Professor Johnson: Sure, Jay, thank you very much for that introduction. It’s a pleasure to be here and help launch this book discussion series for the alumni association. First of all, this is a book about Abraham Lincoln as commander in chief by probably the preeminent historian of the Civil War, James McPherson. Jim has been a professor at Princeton for something like 42 years where he taught this subject so it’s hard to find a person who is more of an expert on this subject. Among the many virtues of the book, I thought I’d just point to a couple. One of them is McPherson is an expert at taking a very complex subject and making it simple, making it appear to be simple and makes his book a pleasure to read and this is something that’s familiar to tens of thousands of readers across the world really because of their reading his other books. I also want to say that the subject of Lincoln as commander in chief seems like such a straightforward one but in fact no one has ever focused on that subject before. And so McPherson by choosing this subject has shown this analytical clarity by taking a very important topic and making the most of it. So this is a passage which comes from early in the book, the introduction on page seven. It sort of states the central theme of the work in just a few sentences so I thought I’d read it. McPherson writes: “As leader of the party that controlled congress and most state governments” namely Republicans “Lincoln as commander in chief constantly had to juggle the complex interplay of policy, national strategy, and military strategy. The slavery issue provides an example of this interplay” now here’s the key sentence of clarity in my opinion, two key sentences. “The goal of preserving the union united the northern people including border state unionists; the issue of slavery and emancipation divided them. To promote maximum support for the war, Lincoln initially insisted the war was only for preservation of the union and not a war against slavery. This policy provided a national and a military strategy of leaving slavery alone. But the slaves refused to co-operate they confronted the administration
with the problem of what to do with thousands of contrabands that came within union lines. As it became increasingly clear that slave labor sustained the Confederate economy and the logistics of the confederate armies, northern opinion moved toward the idea of making it a war against slavery. By 1862, a national and military strategy that targeted military resources including slavery emerged as a key weapon in the union arsenal. With the emancipation proclamation and a republican commitment to a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery, the policy of a war for union and freedom came into harmony with national and military strategies by striking at vital Confederate resources of slave labor. Lincoln’s skillful management of this process was a crucial part of his war leadership. So that’s the commander in chief’s job expressed with tremendous economy and clarity that can be found throughout the book.

Jay: It seems that also McPherson is discussing his political acumen.

Professor: Definitely

Jay: And the ability to parse the issues for greatest political advantages.

Professor: Absolutely and one of the things that McPherson emphasizes is that political acumen, the adroit ability that Lincoln has to decipher what are the crucial parts of his political coalition and how to keep them aboard for maintaining his policy toward the war. If I could take a second passage.

Jay: Sure

Professor: Because I think a second quality of this book that is found throughout is McPherson’s clever and resourceful marshalling of quotations from people, not just Lincoln, but from all kinds of people that enlighten us about Lincoln’s role as commander in chief. And again this is a quality of all of McPherson’s scholarship and I think this reflects his work a Johns Hopkins. He is an indefatigable researcher. He’s a person who really hits the archives so you can see it throughout the book. He provides all kinds of spicy and interesting quotations. I thought I would give one example but there are many, many throughout the book. But it has to do with general Grant’s campaign against Vicksburg, just a brief passage from the middle of the book (page 170). As you know, Grant has been trying to attack Vicksburg and can’t really find a way and so he finally decides on a bold plan to cross the Mississippi river and so let me just read briefly that passage: “after crossing the Mississippi Grant cut loose from the river. His troops lived mainly off the land for three weeks” this is in the summer of 1863 “until they could fight their way back to Vicksburg and make contact again with their river borne supplies. During those three weeks Grant’s men marched 130 miles, fought and won five battles against separate forces that if combined would have been nearly as large as Grant’s own, and pinned the confederate up in the Vicksburg defenses. Lincoln had finally found a general who could march his army as fast and as light as the enemy. The president was delighted by a tongue in cheek letter he received from Ellihu Washburne who traveled with Grant for part of the campaign. Washburn writes ‘I’m afraid Grant will have to be reproved for want of style. On this whole march for five days he’s had neither a horse nor
an orderly nor a servant, a blanket, or overcoat, or clean shirt, or even a sword. His entire baggage consists of a toothbrush. After driving the enemy into the Vicksburg fortifications, Grant ordered attacks on May 9th and 22nd. They were repulsed, but Grant tightened his grip and Vicksburg’s surrender seemed only a matter a time. Lincoln wrote: ‘Whether General Grant shall or shall not consummate the capture of Vicksburg,’ Lincoln wrote on May 26 ‘his campaign from the beginning of this month up to the 22nd day of it is one of the most brilliant in the world.’” So again an example, I think, of the deftness with which McPherson marshals these quotations and enlivens the narrative of the text.

