

Review

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Harold Holzer. *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014. Pp. 768.

Harold Holzer, a leading authority on Abraham Lincoln and the political culture of the Civil War era, has written a necessary and comprehensive addition to literature about both the sixteenth president and the nineteenth-century press. *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion* does what other works on the subject have not done, and that is to weave a perspective on politics and press into a singular narrative using Lincoln's words and those of three major news publishers. Lincoln, along with a triumvirate of New York newsmen—Horace Greeley of the *Tribune*, James Gordon Bennett of the *Herald*, and Henry Raymond of the *Times*—Holzer writes, contributed directly to a legacy that continues to shape our understanding of the American experience.

While texts about Lincoln have reached virtually innumerable levels—Jackie Hogan estimates that more than fifteen thousand different titles are currently in circulation¹—relatively few have focused on his presidency and the press; and, as Holzer observes, the politician's direct ties to newspapers remain a fertile area of study. The reason this part of Lincoln's career has escaped scrutiny is likely because he kept from the public his affiliations with the press. During the antebellum and Civil War periods, politicians in general sought to avoid the appearance of having unseemly connections with the sensational and often vitriolic content of newspapers. Regardless, from the earliest days of his legal and political career, Lincoln read newspapers regularly and with purpose.

The first known newspaper article he signed and published—in the March 15, 1832, *Sangamo Journal*—announced his candidacy for the Illinois legislature. In June 1836 he wrote to the same newspaper, indicating he supported female suffrage, a notion increasingly popularized by the Whig press. As an attorney, he continued placing notices with the *Journal* in the early 1840s. In 1840 he openly identified himself as one of the editors of the *Old Soldier*, which campaigned tirelessly

1. Jackie Hogan, *Lincoln, Inc.* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 29.

for General William Henry Harrison's successful presidential run. The *Old Soldier* had promised to "sear the eye-balls, and stun the ears" of the opposition, and seeing the effectiveness of the press in the election, Lincoln adopted it for his own campaigns. In 1859 he purchased the *Illinois Staats-Anzeiger*, a German newspaper in Springfield, to sway a valuable voting bloc in the 1860 election. "Except for his private banker, his law partner, and but one fellow Illinois Republican politician, he seems to have told no one about the purchase at the time, or, indeed, for the rest of his life," Holzer writes, an involvement that remained "largely unknown even to biographers" (xv). He spoke to the public directly through the press, and in time, began associating with the most powerful publishers of the day.

Holzer's book shows how Lincoln interacted with these figures—not only Greeley, Bennett, and Raymond—and how the worlds of politics and the press intertwined to create a competition for ideals and policy that determined the course of the nation between the 1830s and the 1860s. With a subtext focusing on the tension between Lincoln and his rival Stephen A. Douglas, the book constructs a parallel story about members of the press who put into words for readers the partisan debates between Republicans and Democrats. Holzer's goal in writing the book was to explore a story about nineteenth-century political journalism that went beyond previous attempts which focused on either singular personalities or broader cultural or developmental academic approaches.

The selection of Greeley, Bennett, and Raymond provides the strongest and most appropriate representation of "personal journalism," a publishing practice peculiar to the Civil War era in which major editors sought to shape and direct public opinion by the force of their reputations alone. Greeley and Raymond, who like Lincoln evolved from Whigs to Republicans, addressed political and social issues from demonstrably different angles. However, more often than not, they supported the first Republican administration in editorials and organizational support. James Gordon Bennett, their sensationalistic rival and owner of the Democratic-leaning *New York Herald*, chose to maintain political independence, and in doing so, he built a celebrity status for himself in exchange for distancing himself from immediate political influence over policy. By the time of the 1860 election, Greeley had become widely known as a civic-minded reformer, so much so urban dwellers recognized his name quickly, while Lincoln remained to them something of a curiosity. Indeed, Greeley's outspokenness had earned him a seat in the Thirtieth Congress at the same time Lincoln served as a Whig representative from Illinois. On issues of abolition and western settlement, Lincoln and Greeley generally agreed. However, Greeley's

