early thirties. Originally an anti-abolitionist Democrat, Cameron moved away from Jackson and Van Buren when they, in his opinion, failed to support him against charges of corruption. By the mid-1840s he had jumped to Pennsylvania's Whigs and Nativists and was rewarded with a seat in the United States Senate. Pennsylvania's Democrats, who viewed him as a traitor, ultimately forced Cameron out of the Senate in 1849, but the political upheaval of 1850s saw him return to that body in 1856 as the moderate head of Pennsylvania's new Republican Party. Kahan details how this return was marred by renewed accusations of bribery for votes, which combined with earlier controversies, left "a lasting odor of corruption that became impossible for him to shake"(p.118). This odor probably prevented him from becoming Lincoln's running mate and almost cost him the cabinet position that was his promised reward for delivering Pennsylvania in 1860.

Kahan finds that Cameron was "far from effective" as Lincoln's Secretary of War; he was a "back-slapping, glad-handing politician," who could manipulate congressmen, but he was no executive or administrator, was disorganized, and would neglect important military matters to concentrate on patronage issues. The author, however, tries to excuse Cameron's actions by comparing them to others, including Lincoln's, which were also corrupt. He then concludes that Cameron as Secretary of War "laid the groundwork for later military success and pushed the administration to make the destruction of slavery a war aim, both of which contributed to the government's ultimate victory"(p.155). The evidence presented here, however, shows that Radical Republicans along with generals like Fremont and Butler led the attack on Lincoln. Cameron, it seems, was just one of the first "anti-abolitionist" moderates to sense that the political wind was shifting due to the North's continued military failures and jump ship. The author demonstrates that Cameron and the vast majority of Pennsylvanians cared little for the personal predicament of African Americans, and what care there was about slavery centered around how the institution, or the spread of it, would affect their pocketbooks through increasing the number of states opposing high tariffs.

The study details how Lincoln, “who was trying to avoid making the war about slavery,” came under increasingly effective pressure by Radicals to replace the incompetent Cameron with someone more in line with their abolitionist views (p.188). This, Kahan maintains, led Lincoln and Cameron to take more strident steps to end the rebellion, such as suspending the writ of habeas corpus and arresting Maryland’s legislature to prevent it from passing an ordinance of secession. This last attack led Cameron to break with Lincoln and openly advocate the freeing and arming of the South’s slaves (p.192-194). Kahan devotes much space early in the work proving that Cameron cared little for Blacks or their bondage where it existed, but then suddenly his subject exhibits a “personal aversion to slavery” (p.82, 125, 126, 206).

Kahan disagrees with historians who see Cameron’s sudden change on slavery as toadying up to Radical Republicans in Congress in an attempt to prevent his removal by Lincoln. The author finds, however, that, ironically, his ouster made him more popular with Lincoln’s abolitionist enemies, and allowed him to reenter the Senate (1866) as a Radical Republican by his trusted tactic of purchasing votes in the Union’s most corrupt legislature. Cameron’s career finally came to an end in 1877 when his use of gross patronage ran afoul of President Hayes’s civil service reform movement. Overall, this is a well-researched study that nevertheless seems to reach too far at major points.

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