Jay: One of the things I think that is exciting about McPherson’s writing in this book in particular is the point you made earlier how he takes very complex issues and simplifies them for the reader. I daresay going back to my own education about the American civil war. There is so much shading that the average person knows nothing about. And the passages you’ve brought out really start to color in what was going on politically and probably the fact that Lincoln’s political position wasn’t all that strong in the early years of the war either. Much was the military position which was at the time looked somewhat dire for the union.

Professor: Absolutely, because the union won the civil war and because Lincoln was the commander in chief during it, though he was assassinated.

Jay: They got to write the history.

Professor: They got to write the history.

Jay: And Lincoln became far more celebrated and famous after the war. And frankly also after many of the papers Lincoln wrote during the war became public knowledge and that didn’t happen many, many years nearly half a century that the actual Lincoln papers were not released until the middle of the twentieth century. But I think your point is well taken about Lincoln’s sense of political leadership. I think that one of the strengths of McPherson’s accounts of Lincoln as commander in chief, and I think it’s what all of us as citizens want in a commander in chief, is that Lincoln was able to focus on what was really central and to keep his sense of politics marshaled in such a way that it supported that focus on what was most important. And it’s quite a trip because with all the things that were happening and all the demands of Lincoln’s time it’s not easy to stay focused and figure out what exactly is the central issue. And of course the central issue changed during the war. Lincoln himself, as you know, was very demoralized a number of times and in fact thought he would not be re-elected in 1864. So it was not by any means a slam dunk that the union was going to win and certainly Lincoln considered as much.

Jay: Are there some issues that you think you can point out to our listeners that they would find interesting to jumpstart an online discussion?

Professor: Well, one issue I think comes back to this question of: Was the civil war victory inevitable simply because of the superiority of the resources both men and
material of the union? After all, the states that remain in the union have almost three times as many white people as the states that leave the union. So it appears in retrospect that the way that the union could win was to marshal the resources that it had and a victory was, more or less, inevitable and that was by no means the case. The book shows how Lincoln decided to manage the war to try to achieve victory in his terms, and I think that this is something readers or the general public thinking about the civil war overlook. Lincoln's terms were that in order for the civil war to lead to the restoration of the union, the confederate army had to be destroyed, that it wasn’t a matter of taking territory, but it was a really a matter of destroying the ability of the confederate army to defend the independence of the Confederacy. Grant and Sherman and ultimately Sheridan really understand this point of view, these generals that Lincoln comes to at the end of the war, but for much of the war Lincoln had very great difficulty convincing his generals that that was the principle objective of the union.

Jay: That’s interesting. I guess that leads into some of the scorched earth policies by some of the union generals and armies that marched through the south.

Professor: Lincoln I think starts the war hoping that there is a large group of the unionists who were white and within the south and that group, of what he sees as a silent majority of white unionists in the south, turns out to be largely a fiction. And slowly during the course of the war he realizes that, in order to keep the war going, number one he has to keep the union army in the field. And in order to keep the union army in the field he has to have policies that allow people to see that the war is going to lead to some consequence, it’s going to work, basically it’s going to lead to victories, it’s going to lead to the unification and restoration of the union and in order to do all of that Lincoln ultimately decides he doesn’t have a chance of marshalling any southern unionists who were white in the south. But there is a chance for the people who have some incentive to support the union, but they’re slaves. So part of his thinking in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation is not just the moral issue of ending slavery, which certainly Lincoln supports ending slavery on moral grounds, but also it’s a military decision to support the mobilization of the union army and consequently weaken the mobilization of the confederates.

Jay: What I’ve always found curious, as another example of the precarious political standing in the north, was the fact that there were the draft riots throughout various major northern cities. I don’t ever recall hearing about draft riots in the south although they may have occurred.

Professor: No I think that’s right. That there’s certainly resistance to the draft and the resistance takes the form of basically running away and also deserting. There’s also resistance to the union army in the same way. Many men who are drafted just don’t show up. There’s a sizeable migration to Canada. The draft for Lincoln is certainly resisted. It also leads to one of the most controversial steps that Lincoln takes as president, which is to suspend the right of habeas corpus eventually throughout the nation and largely in response to these draft riots. And Lincoln is treading on thin constitutional ice with this decision, but he defends it completely as justified by the threat of the Confederacy to the
integrity of the union and he argues that it is a perfectly constitutional step for president as commander in chief to take.

Jay: Our location in Baltimore is pivotal for a lot of these decisions that took place early in the war. When a number of years ago I lived in the Federal Hill area of Baltimore and heard the famous story that they told us is the union fort on top of Federal Hill, Fort Federal Hill. The night before Maryland was to vote in the general assembly whether or not to secede from the union, which of course would place Washington DC in the south, the guns were turned from facing out in the harbor to facing across the inner harbor toward Water Street and Commerce Street, which were then one of the largest banking centers in the union. So when some of our readers come back to Baltimore for reunions or what have you, we would encourage them to look around Baltimore and see again some of that history that we have here.

