

# Freedom, Union, and Power: Lincoln and His Party During the Civil War

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## Review

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**Abbott, Richard H. and Quist, John W., Editor.** *For Free Press and Equal Rights: Republican Newspapers in the Reconstruction South.* University of Georgia Press, \$39.95 ISBN 820325279

Black, white, and red all over

The Southern beat after Appomattox

As African-Americans, Southern unionists, and Northern immigrants coalesced to establish a Republican presence in the postwar South, they recognized the strategic importance of newspapers to inform and expand their popular base. In the years after the Civil War, Republican operatives organized some 430 daily and weekly newspapers throughout the South. At the height of Reconstruction, Republican papers accounted for nearly 30% of all partisan Southern newspapers. Though most of these folded after a few years, their very number reflects the importance Republicans gave the press in their fight for political reform. Unfortunately, historians have largely ignored the strategic role the press played in this battle. The late Richard H. Abbott, with editorial assistance from historian John W. Quist, rectifies this in his thorough and informative study, **For Free Press and Equal Rights: Republican Newspapers in the Reconstruction South.** In nine chapters, Abbott, a one-time professor of history at Eastern Michigan University, recounts the growth of the Southern Republican press before, during and after the war, identifies and explains the primary issues that Republican editors championed, examines whites Southerners' reactions to the Republican Press, and traces its gradual decline in the wake of Southern Redemption. Abbott is nothing if not meticulous, often summarizing events state-by-state to suggest the full sweep of the Republican press's history in the postwar South.

As Abbott shows, Republican editors faced a daunting task. The postwar South proved a difficult environment to establish Republican party organs. Former Confederates ostracized, threatened, and sometimes physically assaulted

Republican editors. In addition, the economic dislocation of the South meant that editors had to scramble for sufficient subscriptions and advertising contracts to operate their presses. Equally troublesome, Republican editors faced diverse internal conflicts. In most regions, their largest constituency, formerly enslaved African Americans, was illiterate and too poor to subscribe anyway. Equally problematic, Republican editors often found themselves pulled in two different directions. On the one hand, devout Republicans, many of whom were African Americans, looked to their local Republican newspaper to defend their interests and help build a sense of community that would empower resistance to harassment and repression. On the other hand, many Republican editors believed that they needed to reach beyond their loyal base to make the party both economically and politically viable. Yet to do so invariably meant endorsing political and economic policies that alienated the party faithful. Ultimately, Republican editors split along ideological lines that reflected larger conflicts within the party. From the outset of Reconstruction, Radical editors used class appeals to attract poorer Southern whites to the party. Conversely, Centrist editors tried to attract upper-class whites by avoiding controversial topics—most notably black enfranchisement and political disabilities for ex-Confederates—and played up the Republican Party's efforts to modernize the South's economy. Unfortunately, neither strategy had much success. And indeed the editors' different approaches intensified the deep ideological divisions that ultimately weakened the party.

Abbott's most interesting chapters concern the issue of state and federal patronage to Republican newspapers. As Southern whites became more hostile to the Republican Party, Republican editors became increasingly dependent upon state and federal patronage to survive. Yet as Abbott reveals, this proved to be no solution at all. For one thing, the quest for government patronage forced Republican editors to compete with one another. Those editors who did not get the more lucrative state and federal contracts to publish government documents and notices were often forced to close shop. In addition, Democrats claimed that large state printing contracts revealed the corrupt nature of Republican rule. Abbott argues that these charges were sometimes true. True or not, the accusations further undermined the legitimacy of the Republican press and the governments that supported them. Once Democrats reclaimed control of the Southern states, they systematically ended the lucrative printing contracts to Republican newspapers. Without patronage, these papers closed one after the other. By 1880, only 43 Republican newspapers operated in the South—a mere

10% of the total partisan press in the region.

**For Free Press and Equal Rights** is a scholarly work of the first order. Though Abbott's story of Republican ascendancy and decline is a familiar one to historians of Reconstruction, he sheds new light on the critical role that the press played in this history. Moreover, his careful research in a long-neglected field makes this work invaluable for scholars interested in the political history of the era. Scholars will be especially appreciative of Abbott's thorough footnotes and 16 page list of the 430 Southern newspapers that he was able to identify, complete with place of publication and approximate years of publication. John W. Quist also deserves praise for seeing Abbott's work through to publication.

*Steve Tripp specializes in social and cultural history. He is the author of Yankee Town, Southern City: Race and Class Relations In Civil War Lynchburg. His current research explores the ways in which the Southern ethic of honor informed Ty Cobb's behavior as a baseball player and how a largely northern public interpreted Cobb's behavior.*