



Lincoln's Right-Hand Man

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There's been a rapid comeback for Abraham Lincoln on the pop culture scene. He is in vogue, with *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* depicting his overlooked vigilante days and Steven Spielberg's recent film which was a relative hit at the Academy Awards. Thus begins the effort to repair the fractured relationship between Lincoln and theatres. The man responsible for the fracturing—assassin John Wilkes Booth—also targeted the subject of Walter Stahr's latest biography, which provides a great insight in to that turbulent time in American history through the experiences of one of its most dynamic men.

William Seward was Secretary of State during Abraham Lincoln's and Andrew Johnson's administrations. He spent his political life fighting slavery, attempting to keep the Union together, and after the Civil War, negotiating the purchase of Alaska from Russia. Walter Stahr's research into this biography is outstanding. Stahr consulted every possible source from Seward's collection



of letters to European diplomatic cables alluding to him in passing, and turned them in to an enjoyable read.

Though one feels he could, even should, have run for President, Seward never received a nomination. A Republican, his best chance was for the 1860 election. Seward led the first two ballots at the Republican National Convention that year by a slim margin before losing decisively to Lincoln on the third. After being Secretary of State, a position filled back then by the party's 'next-in-line', Seward knew he could not run again because of the enemies he had made.

Seward's enemies came from his complete commitment to his own ideals. He once remarked that he 'care[d] not...for party' and often went against his Republican comrades if his conscience demanded it. On election to the US Senate, Seward was suspected by many of being an abolitionist due to his outspoken stand against allowing any new state in to the Union to practice slavery. The radical Republicans in Washington saw him as their new hero, but Seward actually favoured a gradual end to slavery and argued existing states should decide for themselves. So, Democrats hated him for his anti-slavery philosophy while some Republicans hated him just as much because he wasn't antislavery enough.

Similarly, Seward stood against the wishes of many Republicans when, after the Civil War, he argued against military rule over the South to curb the racial violence and secure civil rights legislation dictated by the North. Again, he argued that each state should be left alone. He was also one of the few people in Washington to stand by the deeply unpopular Andrew Johnson through his impeachment trial. Johnson was a northern Democrat who personally disliked Seward, but Seward stood by his belief that impeachment would have set an unwelcome precedent for the security of the Presidential office. His commitment to his own conscience was one of his most admirable qualities.

That commitment is part of what attracted Lincoln to Seward. The cover presents Seward as 'Lincoln's indispensable man', due to the tight bond formed through Lincoln's administration. Lincoln sought Seward's counsel on so many complex issues that many politicians felt his power over the president was too strong, leaving Seward to fight off calls for his sacking. Lincoln, however, saw Seward as one of the sharpest political minds in the country, and was rewarded. Seward was able to both prevent any European power from recognising the South as an independent nation despite their desire for cheap, slave-picked cotton, as well as prevent a war with Britain after rogue Northerners had captured an English ship suspected of smuggling Confederates.

Seward's achievements go beyond slavery and the Civil War. He is most famous for the purchase of Alaska in 1867, an accomplishment of which Seward himself was especially proud, but felt 'it would take the people a generation' to agree with him. Seward was certainly an expansionist and committed himself in his time in office to the acquisition of new land for the United States, with the well-intentioned hope of creating a new, glorious 'empire'. As Senator, Seward championed the Guano Islands Act, which allowed the U.S. to colonise any uninhabited island for the purposes of mining guano – extremely effective fertilizer generated by the waste of seabirds. Though guano was a valuable commodity at the time, today over 100 islands, including the famous Midway



Islands, have been claimed under this still-active legislation.

Seward was a fascinating man operating in fascinating times, and this book not only does him justice but expertly conveys the anxieties and political landscape of a defining time in America's history.