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Abraham Lincoln and the Northern Civil War Press

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Senior Project

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Abraham Lincoln and the Northern Civil War Press

O CAPTAIN! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:
But O heart! Heart! Heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.¹

With these words, Walt Whitman, in April, 1865, mourned the death of Abraham Lincoln, the beloved president of the people who had only days before achieved victory over the South and assured the safety of the Union. Since that time, Lincoln's popularity has only grown in the national memory, and today he is seen more as a myth than a man; a great legend who cannot be equaled. However, before the assassin's bullet turned Lincoln into a martyr, he was not always met with such unadulterated approbation. In fact, throughout his public life, the Northern press often heaped words of criticism and condemnation upon Lincoln, criticism that continued right up to the president's death. One may perhaps expect that the Southern press would abhor Lincoln, but it comes as a surprise to many to realize that the man who sits forever enshrined in the nation's capital did not always meet with universal acclaim in the North. By examining the relationship of Abraham Lincoln to the Northern Civil War press, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the president as viewed by his contemporaries—to, in essence, come out of the shadows of the statues to discover the real stature of the man.

Of course, in order to understand Lincoln's relationship to the press, one must first have some basic knowledge of the press of the mid-nineteenth century, a press very different from that of today. Newspapers and other periodicals made up the press of the day, and citizens read them voraciously, especially once war was underway. These periodicals provided the only means of

¹ "O Captain! My Captain!" Walt Whitman, <http://www.bartleby.com/142/193.html>

Lincoln often published anonymous editorials for this paper, becoming close friends with the editor and his wife and spending hours loafing in the newspaper office. In fact, the editor's wife reintroduced Lincoln to Mary Todd after the two had broken their engagement.⁷ In May of 1859, Lincoln would himself become the owner of a newspaper when he bought the *Illinois Staats-Anzeiger*, a German weekly, for \$400. He would later have to sell the paper when he won the presidential election.⁸

Lincoln, then, became familiar with the world of newspapers early in his career. He continued to take advantage of the relationships he formed with editors throughout his political life. Lincoln gained much of his national notoriety through the 1858 debates he had while running for a U.S. Senate seat against Stephen Douglas. Lincoln had this opportunity to run against Douglas thanks to four Illinois editors who in April of 1858 arranged for Lincoln to win the Republican nomination.⁹ Newspaper editors could be enormously influential in the political scene, and Lincoln would again receive help when trying to get the Republican nomination in 1860. Horace Greeley, the editor of the *Tribune*, held a grudge against frontrunner William H. Seward and therefore eventually threw his support to Lincoln, helping to persuade delegates to give him their votes.¹⁰ Lincoln would later remember the usefulness of such tactics, and in 1864, he employed Pennsylvania editor Alexander K. McClure to work at the Republican convention to get Andrew Johnson elected to the vice presidential slot instead of the current vice president Hannibal Hamlin.¹¹

⁷ Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 2-6.

⁸ Harry J. Maihafer, *War of Words: Abraham Lincoln & the Civil War Press* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2001), 13.

⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 18.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 179.

some notoriety in the East, particularly thanks to coverage by the *Baltimore Patriot*.¹⁴ However, for the most part, Lincoln still had a great deal of difficulty gaining attention outside of Illinois at this point in time. For example, in 1848, the *Boston Atlas* editor invited Lincoln to make a speech in support of Zachary Taylor, the Whig candidate for president. However, William Seward overshadowed Lincoln and the *Atlas* chose not to run the text of Lincoln's speech.¹⁵ Similarly, in 1856, Lincoln spoke at the first official meeting of the newly formed Republican Party. Not one paper published Lincoln's speech, although press reports indicate that the crowd found it wildly pleasing.¹⁶

Clearly, to take part in politics on the national level, Lincoln had to be known to the nation as a whole. To become known, he had to have press, particularly press that reported Lincoln's words and ideas so that they could be conveyed to the people. This coverage began on June 16, 1858, after Lincoln was nominated to run against Douglas. The words of this speech would not only be reported in newspapers, but would be remembered for generations to come. In part, Lincoln said:

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe that this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect this Union to be dissolved—I do not expect this house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided.¹⁷

Republican papers applauded, while Democrat papers assailed, the speech, but the commentary mattered little; what mattered was the American public finally having a chance to hear Lincoln speak. Assuredly, Lincoln understood the importance of having his message conveyed. Immediately after giving the speech, he handed the manuscript to *Chicago Tribune* reporter Horace White, asking him to proofread it once typeset. He then followed White to the

