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Seward. Review of Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable
Man, by Walter Stahr

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THE REPUBLICAN STATESMAN: WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD

Scott Gac

Walter Stahr. *Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012. viii + 703 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$32.50 (cloth); \$19.99 (paper).

In 1860, most Americans agreed that the West, with its abundant lands and resources, would secure prosperity and freedom for years to come. But whether wage labor or slavery, industry or agriculture, or some amalgam in between was to embody the new, modern America remained unresolved. At the heart of the Republican Party's imperial design stood Chicago. The city, fueled by a decade of development in rails and commerce, epitomized a nation of dramatic growth, wage labor, and interconnected markets. A small town of about 30,000 in 1850, Chicago more than tripled its population in the next ten years. With a horsecar line, public sewer system, and university, the city had begun to attract women and men, such as George Pullman, who looked to capitalize on the region's growth. They filled the gas-lit western metropolis with an infectious can-do spirit, one that the Republican Party no doubt hoped to emulate when it chose Chicago for a national convention.

As Republican delegates and supporters arrived in May 1860, they gathered in the Wigwam, a building on Market and Lake Streets (today the southeast corner of Lake and Wacker). The party backed free homesteads, tariff reform, and internal improvements—they were adamant that slavery remain confined to states where it already existed. Such policies, they believed, were the foundation of American progress. A newcomer to the political scene, the Republican Party was enlivened by recent victories—their strength was proven in Ohio, where Salmon P. Chase won the governorship in 1856, and Pennsylvania, where Simon Cameron won a seat in the U.S. Senate in 1857. Unexpected trouble in the Democratic Party, the one true national political body, likewise boosted Republican aspirations. In April, the Democrats, amid debate over western expansion and the sanctity of slavery, failed to select a presidential candidate. "The work before the Republicans," announced New York's *Jamestown Journal* on May 11, "is, therefore, to rout a disabled enemy."

A proven party stalwart, William Henry Seward was the most prestigious option among a talented pool of Republican presidential possibilities. When the festivities opened on May 16, few believed that Seward's competition, the likes of Edward Bates, Salmon P. Chase, and Abraham Lincoln, could mount a successful counterattack. Two days later, such beliefs were proven wrong. "The eloquent, self-assured Seward, a U.S. senator from New York, was widely thought to have the nomination wrapped up," recorded the *Chicago Tribune* on May 18, but after the third ballot and "a moment of stunned silence, the flimsy Wigwam began to shake with the stomping of feet and the shouting of the Lincoln backers who packed the hall and blocked the streets."

Lincoln's unforeseen nomination pushed one of America's preeminent statesmen toward historical obscurity. In the comprehensive biography *Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man*, Walter Stahr pushes back. Seward lost the nomination, Stahr explains, thanks to the convention's location (Lincoln's home state), the superior machinations of David Davis (Lincoln's campaign manager), the vilification of Seward by his enemies, and Seward's well-known, strongly stated stance against slavery (pp. 189–92). Beyond the Republican presidential spotlight, this book unveils the Seward who helped to enact a national program where American freedom and American expansion, economic and geographic, were inextricably linked. Seward, Stahr reminds us, played a "central role in founding the American empire" (p. 547).

Seward brings together the life of a man whose "grand vision" for the United States mapped an "extensive territory" connected by "rails, roads, and telegraphs," a country where a "vigorous free market economy" welcomed immigrants and fortunes (p. 546). Stahr's broad view—constructed from an impressive array of newspapers and a comprehensive search of Seward's writings and correspondence—is the strength of the book. Too often scholars relegate Seward to the shadow of Abraham Lincoln. Stahr's work, despite listing Lincoln in its title, returns to readers the multifaceted politician: the governor who supported measures for public education and refuted Virginia's fugitive-slave extradition requests; the senator who formulated a politically viable attack on slavery; and the tireless secretary of state who worked first to save the union and then to expand it.

Seward is substantial and informative, but the extraordinary overview of Seward's life comes at a cost. Stahr is adamant that Seward was a great American statesman—but by the end of the book, it is not clear what that means. More often we learn what Seward was not—an immediate abolitionist, a warmonger, or a nativist. A question first posed on page 84 thus lingers: "I am a mystery to myself," Seward wrote, "What am I?"

