

Fictitious Review of Alternate Civil War Novel

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This is a fictitious book review, in that the book does not exist, but the review is written as if it does. It is one of several fictitious reviews found at <http://www.lakesidepress.com/fictitious-reviews/intro.html>.

I have written 3 Civil War Novels, summarized and compared at www.lakesidepress.com/CivilWarNovels.html. One of them is ‘alternate history,’ dealing with time travel and an alternate outcome to the War.

Like many Civil War buffs, I have other novels in my head, but no time to write them all. One that I envisioned is an alternate history in which Hannibal Hamlin becomes president after Lincoln’s early death. I then proceeded to write a “review” of this non-existent book.

Try this exercise yourself. Create a review of that book you always wanted to write. If it meets your expectations, and you have time, start writing the actual book!

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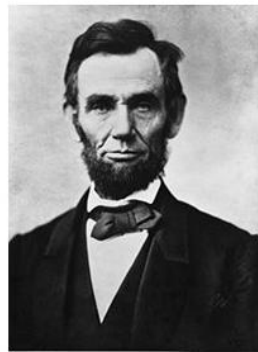
BOOK REVIEW (Of a book that does not exist – yet)

Avoiding Civil War: The Remarkable Presidency of Hannibal Hamlin, 1861-1869

by Jeremiah Michaels
Lakeside Press
314 pages



Hannibal Hamlin, 1809 – 1891



Abraham Lincoln, 1809 – ?

Hannibal Who?

In a recent survey of adults with at least a high school education, 96% knew who was president during the American Civil War. When asked who was Lincoln's vice-president during his first term (1861-1865), 36% had no idea and 60% guessed Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's VP for his *second term*. Only 4% knew the correct answer: Hannibal Hamlin, the senator from Maine who was picked to balance out the 1860 Republican ticket.

Had Hamlin been picked to run again in 1864 – instead of the drunkard Johnson, who became president after the assassination – every school child in the land would be taught his name. But now, it's Hannibal Who?

Jeremiah Michaels' 'What If' novel seeks to correct that slight. 'What If' or 'alternate history' novels are common in Civil War literature, probably more so than for any other historical period. Examples abound: *Gettysburg: A Novel of the Civil War*; *Fire on the Mountain*; *Guns of the South*; *The Impeachment of Abraham Lincoln*.

There is an endless stream of Civil War second guessing to choose from if you wish to create an alternate history. What if the Rebels had pursued the fleeing Yankees all the way to Washington after the first Battle of Bull Run (June 1861)? What if Stonewall Jackson's own side had not killed him by mistake at the Battle of Chancellorsville (May 1863)? What if General Lee hadn't sent his men on a futile charge up the hill at Gettysburg (July 1863)?

But these are piker questions compared to the central theme in this page-turner: What if Lincoln had died between his inauguration March 4, 1861 and the Confederate bombing of Fort Sumter five weeks later, on April 12?

One reason Hannibal Hamlin is so little known is because he became disenchanted with Washington and spent most of the war in his native Maine, even going so far as to enlist as a private in the Maine Coast Guard. (He was rapidly promoted to corporal, and served a brief tour of duty during 1864.) Lincoln relied heavily on his cabinet for advice, and had little need for Hamlin. Since the founding of our nation, vice presidents have, with few exceptions, been men of little influence or historical importance. Hamlin was not an exception.

The novel opens with a healthy Lincoln giving his famous inaugural speech, quoted in its entirety since his words and thoughts play an important part in President Hamlin's first 100 days. Lincoln catches cold at the inauguration, develops pneumonia and dies on April 2, four weeks after becoming president. We are mercifully spared any clinical details.

By this time seven states have seceded (South Carolina was first, on December 20, 1860), but Virginia and several others are threatening. And a powder keg in Charleston has been brewing for months. Union-held Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor is isolated, cut off from supplies; its soldiers will run out of food by April 15. Without food they will be forced to surrender, something Lincoln would not allow. In reality, on April 4, 1861 Lincoln ordered naval ships to resupply the fort, knowing full well this would force the South's hand.

On April 12, as Union ships were arriving with supplies, Confederate general P.G.T. Beauregard ordered the bombing of Fort Sumter to commence. No one was killed, but the next day U.S. Army Major Robert Anderson surrendered the fort and his men sailed home. The Civil War had begun.

Not in this book. Hamlin is sworn in the same day Lincoln dies, and meets with his cabinet that evening. He then prepares a "Here I Am" speech to Congress and the nation for April 5 delivery.

Let's get this out of the way now: Hamlin is no Lincoln. He is actually a pretty good orator, but in language less appealing than Lincoln's, reflecting more of the educated and careful Yankee politician than the self-educated, down-to-earth prairie man from Illinois.

Hamlin is politically astute, and has one singular advantage. Lincoln was just the very-short-term president when he died, not the imposing icon in Washington's Lincoln Memorial, nor the man whose Gettysburg address is the most widely quoted speech ever delivered, nor the single person who 'saved the union' and is considered by most historians our nation's greatest president.