¹⁴ Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 16-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 20.

press to convey his thoughts to the public. In fact, throughout his presidency, Lincoln would use his secretary John Hay to write anonymous editorials supporting Lincoln's point of view.²²

Another example of Lincoln's use of the press occurred when he attempted to use his inaugural address, an address major papers could not refuse to print, to offer an olive branch of peace to the South. Lincoln said:

Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this great land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.²³

The Pony Express ensured the speech reached Sacramento, California, in seven days and seventeen hours.²⁴

Numerous other examples exist of Lincoln's using the press to let his eloquent language speak directly to the people. In 1863, he was invited to a meeting of Union soldiers in his hometown of Springfield, Illinois. Unable to attend, he instead sent a letter, and, knowing that the press would reprint it, took the opportunity to explain to the nation why the Union must continue to fight and what made the Emancipation Proclamation necessary.²⁵ In 1864, Lincoln sent a letter to the editor of the *Frankfort (Ky.) Commonwealth* that was picked up by papers across the nation. He said:

I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me...If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills that we also of the North, as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.²⁶

²² Harry J. Maihafer, *War of Words: Abraham Lincoln & the Civil War Press* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2001), 32.

²³ *Ibid*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ *Ibid*, 131.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 159.

Lincoln instead had John Forney, editor of the *Philadelphia Press* and a close Lincoln confidante, publish an editorial supporting such a policy. This was Lincoln's way of gauging public reaction.³⁰

In another instance, Lincoln used Forney to turn the tide of public opinion. In November of 1862, he replaced George McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac. Since the soldiers of that army were loyal to McClellan, Lincoln had Forney take the *Sunday Morning Chronicle*, turn it into a daily paper, and distribute 10,000 copies to the soldiers filled with items promoting the administration.³¹

To get positive press, Lincoln also promised favors to newspapermen. Today, such action would be scandalous, but in an era when the editors helped to choose who wins election at nomination conventions, such activity seemed par for the course. After Lincoln's first election, he awarded Cabinet positions to four former editors.³² During his second campaign, he promised favors to the editors of all three major New York papers, the *Times*, *Tribune* and *Herald*.³³

Clearly, Lincoln expertly used the press for his own advantage. He used them to disseminate his ideas to the public, to get information, and to gauge public opinion, all of which helped him in his presidency. However, sometimes, Lincoln used the press just for fun, especially when he had a chance to outsmart Greeley, whose relationship with Lincoln was somewhat tempestuous. On August 20, 1862, Greeley, as he often did, used his paper to offer some advice to Lincoln, demanding he free the slaves. Of course, at this point, Lincoln had already drawn up the Emancipation Proclamation, but he saw no reason to explain that to Greeley. Instead, he sent a reply by way of the *Washington National Intelligencer*. "I would

³⁰ Ibid, 70-71.

³¹ Ibid, 87.

³² Ibid, 35.

³³ Ibid, 203.

Greeley looked like a fool who had been duped.³⁷ “I guess I am about even with him now,” Lincoln would later comment to Charles Dana.

By the end of his life, Lincoln had learned to use the press so well that he could even have a laugh at the expense of editors who occasionally frustrated him. However, the relationship between Lincoln and the Civil War press went both ways. The press also commented on Lincoln free of his control. Some of this press was favorable. Even the *New York World*, generally antagonistic to the president, declared him “The Right Man in the Right Place,” after his 1861 message to Congress. The paper also compared Lincoln to George Washington, a practice that became increasingly common as time passed.³⁸ In July of 1862, the *New York Evening Post* declared “We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more!” after Lincoln called for a build-up of troops, something he had been reluctant to do in April for fear of public reprisal.³⁹

Lincoln also received a great deal of positive press after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, although in this case support was typically divided down party lines, with Republicans supporting the president and Democrats rejecting outright his proposal. The *Chicago Tribune* was particularly eloquent in its praise of the president. The paper declared:

From the date of this proclamation begins the history of the Republic as our Fathers designed to have it—the home of freedom, the asylum of the oppressed, the seat of justice, the land of equal rights under the law, where each man, however humble, shall be entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁴⁰

The press could certainly approve of President Lincoln, even when he was not actively courting their support. However, all too often, the press did not heap the president with such

³⁷ Ibid, 310-312.

³⁸ Hans L. Trefousse, *First Among Equals: Abraham Lincoln's Reputation During His Administration* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). 34.

