Lincolns Darkest Year: The War in 1862 by William Marvel

A revealing look at Lincoln’s actions in 1862— and a nation in the midst of war

Lincoln’s Darkest Year offers a gripping narrative of 1862, a pivotal year in our country’s Civil War. Marvel continues the story he began in Mr. Lincoln Goes to War, which focused on Lincoln’s first year in office, again relying on recently unearthed primary sources and little-known accounts to paint a picture of this critical year in newfound detail. Lincoln’s Darkest Year highlights not just the actions but also the deeper motivations of the major figures, including General Ulysses S. Grant, Jefferson Davis, George McClellan, Stonewall Jackson, and, most notably, Lincoln himself. As the action darts from the White House to the battlefields and back, Marvel sheds new light on the hardships endured by everyday citizens and the substantial and sustained public opposition to the war.

The second in a planned four-part series on the Civil War, and the first major reexamination in over fifty years, Lincoln’s Darkest Year stands apart from traditional assumptions and narratives about the early years of the Civil War. Marvel combines fluid prose and scholarship with the skills of an investigative historical detective to unearth the true story of our nation’s greatest crisis.

Features:
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My Personal Review:
1862 is one of the most interesting years in American history and a critical year in the Civil War. In that year, the war changes from a great adventure...
that will end soon to a bloody war with no end in sight. In that year, the
war's objective changes from restoring the union of states to a fundamental
change in society. Americans, North and South, undergo a series of
radical changes in response to current events and to long-term differences.
William Marvel brings this complex and difficult year to life. He gives us a
not always comfortable look at how Lincoln changes the war's direction
and how the North reacted to that change. The South is not a major player
in this book. Their commitment to victory and willingness to sacrifice came
earlier than the North. They are cast in a reactionary role throughout the
book. This does not detract from the story. The principle players are
Lincoln, the Abolitionists, the Democrats and the people.
This is not a comfortable read. Lincoln is not at his best. He is learning
the duties of President and Commander in Chief. While his determination
to reunite the nation is unshakable, how reunification will take place is
questionable. Surrounded by pressure groups, Lincoln is pulled in many
directions. The Radical Republicans, in control of Congress, have
determined to purge the army of "enemies". Men having the proper values
and view of America's future will replace those purged. The Democrats
are split between supporting the war and doubting that winning is possible
or desirable. The Radicals and Abolitionists wish to end slavery. The War
Democrats wish to reunite the nation and the Peace Democrats want the
war to end. The major portion of the book is devoted to the politics of this
battle. The critical off-year elections and the administrations reactions to
public comment is the main story. Debate and dissent become crimes.
The Radicals and the Administration assume more power and compel the
states to support the war. This is not a standard Civil War history of 1862.
It is a very complex political story of a government doing what is required
to win.
Military history is not ignored. While not the major story, battlefield event
drive much of the politics. Shiloh is the first major bloodletting of the war.
We forget this with all the big battles yet to be fought. For the people,
Shiloh is a shock. No battle had ever come close to the number of
casualties incurred. The Seven Days, Second Bull Run and Antietam in
the coming months empty the armies. Requirement and conscription
create another political crisis. Military and political intermix forming one
seamless story.
I said this is not a comfortable read, 1862 is a very hard year. A multitude
of bad decisions, missed opportunities and miscalculations, result in
causalities and may have prolonged the war. Lincoln makes a number of
very bad military decisions during this time. Stanton and Halleck bear
some of the responsibility but they are Lincoln's decisions. This book
shows Lincoln in a different light. He is not the Great Emancipator or
Savior of the Union. He is a fearful politician reacting to pressure in an
unfamiliar environment. This will not be popular but it is historical and
realistic.
The Radical Republicans are determined to punish the enemy and reward
supporters. They purge the government and army filling spots with
supporters. Unqualified political generals, incompetents and fools that
they approve of are promoted. McClellan is an early entry on their hit list
and suffers for it. Freemont, Pope and Banks all have warm support in Washington. This is political warfare with no quarter.
The battle to change the war from Union to Abolition of slavery is a major story. Public reaction in and out of the army is not favorable. This story will upset a number of readers too.
I disagree with the author's attack on Grant for not entrenching at Shiloh. It is one of the harshest and one-sided attacks I have seen. I feel it is very unfair ignoring the standards in entrenchments in early 1862 and the Drill vs. Dig requirements of his army. Other than that, I feel his views on Lincoln, Stanton, Halleck and McClellan are fair and correct for 1862.
William Marvel has won multiple prizes for his books. I think he is one of the best Civil War authors we have. His scholarship is unquestioned and he has excellent writing skills. Lincoln's Darkest Year is not a comfortable read. It is challenging and thought provoking read. This is close to a must read and a five star book.

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