Conceivably, another president who died within a month of taking office – William Henry Harrison – might also have become 'great', but he is just a footnote in American history. Harrison, like Lincoln in this novel, never had a chance. While Lincoln is vital in developing the story, he is quickly forgotten by the nation's leaders, if not the reader. You have to get the 'greatness factor' out of your head as you read *Avoiding Civil War*, for without any accomplishments this novel's Lincoln is not the Lincoln we know. So Hamlin doesn't have *those* shoes to fill.

At the new president's post-swearing-in cabinet meeting on April 2, the secession problem is first and foremost. What to do? In a gesture of humility Hamlin, who was well known as an ardent abolitionist (one reason he was picked to run as VP), quotes Lincoln's inaugural: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." William Seward, the man who Lincoln beat out for the nomination, and who then became his very able Secretary of State, will have none of it. He is for invading South Carolina, occupying Charleston and ending the insurrection.

Then things get interesting. Secretary of War Simon Cameron points up the "loss of men war will surely bring," and estimates "up to 50,000 could die if we go to war." Seward counters that the North has four times as many men as the South, and cannot possibly lose an all-out engagement, which he estimates would last no more than three months. (Of course both men are way, way off in their estimates). Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase is worried about what a protracted war might cost, and whether England and France will get involved, which would certainly extend the conflict.

We see where Michaels is going with this. Lincoln never flinched. For him war was a necessary evil to keep the Union together – at all cost. Michaels wants to remind us (again and often, I might add) that the cost was the lives of over 700,000 soldiers, a large but unknown number of civilians, and a decade-long reconstruction nightmare that brought about *de facto* slavery (and deaths) for many blacks who were legally free.

Hamlin takes action, or as it were, inaction. He orders Major Anderson to surrender Fort Sumter. As result, there is no bombing of the fort on April 12, and war is not declared. The cabinet decides on a diplomatic end run around the secessionist states and those threatening to secede. Seward and Hamlin travel to Richmond, where they lobby the Virginia legislators, assuring them there will be no interference with slavery in that state. All they ask is that Virginia remain in the Union, which it does. As a result, the Confederate capital remains in Montgomery and is not moved to Richmond. A similar mission is made to Baltimore, and Maryland stays put. Now the cabinet has some breathing room.

This is a novel, not a textbook recitation of alternative history. Michaels creates some drama with two characters, one historical and one fictional. Ex-slave Frederick Douglass lobbies Hamlin to do something about the slave situation. We know the real Douglass did the same with Abraham Lincoln, but here he's much more of a gadfly, much more of an influence on the president. In one pivotal scene Hamlin, after a knock

down argument with Douglass, wonders about his own commitment to the slaves, and resolves to petition Congress for funds to purchase their freedom.

The fictional character is Molly Simmons, an eighteen-year old runaway slave from Virginia. The Underground Railroad gets her to Maryland, where she is caught by slave traders. Before she can be sent back to her owner, newspapers make her a cause celebre' and agitate for Hamlin to, in effect, 'put up or shut up' over slavery. He orders the Army to bring her to Washington. Virginia, still in the Union, files a lawsuit for her repatriation, and the legal situation then plays out for the rest of the novel, highlighting the opposing philosophies. This is of course remindful of Dred Scott, the infamous 1857 Supreme Court decision that upheld repatriation of runaway slaves. It does not play out the same, however. Michaels weaves the subplot into his novel and leaves the outcome until near the very end.

Meanwhile, envoys are sent to France and England to encourage non-recognition of the breakaway South, since the Confederacy is a slave 'nation' and Europe long ago gave up slavery. Hamlin then presents his bold plan to Congress, to set up a fund to buy the slaves' freedom in any state that agrees to rejoin the union.

It's not so simple. Northern abolitionists are furious over the legal and legislative wrangling, and agitate for war. Non-seceding states that hold slaves, like Missouri, Kentucky, and Virginia, vow to block any legislation that doesn't include their holdings, hoping for a big payday. And Southern 'states rightists' swear they will never rejoin the Union in any case.

As the months pass without war, the reader will want to peak at the Appendix, to see 'what really happened' on such and such a date. On September 17, 1862, in the novel, Hamlin meets with the ambassador from France, to hammer out a treaty that recognizes the United States as the sovereign North American power. And he has just received word of a skirmish in Savannah, between a John Brown-type northern abolitionist hothead with his gang of cutthroats, and an angry mob of southern rednecks. Twelve people are killed, including three slaves. In the Appendix we see that on this date in real history the battle of Antietam was fought in Maryland between General McClelland's Army of the Potomac and Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. More Americans died at Antietam than on any other day in the nation's military history (roughly 22,000 casualties, 3500 dead).

As the novel progresses, one begins to feel that maybe war is the only thing that will resolve the miasma of conflicts and agitations presented to President Hamlin. But then you come to your senses and realize you'd rather have the miasma than what really took place 1861-1865. But if you feel that way, then was Lincoln wrong? Was the Civil War worth it? Was there any other path than the horrible loss of life and mutilation, the ruination of the South and its economy, the *defacto* enslavement of blacks for decades after their legal emancipation? Those are the central questions of this remarkable novel.