responses to Lincoln's wartime measures became often so erratic, the president turned to Raymond, editor of the *Times*, who had proved to be a more loyal supporter. As a result, when a congressman-elect from New York sought Lincoln's aid on a political matter, Holzer writes, Lincoln advised him to consult Raymond, in Lincoln's words, his "Lieutenant-General in politics" (306). Raymond's trustworthiness in Lincoln's eyes translated into a remarkable legacy for the *Times*, albeit not due to the president's or the editor's efforts alone. After Raymond died in 1869, the newspaper went through a series of publishers and emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as the only remaining penny press paper of its kind. The *New York Times* to this day remains, Holzer writes, "the most influential daily not only in the city, but in the nation, and one of the leading print and online news platforms in the world" (565). Bennett's aim, simply to create an important and profitable newspaper, was realized as he eventually gained Lincoln's recognition in an offer from the president to serve as the American minister to France—an appointment the *Herald* editor in true form declined. However, the editor also left a legacy not at all in harmony with either Lincoln or his cohorts at the *Tribune* and the *Times*. While Bennett would be appreciated by generations to follow as the genius behind the *Herald*, less recognized, Holzer writes, "was the founding editor's long opposition to emancipation, black equality, and nearly all Republicans" (556).

The use of primary sources in this book, which includes an impressive array of reproduced photographs, images, and handwritten letters, is remarkable. While several attempts to compile encyclopedia-like information about Lincoln have emerged in the years marking the 150th anniversaries of the Civil War and Lincoln's rise to prominence, not one of them has woven the biographical accounts of four different personalities the way Holzer has done. Of note are the inclusion of materials from New York editors including Henry Ward Beecher (*Independent*), William Cullen Bryant (*Evening Post*), Manton Marble (*World*), and James Watson Webb (*Courier*). Materials from Illinois editors include those of Joseph Medill and Horace White (*Chicago Tribune*), James W. Sheahan (*Chicago Times*), and Charles Lanphier (*Illinois State Register*). Holzer's research of each of these newspapers is impressive, a welcome addition to literature about the era and well beyond typical focuses on the press of New York and Washington, D.C., alone.

At the same time, Holzer leaves room for further development of this story. The premise of the book rests essentially on a "Great Man" approach to history—a Romantic idea that individuals who, through their own sense of destiny and achievements, could influence others and society as a whole. While this approach works as the foundation

for this particular book, a dissection of the Whiggish notions of the “self-made man”—a concept created by Henry Clay—could more holistically describe foundational aspects of the era. Indeed, of any event in American history, the Civil War itself would cast into doubt the notion that societal progress was inevitable through the achievements of hard-working individuals, a fundamental component of antebellum thinking. The primary sources of this era, which Holzer has cited amply, were certainly steeped in a belief that great men indeed had the power to chart the course of the nation, and our understanding of Lincoln, Greeley, Bennett, and Raymond has in turn been influenced by this notion, in spite of the less studied shortcomings of each individual. Lincoln’s problematic relationship with the First Amendment, for example, still troubles historians and scholars of the press, as the same man who manipulated newspapers so effectively in his rise to prominence suppressed them while he was in power. Ultimately, among the Lincoln administration’s most enduring legacies with the press came not from his celebration of it but from his suppression of it or outright shutting down of newspapers and jailing of staff who wrote against many of his policies throughout the Civil War.

Moreover, at least one area in which these three news personalities shared distinct ideas deserves additional scrutiny. On one point, as noted in the concluding passages of *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, the editors reconciled over the effect Lincoln’s martyrdom would have on restoring a belief in the Union. For the first time, Holzer writes, “James Gordon Bennett, Horace Greeley, and Henry J. Raymond had finally found something about which they could agree” (554). This point is no small one, as historians often cite Lincoln’s assassination as the most widely covered newspaper story—if not the story most widely covered by media in general—in American history. Yet Holzer’s account devotes only a few pages to describing the event through the featured storytellers. Bennett, Greeley, and Raymond each filled several weeks—even months—of pages with news and thoughts about the slain president’s legacy, a point of common intersection that deserves additional examination for both Lincoln’s transformative effect on the nation and simply the sheer energy expended by newspaper publishers in covering the event.

Regardless, the underlying, soundly constructed story that ties *Lincoln and the Power of the Press* together describes how newspapers of the era at times created political figures, and how politicians often manipulated the press. Ultimately, the two institutions became interdependent, and in some cases identical. Holzer’s contribution to scholarship details how Lincoln embraced and thrived in this institutional arrangement, a story that has largely escaped scrutiny until now.