

Paul Kahan. *Amiable Scoundrel: Simon Cameron, Lincoln's Scandalous Secretary of War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016). Pp. 367. Notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$36.95.

In his ninety years Simon Cameron made a lot of money, cut innumerable political deals, helped many people, lent and lost thousands of dollars, won and lost elections, and earned an indelible reputation as a consummate wire-puller. Almost from the beginning of his public life he was tainted by the aura of corruption, though the corruption was never proved. A long-serving US senator from Pennsylvania, he is best known as an incompetent and possibly corrupt secretary of war in Abraham Lincoln's Cabinet. In this first comprehensive biography of Cameron in half a century, Paul Kahan describes a glad-hander who by dint of craftiness and persistence gained access to power at the highest levels and held a series of significant posts in business and government. For all the good information provided in this compact, accessible work, and its subject's impressive resumé, it remains unclear at the end what Cameron's substantive accomplishment entailed beyond voting in the US Senate for the Fifteenth Amendment (giving former slaves the right to vote) and helping Mary Todd Lincoln secure a federal pension.

Simon Cameron's early life fit the classic tale of the country nobody who by dint of his pluck, charm, and innate talent turned himself into a somebody. Born in rural Maytown (Lancaster County), Pennsylvania, in 1799, Cameron had to make his own way. His father, an unsuccessful businessman, died when Simon was young and he and his siblings were dispersed among foster parents. Apprenticed by age seventeen to a printer, he spent the next several years working in different printing jobs, and in his twenties ran newspapers in various Pennsylvania locations, gaining valuable experience and making the most of networking opportunities, particularly in the political world. By the late 1820s he was serving as right-hand man to James Buchanan, then a rising political star. Although he marched in lockstep with Buchanan for many years, Cameron would gradually fall out with him, making a surprising and apparently sincere turnabout on the slavery question in the 1850s.

Kahan evokes the nexus of press, politics, and enterprise in Jacksonian America, turf that his subject found congenial. Cameron missed few opportunities to invest in promising businesses, including canals, banks, and railroads. He seems to have had a Midas touch when it came to investments, undoubtedly grounded in his ability to influence legislation that served his interests. Politics was always Cameron's primary vocation, indeed,

his passion. By his thirties he was widely recognized as a canny and formidable Democratic operative in politics-drenched Pennsylvania, enjoying connections to such national notables as Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren. Obtaining and distributing patronage was his major concern for half a century, and he was exceptionally adept in that realm.

In both politics and collateral enterprises Cameron often elided or tested ethical boundaries, as exemplified by his work as a commissioner settling claims for and against the Winnebago Indians of Wisconsin, an appointment gained through credit he had earned working to install Van Buren as Jackson's successor in the White House. Misfeasance allegations against Cameron in the Winnebago claims cases were never proven, though the smell of corruption lingered. Kahan is satisfied that the best we can say is "not proved" about this and later claims that Cameron bribed, or had his agents bribe, individual legislators to vote Cameron's way on particular matters or to support him in elective offices he sought.

Kahan is more assertive, discussing Cameron's ill-starred tenure as secretary of war from 1861 to 1862. Insofar as there is any "revisionist" tint to this genial book, it lies in Kahan's argument that Cameron was fired as secretary of war less for his managerial deficiencies (which Kahan acknowledges) or corruption (which was never directly connected to him) than for getting crosswise with Abraham Lincoln on the matter of war aims. Cameron, Kahan says, was in sync with abolitionists who early on wanted the war to focus on freeing slaves, while Lincoln—sensitive to the status of the border states—was focused on preserving the Union. Consequently, when congressional investigatory committees focused on procurement problems and awarding of contracts, intent on demonstrating Cameron's ineptitude if not crookedness, antislavery men—among them Salmon Chase and Thaddeus Stevens—cut Cameron some slack. They insisted that he was an honest man, doing the best job he could. Lincoln himself took the charges against Cameron "with a sizable grain of salt" (190).

Cameron fell afoul of Lincoln in supporting Gen. John Charles Fremont's edict confiscating slaves in wake of Union successes in the west, forcing Lincoln to countermand Fremont's orders. Early in the war—again, ahead of Lincoln—Cameron advocated arming former slaves, much to the dismay of Lincoln and most fellow Cabinet members. Overall, Kahan finds Cameron's views about race "pretty advanced" (206)—and a marked change from his conservatism on virtually all political questions, including slavery, before the Civil War.

By late 1861 it was evident Cameron's days in Lincoln's Cabinet were numbered. He was given a fig leaf when forced out—the Russian mission—which proved unpalatable and short-lived. Despite his demotion, Cameron

maintained cordial relations with Lincoln and worked on behalf of his reelection in 1864. He would support every Republican nominee for president with greater or lesser enthusiasm for the rest of his long career.

The chapters on Cameron's service as secretary of war are the best in the book. They supersede the account in Erwin Bradley's 1966 biography, *Simon Cameron: Lincoln's Secretary of War* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966). From this point on, although Cameron had a second act in politics—further service in the US Senate and never-ending maneuvering behind the scenes to advance the political interests of his son Donald—the book loses momentum, drawing increasingly heavily on secondary sources, and highlighting Cameron's personal virtues. At points in the final chapters, it is a virtual gloss on Bradley's book, enhanced somewhat by exploiting newspaper clippings and an occasional manuscript collection.

Kahan could have done more intensive research in relevant manuscripts. He missed significant Cameron material at Dickinson College and Lancasterhistory.org, for example. The occasional important book for his purposes, notably Mark Summers's *The Plundering Generation* (Oxford University Press, 1987) is overlooked. Still, *Amiable Scoundrel* has merit, not least because Kahan has drawn on much of the best scholarship relevant to Cameron published in the past half-century. He recounts the basics about Cameron's career in an informed and accessible way. Kahan's closing riff that there is "much to admire" in Cameron as a personality (292) is, unfortunately, beside the point. It is Cameron's influence on policy, or lack thereof, that we need to understand better, as well as the impetus for his tendency so consistently to cross invisible moral lines in advancing his personal interests. Perhaps the secret of Simon Cameron is that there was no secret—that playing the game was what it was all about.

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Chloe Taft. *From Steel to Slots: Casino Capitalism in the Post Industrial City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). Pp. 336. Notes, index, illustrations. Cloth, \$39.95.

The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed the decline of much of what was left of industrial America. Social changes, along with new innovations, together transformed the old structure based on industrial output into a system based