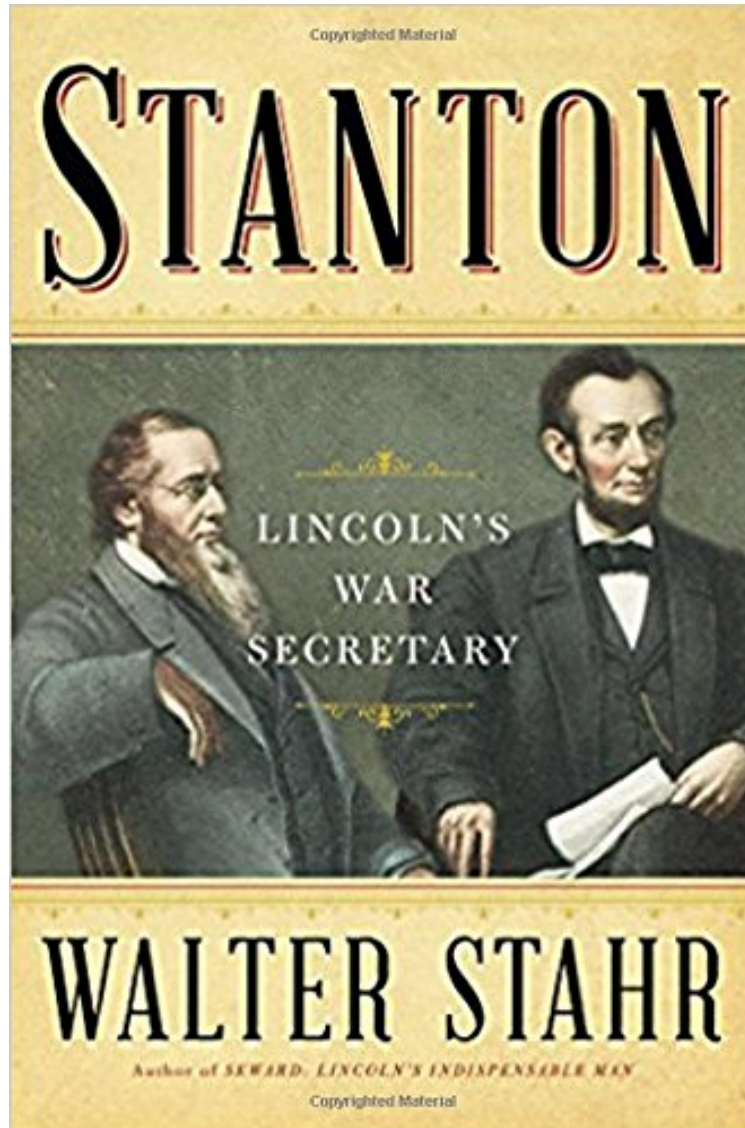


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Stanton: Lincolns War Secretary

Walter Stahr

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This exhaustively researched, well-paced book should take its place as the new, standard biography of the ill-tempered man who helped save the Union: It is fair, judicious, authoritative and comprehensive. The Wall Street Journal A welcome and significant addition to the ample literature on the Civil War and Reconstruction. Ron Chernow, author of The New York Times bestseller Alexander Hamilton Walter Stahr, award-winning author of the New York Times bestseller Seward, tells the story of Abraham Lincoln's indispensable Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, the man the president entrusted with raising the army that preserved the Union. Of the crucial men close to President Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (1814-1869) was the most powerful and controversial. Stanton raised, armed, and supervised the army of a million men who won the Civil War. He organized the war effort. He directed military movements from his telegraph office, where Lincoln literally hung out with him. He arrested and imprisoned thousands for war crimes, such as resisting the draft or calling for an armistice. Stanton was so controversial that some accused him at that time of complicity in Lincoln's assassination. He was a stubborn genius who was both reviled and revered in his time. Stanton was a Democrat before the war and a prominent trial lawyer. He opposed slavery, but only in private. He served briefly as President Buchanan's Attorney General and then as Lincoln's aggressive Secretary of War. On the night of April 14, 1865, Stanton rushed to Lincoln's deathbed and took over the government since Secretary of State William Seward had been critically wounded the same evening. He informed the nation of the President's death, summoned General Grant to protect the Capitol, and started collecting the evidence from those who had been with the Lincoln at the theater in order to prepare a murder trial. Now with this worthy complement to the enduring library of biographical accounts of those who helped Lincoln preserve the Union, Stanton honors the indispensable partner of the sixteenth president. Walter Stahr's essential book is the first major biography of Stanton in fifty years, restoring this underexplored figure to his proper place in American history.