Over the years, historians and filmmakers have fashioned Seward into an array of caricatures. The legendary American historian Frederic Bancroft in 1900 declared Seward complex—"an agitator, a politician, and a statesman,

all in one"—and the nation's finest secretary of state.¹ Allan Nevins' portrait was less complimentary. Convinced that Seward was Thurlow Weed's minion, the eminent Civil War historian called him a "deeply pathetic" presidential pursuer whose determination led to a blind embrace of his manager's corruption.² More recent depictions cover the gamut between Bancroft and Nevins well. Some focus on Seward's privileged upbringing and flamboyant dress; others fashion him a brawler who battled his way to the top; a compromiser who, as president, could have averted the Civil War; or a political reformer whose governorship "earned him the praise of abolitionists."³ Clearly, if the title had not already been assigned, Seward would be the "American Sphinx."

Who was William Henry Seward? The best answer to that question appeared on March 11, 1850, in what Stahr calls "the most important speech of his life" (p. 123). Presented as "Freedom in the New Territories"—but more commonly called by its ideological keystone, "Higher Law"—Seward's three-hour oration situated freedom at the center of the American political tradition. He accomplished this on a point-by-point engagement of the issues at hand in the Compromise of 1850. From the admission of California as a state and slavery in Washington, D.C., to the fugitive slave clause, Seward returned, again and again, to an idea he felt was best expressed in the words of Englishman Edmund Burke: "There is but one law for all—namely, that law which governs all law—the law of our Creator—the law of humanity, justice, equity—the law of nature and of nations."⁴

For Seward's critics, such phrases marked him as a God-fearing fanatic who would follow morals and religion over law and order. The irony, of course, is that Seward accomplished the opposite in his speech. His position was not that of a minister or moralizer, but of a lawyer or logician. He placed the Constitution within a broad legal tradition, where, Seward declared, freedom reigned. Thus he extended a welcome to "California, the youthful queen of the Pacific, in her robes of freedom, gorgeously inlaid with gold," and found slavery "not admitted by the law of nature and of nations."⁵

Central to Seward's stance was an idea that soon developed into the cornerstone of Republican Party ideology. "I deem it established, then, that the Constitution does not recognize property in man, but leaves that question to the law of nature and of nations." The "reason of things" was the guiding principle. "When God created the earth," Seward said, "He gave dominion over it to man—absolute human dominion." The world was thus governed by law, the Constitution, the law of nations, and the law of nature. Slavery, established by voluntary compact in the United States, ran counter to this tradition. "The right to *have* a slave implies the right in some to *make* a slave; that right must be equal and mutual, and this would resolve society into a state of perpetual war."⁶

When Seward declared that “there is a higher law than the Constitution,” he framed American slavery as a conscious human choice, one at odds with modern international practice. Slaveowners, he said, remained in the “Dark Ages.” As such, he held the fall of American slavery inevitable. National demographics stood on the side of freedom—the increase in white settlers outpaced that of slaves, especially due to the foreign slave-trade ban. More important than the numbers, however, was the ideological thrust of the American Founders. Seward’s opponents at the time argued for “political equilibrium”—that for every new free state, one slave state must be admitted too. The New York senator claimed such balance as nonsense. Two years before the Constitution was ratified, he said, the Founders prepared the Northwest Territory for five free states.⁷

Freedom was thus the basis of American expansion, but, in an argument much more difficult to contest, Seward held freedom at the center of the American political experiment. In a word play dependent on the constitutional guarantee for each state to have a “republican form of government,” Seward said: “You may separate slavery from South Carolina, and the state will remain; but if you subvert freedom there, the state will cease to exist.”⁸

Whether grounded in the law of nations or the Constitution, Seward’s speech sought a legal framework in which a federal attack on slavery could transpire. Stahr is correct, then, to note that Seward was no John Brown. He was, with John Quincy Adams, Charles Sumner, and, eventually, Abraham Lincoln, an originator of the political antislavery measures embraced by the Republican Party. As recently detailed by James Oakes, it was a two-pronged attack. One front pursued a peaceful, eventual end to slavery by crowding it out with free states; the other promoted a violent, quick termination through the powers granted in times of rebellion and war.⁹