Professor: Definitely. Baltimore is also prominent in the Civil War because the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Roger B. Tawny, was a Marylander and Tawny rules against Lincoln in the question of suspending the right of habeas corpus. And one of the virtues of being president is, if you decide to, you can ignore the Supreme Court. And that’s exactly what Lincoln did. Lincoln met with a group of representatives who wanted him to have a lighter hand in Baltimore and he was really quite firm with them and said there’s really nothing I can do. I have to march troops through Maryland. I can’t dig a tunnel under the state of Maryland. They have to come through and so Lincoln made sure by suspending habeas corpus in Maryland very early on that Washington, DC would not be surrounded by Confederate territory and that the confederacy would not add Maryland to its list of states.

Jay: What are the things that our readers, listeners might be interesting in knowing about this book? They’ll be asking themselves questions, obviously, as they listen to this podcast and read this book, but one of the virtues of this experiment is their ability to interact online in this virtual chat atmosphere. So what kinds of things would you envision them asking themselves or each other as they read the book?

Professor: That’s a good question I think we tend to think today of the role of a commander in chief as a role which involves being at the top of a very steep hierarchy of very competent and experienced military and political advisors and that’s certainly the case today and has evolved into that kind of situation largely through the experience of World War Two. One of the things that jumps out in this book is that Lincoln did not have a place in such a hierarchy. Lincoln had only two or three personal aides. Lincoln spent most of his time actually meeting applicants for patronage appointments and anybody lined up outside Lincoln’s door could come in and appeal to be the postmaster of Westminster or wherever and they did. So, Lincoln is making the decisions about military strategy and political maneuvers in the context of really sitting in a room with a map, a couple military advisors, a few aides, and that’s it. Now one of the crucial things that comes through the book, McPherson doesn’t emphasize it, but is the crucial thing, Lincoln was able to be the kind of commander in chief that he was because telegrams were for the first time available to military strategy at the center. And so that allowed him
to find out in a more or less real time way what was happening on the ground in various military theatres in a way that, for example, previous presidents in the war of 1812 or the Mexican American war could not. And nowadays we think of that kind of communication technology for command and control purposes available to the commander in chief, this so called briefcase that the commander in chief is always carrying around or one of his aides, as routine. But that was by no means routine for Lincoln. So one of the things that comes through is that Lincoln as commander in chief has to invent the role of being commander in chief with really very few precedents that he can draw upon and a role that now has grown into a much more elaborate role and I think much more carefully controlled then for Lincoln.

Jay: If I recall, the foundations for Western Union and the telegraph was started I guess immediately prior to the Civil War and lines were being strung out west even as the war was being fought.

Professor: Yes. And the generals are very eager to cut the lines for their enemies and restore those of their friends and their allies. Telegraphy is crucial to the kinds of command decisions that Lincoln makes and we can find him for example to back up just a moment, scholars agree people who really look at what Lincoln did that Lincoln was really the hardest working president ever, in terms of putting in the hours. Lincoln didn’t have much of a social life and he worked really hard and partly because he had such small staff. His two key staff members were really young men, basically in their twenties. Aside from his time in the white house, he spent his time in the telegraph office of the war department getting dispatches from the front and from his various generals and communicating with them. And literally he was a hands on commander in chief finding out exactly what was going on. At times, that did not serve him well. I think that perhaps times he interfered too often, in some cases, at other times held back too much and let the generals have their head. But by being there he was more directly involved than certainly any previous president and probably more than any subsequent president as well.

Jay: Very good. Is there anything else you’d like to share with listeners?

Professor: I think that one of the things that comes through in McPherson’s discussion is Lincoln’s attempt to marry or to combine a shrewd and canny political sense of his role as commander in chief with a genuine sense of moral commitment to democracy. And so he was not a president or a commander in chief who was simply trying to exercise power for his own ends, but really, I think, and McPherson emphasizes this, I believe, a president who was trying to match the moral vision of the declaration of independence to the circumstances he found himself in when he assumed the office – namely an office that required him to be commander in chief. And he was a person who had no military experience except a brief period of time in the militia many years earlier, almost thirty years earlier. So this attempt by Lincoln to both keep his eye on the overarching moral and democratic mission of the U.S. and at the same time execute a bloody and costly and remorseless war is really a very impressive achievement I think for any president.
Jay: He may have been the first president we had in wartime who did not have a significant military background.

Professor: I think that’s right

Jay: Well, I want to thank you professor Johnson for this enlightening discussion we hope that all of you listening to this podcast will get as much out of it as we have. To our participants, please note that Dr. Johnson will be posting a number of questions on the website for online discussions during the month of February

Professor: Thank you

Thank you and I hope that this will be one of the first of many discussions for the new book club, thank you.