This exhaustively researched, well-paced book should take its place as the new, standard biography of the ill-tempered man who helped save the Union: It is fair, judicious, authoritative and comprehensive. (The Wall Street Journal) A judiciously sympathetic treatment that tries to calm a still-uncalmable subject. (The New York Times) Walter Stahr has delivered another solid, well-researched biography of a major, if often overlooked, figure in American history. His portrait of Edwin Stanton is fair-minded, rigorous, and scrupulously honest, balancing his sometimes questionable record on civil liberties with the logistical wizardry that he applied to win the Union war effort. Stanton is thus a welcome and significant addition to the ample literature on the Civil War and Reconstruction. (Ron Chernow, author of The New York Times Bestseller Alexander Hamilton) Moving swiftly across the enormous landscape of Stanton's life and times, Stahr provides a narrative that is both readily accessible and compelling for scholars long familiar with the basic facts. Stahr finds in even the more ephemeral material insights into the ways Stanton stood out from his cohort while embodying the virtues and limitations of his times. (NPR) A lively, lucid, and opinionated history . . . The book should be Stanton's definitive biography for some time to come. (Kirkus, starred review) There are many biographies of Stanton, but Stahr's will stand out as one of the finest and most detailed. This is a book for both scholars of Civil War history and general readers who have a deep interest in that period. (Washington Independent of Books) Walter Stahr has given us the best all-around account of Stanton's life as Lincoln's Secretary of War in over half-a-century. Here is the biography of America's most difficult mandelighfully written, well-informed, humane and judicious. (Dr. Allen C. Guelzo, author of Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President, winner of The Lincoln Prize) Walter Stahr's Stanton offers a masterly account of one of the great characters of the Civil War. The Secretary of War from 1862-1865 was irascible, autocratic, and vengeful, but also steadfast, punctilious, and practical. This fascinating biography reveals how such a complex and unlikely figure came to play such a vital role at the country's hour of peril. (Amanda Foreman, author of A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War) Stahr has given us not only the definitive biography of the man after Lincoln most responsible for Union victory, but also a work of stunning force and literary excellence. Indeed, I believe Stanton to be one of the finest Civil War biographies ever written. (Peter Cozzens, prize-winning author of The Earth is Weeping) In this well researched, forcefully written and argued biography, Walter Stahr shows why Stanton deserves great credit for helping to make Lincoln a successful leader. The gruff, irascible, humorless war secretary and the magnanimous, affable, humorous president were an odd couple, but together they provided the extraordinary leadership that the times required. (Michael Burlingame, author of Abraham Lincoln: A Life) Stahr is at his best highlighting Stanton's adroitness in manipulating people, organizational structures, and budgets to accomplish the goal of winning the war. . . . Stahr is especially effective in demonstrating how Stanton served as a political ally of Lincoln's, using the president's considerable influence to his advantage. Highly recommended for novice and experienced Civil War readers alike. (Library Journal (starred review)) About the Author Walter Stahr is the author of Stanton: Lincoln's War Secretary; Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man, a biography of one of the most important Americans of the nineteenth century; and John Jay: Founding Father, a biography of America's first Supreme Court Chief Justice. He lives in Newport Beach, California. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Stanton Introduction Not long after eleven o'clock on the night of April 14, 1865, a

short, burly, bearded man pushed his way through the crowd on Tenth Street, up the curved front steps of a three-story brick boardinghouse, and into the small back bedroom where Abraham Lincoln was stretched on a bed, bleeding and dying. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton soon learned that an assassin had shot the president in the back of the head from point-blank range. The president was not conscious and would not live for more than another few hours. Stanton did not linger. He went into the adjoining parlor, sat down at a small table, and went to work. He launched an investigation to determine who had shot Lincoln at Fords Theatre and who (at almost the same time but about ten blocks away) had stabbed and nearly killed Secretary of State William Henry Seward. Stanton ordered a massive manhunt to find and catch the assassins and those who had assisted them. He assumed that the attacks on Lincoln and Seward were part of a Confederate plot against the Union leadership, perhaps against Washington itself, so he issued orders to protect the leaders and the city. By a series of messages to the press, Stanton informed the nation about the attacks and the presidents condition. He did