Stahr wonderfully details Seward’s struggle to solve American slavery and American nationhood from the beginnings of his public career. In 1820, when his family still owned seven slaves in upstate New York, Seward expressed, in his Union College commencement address, the need for a nationwide policy of “gradual emancipation” (p. 16). As New York governor in 1840, Seward helped enact two important protections for fugitive slaves: a right to a trial by jury (along with a key clause that required state lawyers to intervene on fugitives’ behalf) and the right of the governor “to appoint agents to go to slave states to negotiate the rescue of free blacks captured and sold into slavery” (p. 69). Before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1846, Seward, along with Salmon P. Chase, argued in support of John Van Zandt, an Ohio farmer who had assisted fugitive slaves escape from Kentucky. The two men asked of the justices to provide slavery no “sanction” or “countenance” since it had received none at the Constitutional Convention (p. 104). With his reputation burnished as a “defender of the defenseless,” Seward took a short leap toward political an-

tislavery in 1848 (p. 105). As he campaigned for the Whig Party, Seward said, "Slavery can be limited to its present bounds, it can be ameliorated, it can and must be abolished, and you and I can and must do it" (p. 112).

That Seward added his preference for abolition to occur "in the spirit of moderation and benevolence, not of retaliation and fanaticism," does not diminish his commitment (p. 112). Seward's antislavery credentials are located in the struggle to find a legal means for national abolition. Stahr's book, however, is troubled by Seward and antislavery. The author is confident that Seward was not a radical abolitionist who would free the slaves come what may. But he fails to situate his subject in what he was—a lawyer, a politician, a Republican, and a hater of slavery. Stahr delivers a confused story, then, when Seward navigates among personal, national, and international matters in the Civil War.

"I hope the time has come when you can conscientiously urge the President to issue a proclamation of immediate emancipation," wrote Frances Seward to her husband in July 1862 (p. 339). Compared to the antislavery positions of his wife, Seward often appeared conservative. But what he, as a member of the Lincoln administration, accomplished was radical. Seward largely disclaimed proclamations—they "are *paper* without the support of armies," he said (p. 339). And therein lay the key. For, in the throes of war, the staunch advocate of antislavery diplomacy changed course: Seward and Lincoln now had an army. From the Confiscation Acts to the Emancipation Proclamation, the two men embraced the notion of military necessity and, as the war progressed, the military developed into an important tool of abolition. In the end, Republican-led emancipation was both grounded in law and enacted on the battlefield.¹⁰

Stahr is certain, though, that "for Seward the war was about the Union, and not about Slavery" (p. 303). He champions some misplaced conclusions on human sexuality as well. Of Seward's intimate writings to legislator Albert Haller Tracy, he writes: "A modern reader of these letters might assume that there was a homosexual relationship between the two men, but that seems unlikely, since they were both happily married" (p. 33).

Such lapses in analysis in *Seward* are rare. On the whole, the book provides rich details on the life of a fascinating, influential Republican politician. At its best, Stahr's work melds information and intrigue to help readers understand how Seward lost the presidential nomination in the Wigwam, why Seward was a target of the Lincoln conspirators, and what motivated him to wildly scheme for American expansion, such as the sordid affairs behind the purchase of Alaska. Walter Stahr has crafted an enduring work on William Henry Seward, a man who personified the dominant Republican Party during critical years in the nineteenth century. "We are Americans," Seward explained in 1869 when speaking about a proposed canal across the Panama isthmus, "charged with responsibilities of establishing on the American continent a higher condition

of civilization and freedom than has ever before been attained in any part of the world" (p. 523).

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1. Frederic Bancroft, *The Life of William Henry Seward* 2 (1900), 528.

2. Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln, 2: Prologue to Civil War, 1859–1861* (1950), 235.

3. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (2005). Steven Spielberg, director, *Lincoln* (2012). Amanda Foreman, *A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War* (2011). Lawrence M. Denton, *William Henry Seward and the Secession Crisis: the Effort to Prevent Civil War* (2009). Quote from Douglas R. Egerton, *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War* (2010), 14.

4. William H. Seward, "Freedom in the New Territories" in *The Senate, 1789–1989*, 3: *Classic Speeches, 1830–1993*, ed. Wendy Wolff (1994), 303.

5. *Ibid.*, 295, 307.

6. *Ibid.*, 307.

7. *Ibid.*, 308, 303, 302.

8. *Ibid.*, 308.

9. James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (2013).

10. Louis P. Masur, *Lincoln's Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the War for the Union* (2012).