³⁹ Harry J. Maihafer, *War of Words: Abraham Lincoln & the Civil War Press* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2001), 64-7.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 80-81.

were being evacuated.⁴⁴ It seemed the press simply made up the story when unsure of the facts, or, as in the following instance, believed reports that were completely untrue. In 1864, both the *New York World* and the *New York Journal of Commerce* ran with a false report that Grant's army had fallen and Lincoln was drafting an additional 400,000 men.⁴⁵

Lincoln, then, often had to contend with the falsehoods of the press; however, sometimes a worse problem occurred when trying to keep the press from printing stories. General Order No. 67 stated that the press could not communicate military movements or other intelligence that could potentially aid the South;⁴⁶ the order was routinely ignored. "Such information from our friends is more injurious than that gained by rebel spies," General H. W. Halleck commented. "Such publications have done immense injury to our cause."⁴⁷ General William Tecumseh Sherman concurred. "You fellows make the best paid spies that can be bought," he railed at one reporter. "Jeff Davis owes more to you newspapermen than to his army." Sherman attempted to stop such actions, even evicting one *New York Herald* reporter from the front lines. Lincoln, however, told Sherman he could not take such measures in the future.⁴⁸

Despite his bitter resentment of reporters who reported troop movements, Lincoln had to be very careful when censoring the press due to intense scrutiny and criticism of such actions, which opponents argued violated citizens civil rights. Nevertheless, in some cases, the president did allow the presses to be stopped. In 1861, tired of the defeatist attitude of the press, the president persuaded Congress to pass a law forbidding transportation of material that would aid

⁴⁴ Harry J. Maihafer, *War of Words: Abraham Lincoln & the Civil War Press* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2001), 38.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 173.

⁴⁶ Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 115.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 134.

⁴⁸ Harry J. Maihafer, *War of Words: Abraham Lincoln & the Civil War Press* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2001), 98-9.

decried such actions as going beyond the scope of the Constitution. The *New York Evening Daybook* reported:

On entering upon his office, he takes a solemn oath to obey and support the Constitution. Does any man pretend that Mr. Lincoln has not violated this oath in usurping the powers which the Constitution gives to *Congress alone*, of calling out and increasing the army and navy of the United States? If the people fail to rebuke one such trespass upon their Constitution, they may soon expect to be called upon to submit to *another, and to another, and another*, until their liberties have almost imperceptibly slipped away.⁵⁴

Such criticism, while not necessarily warranted, certainly could help to maintain a public dialogue on such actions and ensure the president remained within the bounds of his constitutional authority. Similar fair criticism occurred when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. While today's morality makes the necessity of such action evident, the standards of the time made such action more ambiguous, and many debated the necessity and constitutionality of the proclamation. "The Constitution confers on the Federal Government no power to change the domestic institutions of the States," the *New York World* proclaimed. "This policy makes changes of the most violent and sweeping character."

While the above examples reveal a measured response to Lincoln's policies, much of the criticism he faced was more personal—vicious, vindictive and vituperative. The press even criticized the Gettysburg address, Lincoln's most famous and honored speech, the words of which have been recited by schoolchildren for generations. He said:

Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure...It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom;

⁵⁴ Andrew S. Coopersmith, *Fighting Words: An Illustrated History of Newspaper Accounts of the Civil War*, (New York: The New Press, 2004), 43.

Commentary only grew worse from there. In August of 1861, the *Philadelphia Christian*

Observer said:

The gross, brutal, fiendish, demoniac outrages perpetrated by the chicken stealers sent here to ravage the country, pillage the houses and burn them, outrage the women, and shoot down for amusement peaceable citizens, and even children, on the streets, have greatly exasperated the people.⁶¹

The most intensive attacks on Lincoln came during his campaign for reelection. People today complain about the viciousness of campaigns, but the derogations politicians today hurl at one another pale in comparison to those made against Lincoln. The *La Crosse Democrat* of Wisconsin accused him of swapping the “Goddess of Liberty for the pate and wool of a nigger. He has swapped a land of peace for a desert of graves.”⁶² The *New York Herald* decried a Lincoln meeting as a “gathering of ghouls, vultures, hyenas and other feeders upon carrion, for the purpose of surfeiting themselves upon the slaughter of recent battles.”⁶³

With people believing such things, it is no wonder then that the *Illinois State Register* mourned Lincoln’s successful reelection. The paper said:

Believing, as we do, that this result is the heaviest calamity that ever befell this nation; regarding it as the farewell to civil liberty, to a Republican form of government, and to the unity of these states, it is useless to say that his election has filled our hearts with gloom.⁶⁴

Hatred for Lincoln consumed some to such an extent that they belittled the president even years after his death. In 1868, New York journalist “Brick” Pomeroy condemned “the shameless tyrant, justly felled by an avenging hand, [who] rots in his grave, while his soul is consumed by eternal fires at the bottom of the blackest pit in hell.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid, 109-11.