not announce that he was taking charge: he simply was in charge. The first telegram Stanton sent, at about midnight, was to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, the commander of the Union armies, who had left Washington earlier in the evening, bound by train for a few days with his family in New Jersey. Stanton informed Grant that Lincoln had been shot and would not live. Seward and his son Frederick, the assistant secretary of state, had also been attacked and were in a dangerous condition. Stanton ordered Grant to return to Washington immediately. A few minutes later one of Stantons assistants sent a follow-up message, urging Grant to beware of attacks against himself. Stantons next message was to the commander of the defenses of Washington. The Secretary desires, an aide wrote for him, that the troops turn out; the guards be doubled; the forts be alert; guns manned; special vigilance and guard about the Capitol Prison. Stanton soon sent more specific orders to army officers in the region and beyond: close the bridges out of Washington, question those arriving from Washington, arrest any suspicious persons.¹ As an experienced lawyer, Stanton knew the value of interviewing witnesses while their memories were fresh. Through his aides he summoned some of those who had seen the attack on Lincoln to the small back parlor at the Petersen House. Stanton himself, aided by the local district judge, posed the questions. When it proved impracticable to make notes in longhand, Stanton had his staff find him someone who could take notes in shorthand. James Tanner, a clerk who lived nearby, was soon seated next to Stanton, scribbling in shorthand. Those whom Stanton questioned that night were certain that Lincolns assassin was the famous actor John Wilkes Booth. Tanner wrote that after fifteen minutes of this question and answer session, Stanton had enough evidence to convict Booth of Lincolns murder.² In the midst of the Civil War, Stanton had developed a system for informing the nation of key military events: telegrams nominally sent to John Dix, the general in charge in New York City, were in practice sent directly to the Associated Press. Although the term press release would not be used for fifty years, Stantons messages to Dix were in effect government press releases. His first message on this night, sent about one in the morning, started, Last evening, about 10.30 p.m., at Fords Theatre, the President, while sitting in his private box with Mrs. Lincoln, Miss Harris, and Major Rathbone, was shot by an assassin, who suddenly entered the box and approached behind the President. This detailed and remarkably accurate message, composed only a few hours after the attacks upon Lincoln and the Swards, was followed with three other messages. In one of these Stanton informed the press that investigators had found a letter among Booths papers referring to the need to consult with Richmond. Stantons messages were how the nation first learned of the assassinations and of the suspected role of the Confederate leaders.³ Charles Dana, one of Stantons assistant secretaries, later recalled how Stanton dictated and scribbled order after order in Petersens parlor. It seemed as if Mr. Stanton thought of everything, and there was a great deal to be thought of that night. The extent of the conspiracy was, of course, unknown, and the horrible beginning which had been made naturally led us to suspect the worst. The safety of Washington must be looked after. Commanders all over the country had to be ordered to take extra precautions. The people must be notified of the tragedy. The assassins must be captured. The coolness and clear-headedness of Mr. Stanton under these circumstances were most remarkable. Charles Leale, one of the doctors attending Lincoln, described Stanton during those hours as being in reality the acting president of the United States.⁴ Others have taken a far darker view of Stanton. Otto Eisenschiml even suggested that Stanton himself organized the assassination of Lincoln. Eisenschiml argued his case against Stanton mainly through questions: Why was there not a better guard for Lincoln at Fords Theatre? Why did Stanton not mention Booth in his first message to the press? Why did Stanton not close the bridge by which Booth left Washington and fled into rural Maryland? Why, when federal soldiers finally located and surrounded Booth, was he killed rather than captured and questioned? Bill OReilly, in his recent best-selling book on Lincolns death, has raised these questions again: Did [Stanton] have any part in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln? To this day there are those who believe he did. But nothing has ever been proved. No serious scholar believes that Stanton helped Booth to kill Lincoln. But historians have accused Stanton of many other errors and crimes, ranging from misrepresentations to some of the more shameful injustices in American history.⁵ Who was Edwin McMasters Stanton? How did this lifelong Democrat become the secretary of war for the first Republican president? Why was Stanton so controversial, both in his life and after his death? Born on the banks of the Ohio River, in Steubenville, Ohio, Stanton attended Kenyon College for two years, then studied law with a Steubenville lawyer. He practiced law with increasing success, first in Ohio, then in Pittsburgh, and then in Washington, D.C. By the eve of the Civil War, Stanton was one of the nations leading lawyers, famed both for his trial work, including the successful

