

Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion

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Review

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Holzer, Harold *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion*. Simon and Schuster, \$37.50 ISBN 9781439192719

The Press and the President

Lincoln and The Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion is a detailed story of the process of journalism and the cult of personality of editors and owners. For a politician who declared that public sentiment is everything, Lincoln recognized that, more than any other one thing, newspapers shaped public opinion. During the Civil War era, of the over 4,000 newspapers and journals approximately, 8 of 10 were political in nature.

Lincoln began reading newspapers very early in his life. Later he used them to argue his case and attack political opponents. He cultivated editors by pampering them, hindering them, or manipulating them to change their course. Lincoln the President used the press to talk directly to readers. At times he signed his work, at times he submitted his work anonymously; he guided his presidential staff in their newspaper submissions. Lincoln's writing style was similar to the English translators of the King James's Bible and the Shakespeare's plays. His writings reveal his wit and precise perceptions of the public's temperament.

Not since the 1952 appearance of Robert Harper's *Lincoln and the Press* has there been a complete and copious examination of the relationship between Lincoln and newspaper editors and writers. Though Robert Harper used a multitude of examples of newspaper editors' abuse of Lincoln, he did not closely analyze Lincoln's motives or leadership style in dealing with antagonistic or cordial newspapermen. Holzer finds that Lincoln's general tolerance and forbearance, as well as his single instance of suppression and arrest, was generated by several experiences throughout his life.

Through deep research, Holzer offers an analysis of Lincoln's style of engagement with his open enemies, ambivalent acquaintances, and Republican Party friends in the newspaper industry. The industry's larger, faster and more productive printing presses offered multiple editions inexpensively. Newspapers became increasingly prevalent due to the speedier gathering of news via telegraph and its delivery by railroads. Aggressive entrepreneurship marked the path of successful, wide circulation of newspapers.

Unlike Harper, Holzer offers a cogent analysis of Lincoln's mindset and character. Harper reviewed the newspapers that opposed Lincoln. Holzer thoroughly reviews both Lincoln's opponents' and the journalism of loyal friends. He reveals the comparative size of the opposition press and the degree of its influence in its geographic region. Regarding the opposition press Holzer's anecdotes are frequent and well sourced.

Holzer makes it clear that Lincoln early in his career liked the atmosphere of editorial offices. Lincoln, over time, became adept at cultivating, through diligence and courtesy, the friendship of reporters and editors. He loved newspapers for what they were and for what they could do for him in politics. Of course local, state and federal governments did need printing done and Lincoln and his friends influenced publishers with contracts.

Holzer finds that Lincoln's restraint in the face of editors' animosity arose from his understanding the importance of dissent in a democratic republic. Lincoln understood that suppressing journalism during the war would establish a precedent that may in the future endanger journalistic freedom. Also he understood that during the war, such damage to freedom of speech might not be readily apparent. He realized that as President, to personally engage in the suppression of the press would have caused long-term damage to freedoms.

The press was a power long before Lincoln became president. There was furious competition among the editors to promote or challenge presidential candidates and their social and fiscal policies. During the Civil War era, objective reporting and truthfulness were not common practice, though editors endorsed the principle of truthful reporting. Most wrote news through partisan fingers. Holzer dwells upon the big three New York City newspapers and their editors. To each editor Lincoln was at different times charming, distant, uncaring, patient, tactful and manipulative.

James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* was a bigot who owned and edited the most widely read newspaper in America, both North and South. His newspaper offered the best content for day-to-day news and constant challenges for Lincoln. In 1860 and 1861 Bennett was the only editor to assign a full-time reporter to the president elect. Henry Villard, the correspondent, was at first scornful but eventually became a Lincoln supporter. Lincoln's treatment of Villard throughout the war offers a prime example of Lincoln's ability to treat a journalist favorably, converting him to the point that the correspondent influenced his editor, James Bennett, to soften toward Lincoln.

Holzer offers another example in Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, a quixotic moral crusader who erratically lusted for political office. In 1864, Greeley mused over his own vice-presidential candidacy. During the presidential campaign season, he attempted to organize arbitration with Confederates. Lincoln manipulated Greeley into a position in which the editor could meet but only with Confederates who did not have the power to negotiate.

Henry J. Raymond, founder of the *New York Times*, and a chairman of the Republican Party during the war was also a Lincoln confidante. The president offered Raymond scoops on emancipation policy as a means of challenging and contradicting the other two editors. Holzer also describes Illinois newspapers, both friends and foes of Republicans and Lincoln. Joseph Medill of the *Chicago Tribune* alternatively denounced and supported Stephen Douglas, fully resisted the military draft and emancipation, but to a degree became a convert to Lincoln's policies late in the war.

Republican editors described Lincoln as pleading for reverence toward the constitution and legal due process. Lincoln sometimes penned anonymous editorials for Republican newspapers. Lincoln never granted interviews nor held press conferences but he casually invited correspondents into his office for off the record and informal conversations. Generals Sherman, Meade, Burnside despised newspaper correspondents and banned their reporting efforts from their armies. At times Lincoln supported the generals; at other times he didn't. It depended on whether Lincoln knew the reporter or was familiar with his editor.

J. Cutler Andrews' in *The North Reports the Civil War* (1955) and *The South Reports the Civil War* (1970) offers the news writers' unique personal characteristics and calamities. Both Andrews and Holzer consult a significant number of individual studies of newspapers and individual editors. Also, both

have organized these materials into a cohesive description of news gathers [Andrews] and Northern writing editors [Holzer]. Both Andrews and Holzer offer instances of Lincoln and Stanton struggling with tolerance and suppression of news reporters. Both show Lincoln leaking and planting news and also cajoling and buying editors. Both authors describe Stanton as having a very low threshold of pain frequently crossed by news writers.

As it is today, the era of Lincoln was the era of a partisan media; newspapers were owned by politicians and their parties. Government contracts and political party campaign literature were vibrant sources of income for newspapers which literally controlled the printing presses of the nation. Lincoln and Republicans used these contracts to their advantage. Holzer offers deep research of this different media world, with illustrative anecdotes and well sourced analysis. These attributes mark *Lincoln and the Power of the Press* as essential for readers of Lincoln studies and news journalism history.

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