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Interviews: Charles A. Dana's Recollections of the Civil War

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He was the son of a Presbyterian clergyman -- Reverend Doctor Montgomery. When this young man was brought to the War Department, there was nobody there except me. He and I were acting. He got a place as Consul somewhere -- I think somewhere in England, and he got married, but the habit of lying which he acquired in the course of these transactions, he could not get over. I remember he got in some scrap -- I do not know whether it was some commercial fraud, or a divorce or what -- at any rate he got into trouble, and since that he came into this office once but for many years I have not seen him.

George Shea was a Judge here, and it is not long since he died. Stanton's middle name -- I do not know. Judge Shea asked me. I think he had no special purpose.

Mr. Stanton was always well dressed -- never was anything showy about his dress -- always dressed in dark clothes. He was a student of history -- he knew a great deal of history, and I should suppose he had read more books on that subject than any other. He made no show of his learning, and was very fond of discussing legal questions. But there was nothing eccentric about him that I can remember.

Mr. Eckert perhaps had a good deal to do in it, but it was not his job. When I went to the War Department he was there
and he was Chief of the Telegraph Bureau, but he was not seen much, except in the Bureau. I happened to know more about it and by using these ciphers and seeing a great deal more of Eckert than of his assistants, I got to know a great deal more about the business of the Telegraph Bureau, but how far it was increased, I do not know. They had got in the way of -- when the army moved down they set up a telegraph wire and kept it connected all the way, as long as they could, and in the battles of the Wilderness, the telegraph was always there, and it was also in Tennessee. It became a regular part of the War Bureau's operations to keep the wire connected always. Eckert had a great deal to do with that, because he was a very energetic and capable man -- very intelligent.

Mr. Lincoln was always the master, and he did not put on the appearance of it at all. He never gave a hair's breadth, never gave way -- he always had his own way. The relations between him and all the Secretaries were perfectly cordial always and unaffected, and without any appearance of his thinking himself the boss, but it was always his will, his order, that determined a decision. They knew him as a public speaker, a member of Congress, but he never said or did anything that would justify any doubt. He never was in a passion -- never was vexed -- never was impatient. He went along, and it was his order that
was obeyed always. He used to go around I think particularly to the War Department because that was the centre of the most interesting news. Mr. Lincoln was not undignified -- he was genial, kind and good-natured -- never saw him but that he would come up and put his arm through yours and go on telling you a joke. He was very fond of telling a little funny story. His stories were always to illustrate. Sometimes he would tell a story to a person he was very intimate with for the mere sake of telling it, but the stories that were reported were always to illustrate. He was not what you call an awkward man. Six months ago he was tall -- he was not graceful, but he was always dignified. His movements were not hurried and swift and spasmodic -- they were always considerate and rather slow. For instance, that afternoon when I went into his office and he was washing his hands and rubbing them on the towel -- without a coat on without any cravat -- he was not strictly awkward -- not graceful -- he always had command of himself.

Mrs. Lincoln was a woman naturally impatient and unlike most ladies, anxious to have her own way. But she was kind, cordial, always polite, and I never saw her in a passion. I do not know but from her constitution she might easily have got into a passion -- got angry, but there was no great variety in her mentally -- she was not a person of any extensive information -- she was a person -- she might say things, though I never knew
of her saying anything disloyal at all. If she got mad
she might say these things. I knew the children. Tad used to
come into my office very often. We went all around and he
would go with his father who was very fond of having him with
him when he was going out on business -- going over to the Depart-
ment. You could not always understand what he said. He had a
thick tongue but he was rather cunning and the child of the Pre-
sident is always made much of. I knew Mr. Lincoln was rather
disposed to melancholy -- a man of dark complexion and dark tem-
per, and such a man is generally disposed to sadness. The only
evidence of it I ever saw was -- he used to say "it is a pity
the President should be so fond of jokes." I never saw any
sign of a mental weakness or of anything that affected his intel-
lectual status at all. His strongest point was judgment --
soundness of judgment -- not making any mistake as to the nature
of the thing that he had to deal with; and patience -- never seem-
ed to be in a great hurry; humor - his first disposition was to
see the funny aspect in anything. The great thing about him was
a great wide and solid judgment. The only sign of his being
weak that I ever saw was his unwillingness to give in to the
execution of a spy. A quarrel with Lincoln you would not en-
gage in unless you wanted to leave your office - leave your post.
I never heard Stanton argue any case with the President and I
never heard him argue to over-convince the President against his
will.