defense of a congressman accused of murder, and for his work in the Supreme Court, especially the high-profile challenge to the erection of a bridge at Wheeling, Virginia. Especially during his Ohio years, from roughly 1837 through 1847, Stanton was active in Democratic politics. In private letters he opposed slavery, but he took no public stand on the issue, perhaps because of family connections with the South, perhaps because the Democratic Party was dominated by slave-owning Southern Democrats. When Stanton moved to Washington in 1857, he worked closely with the Democratic attorney general Jeremiah Black, representing the federal government both in California and in the Supreme Court. In late 1860 and early 1861, as the Southern states seceded and formed their Confederacy, Stanton served four months as the attorney general in the cabinet of Democratic president James Buchanan. Stanton claimed then and later that he served Buchanan only to save the Union, but it is hard to confirm just what Stanton said to Buchanan or what effect he had on Buchanans actions. When Lincoln became president in early 1861, Stanton returned to his Washington law practice and criticized Lincoln in private letters to Buchanan and others. Stanton also, however, started to do important legal work for members of the Lincoln administration, and in early 1862, when Lincoln needed a secretary of war to replace Simon Cameron, he chose Stanton. For the next three years and three months Stanton worked night and day, raising, arming, feeding, clothing, transporting, and supervising an army of a million men. He dealt with issues great and small and with men and women ranging from the president and governors to generals and private citizens. Stanton was also responsible for the system of military arrests of civilians accused of aiding and abetting the rebellion, some of them rebel spies, some of them merely opponents of the Lincoln administration. Although Stantons appointment as secretary was praised by almost all the papers, some were soon attacking him and insisting on his resignation. The Boston Advertiser demanded as early as the summer of 1862 that Stanton vacate a department which he has proved himself incompetent to fill. The New York World declared in 1863, When we see any order with Stantons name at the bottom we are sure that if anything can by any possibility be done wrong, reasoned badly, or unfittingly expressed, we shall surely find it. The New York Times, on the other hand, near the end of the war, lauded Stantons indomitable industry, inflexible integrity, high courage, and devoted patriotism. Lincolns private secretary John Hay, writing Stanton not long after Lincolns death, said that Lincoln loved and trusted Stanton: How vain were all efforts to shake that trust and confidence, not lightly given never withdrawn.⁶ Stanton remained the secretary of war under Lincolns controversial successor, Andrew Johnson. Stanton, who was now a Radical Republican, and Johnson, who remained a Democrat at heart, soon disagreed about reconstruction. Johnson wanted to turn the Southern states over to the Southern white leadership; Stanton insisted that the federal government and the Union Army should protect Southern blacks and Northern sympathizers. Johnson and Stanton quarreled, first in private and then in public, and their quarrel became part of the larger political war between Johnson and the Republicans. In early 1868, finally fed up, Johnson attempted to remove Stanton and appoint Lorenzo Thomas as secretary of war. For a while the nation had two secretaries of war: Thomas, attending Johnsons cabinet meetings, and Stanton, holed up in the War Department but without access to the White House. It was Johnsons attempt to remove Stanton, which Republicans viewed as utterly illegal, that led to the impeachment and near removal of Johnson. After the Senate declined to convict Johnson, by only one vote, Stanton resigned and returned to private life. So Stanton was a critical figure not just in the Civil War but also in Reconstruction. One simply cannot understand the first impeachment of an American president without understanding Edwin Stanton. When Stanton left the War Department in the spring of 1868, his health was failing and he had only a few months to live. He devoted much of the fall of that year to Grants political campaign, both because he favored Grant for president and because he hoped for a suitable appointment in the Grant administration. Grant eventually did appoint Stanton, but too late. In December 1869 Grant nominated and the Senate confirmed Stanton to a seat on the Supreme Court, set to open in February of the following year. Stanton never took the oath of office. He died at the age of fifty-five, of congestive heart failure, a few days after his confirmation. Stantons name is familiar, but there is much about him that Americans, even those well versed in the Civil War, do not know. The aim of this book is to tell the whole life story of this important, interesting, contradictory, controversial man.