⁶² Ibid, 228-9.

⁶³ Harry J. Maihafer, *War of Words: Abraham Lincoln & the Civil War Press* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, Inc., 2001), 204-5.

⁶⁴ Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 224.

⁶⁵ Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 45-6.

was doing wrong, suggestions on what to do next, and, occasionally, demands that certain actions be taken. The complaints began immediately. After his election, Lincoln became bogged down by the necessity to make Cabinet-level and other appointments. Both the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Times* criticized Lincoln for his slowness.⁷¹ Of course, perhaps Lincoln could have made decisions more quickly had he not been pestered by editors such as William Jennings Bryant of the *New York Evening Post*, who was more than willing to provide “recommendations” for the Cabinet positions.⁷² After the North lost the Battle of Manassas, the *New York News* informed Lincoln he must immediately extend a peace offer to the South and protect slavery to keep families from being destroyed by war.⁷³

Even when Lincoln did what the press of his party recommended, he received criticism. For example, the *Liberator* desired freedom for the slaves. However, when Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation, the paper complained:

After seventeen months’ waiting for the event, we at last hear the president speak the word which, had it been spoken at first, would have commanded the sympathy and applause of the world, and cut short the life of the Rebellion with a comparatively small loss of life and treasure.⁷⁴

Every time anything went wrong, the press demanded change. When Grant suffered heavy casualties, editors informed Lincoln popular sentiment required his removal. “I can’t spare this man—he fights!” Lincoln responded,⁷⁵ wisely ignoring the advice of the fair-weather press.

⁷¹ Harry J. Maihafer, *War of Words: Abraham Lincoln & the Civil War Press* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, Inc., 2001), 36.

⁷² Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 75.

⁷³ Andrew S. Coopersmith, *Fighting Words: An Illustrated History of Newspaper Accounts of the Civil War*, (New York: The New Press, 2004), 74.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 105.

⁷⁵ Harry J. Maihafer, *War of Words: Abraham Lincoln & the Civil War Press* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, Inc., 2001), 63-4.

Criticism of the president continued right up through his reelection, with Greeley freely considering on several occasions whether it would not be better for another Republican to take Lincoln's place as leader. It was the support of the public that won Lincoln reelection. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* correctly pointed out, "Mr. Lincoln's re-nomination is clearly the work of the people of his party. The politicians *may* have been for him; if they were, they *followed*, instead of leading the people."⁸⁰ And indeed, after Lincoln's reelection, which he won with a 500,000 majority, the *New York Times* expressed the shock of newspapers everywhere. "The universality of popular sentiment, in favor of Mr. Lincoln's reelection, is one of the most remarkable developments of the time," the paper reported.⁸¹

And indeed the victory was remarkable. Papers everywhere in the North, particularly Republican papers, were now doing everything they could to express their unending devotion to Lincoln.⁸² Despite the negative criticism that would continue right up until Lincoln's assassination, and in isolated cases even after, and despite the difficulty of dealing with a press often busy printing either false information or too much military information, Lincoln managed to get through to the American people through his own understanding of the press, and in doing so, he earned their everlasting adoration, an adoration that made itself fully apparent in the wake of Lincoln's death.

Abraham Lincoln died at 7:22 a.m. on April 15, 1865, after being shot in the head by John Wilkes Booth during a showing of "Our American Cousin," at Ford's Theatre. Immediately, the scorn Lincoln had received at the hands of numerous papers was forgotten.

⁸⁰ Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 305.

⁸¹ Hans L. Trefousse, *First Among Equals: Abraham Lincoln's Reputation During His Administration* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 91.

⁸² Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 344.

newspaper clippings concerning his leadership, all of them positive.⁸⁸ Or perhaps Lincoln would simply have smiled and encouraged editors, as he often did, to pray as the man lost in the forest during a thunderstorm, “O Lord, if it is all the same to you, give us a little more light and a little less noise.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ibid, 388.

⁸⁹ Harry J. Maihafer, *War of Words: Abraham Lincoln & the Civil War Press* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2001), 41.