JOURNALISM in the Civil War Era

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UNION

VICTORY!

PEACE!

Surrender of General Lee and His Whole Army.

FOREWORD

The study of Civil War journalism has traditionally been treated as a facet of the history of war correspondence. The two most noted scholarly works on this topic, J. Cutler Andrews's books, *The North Reports the Civil War* and *The South Reports the Civil War*, are certainly in this vein, and offer a comprehensive view of how the major dailies in the two regions reported the major events of the war. The more famous popular history of Civil War journalism, Louis Starr's *Bohemian Brigade*, does the same thing, though for a more general audience. While each of these works is packed with compelling stories of bravery and daring and sound analysis of the reporting, they lack an important element: context. War reporting does not exist in a vacuum, as a thing in and of itself.

It is this understanding that Civil War journalism was more than war correspondence that sets this work by David Bulla and Gregory Borchard apart as something special within this genre. They recognize that Civil War journalism was far more than just stories about battles and brave exploits by daring war correspondents. They explore the full story of the fledgling days of the information model of journalism that persists (more or less) today.

This journalism was founded on the work of field reporters, but their stories had to be gotten from the battlefield to the newspaper office by courier or telegraph, set in type, printed, and then distributed. That printing and distribution had to be supported by bookkeepers and front office staff, delivery people, and railroads. In other words, looking at only the war coverage itself tells only a small part of the whole story of Civil War journalism.

The story of Civil War journalism is every bit as exciting and dramatic as the war correspondence itself. Military censorship and civilian mobs threatened newspapers that stepped away from patriotic boosterism in their coverage of the war and politics. Military service swept some 80 percent of printers into the army, at least in the South. The struggle to obtain raw materials pushed editors to find creative ways to keep their presses rolling so they could keep up with increased demand for news. This was especially true in the South where most paper, ink, and type was imported from the North or from overseas. Transmission challenges loomed large, too, as editors and correspondents sought ways to overcome diversion of railways and telegraphs to military use.

The most amazing and poignant aspect of this struggle is that the editors, reporters and printers engaged in the struggle to acquire and disseminate the news did so even when economic conditions forced them to take chickens and collards in trade for subscriptions. And they did so because of the obligations they believed they had to their communities and to their readers.

At the same time they were dealing with trying to meet increased demand for their product with fewer resources, Civil War-era newsmen were also creating a new paradigm for journalism, one that included a very new form of journalistic communication, visuals, and a move to a whole new definition of news. As the war wore on, news moved from being an editor's personal political interpretation of events to being a matter of fact. Further, reader demand led editors to rethink how they would display news. Traditionally, page one had been reserved for advertising, but reader demand led editors to place news right on the first page—and to add multiple deck headlines to summarize correspondents' lengthy stories. This new form of news would not flower fully until the twentieth century, but its seeds were firmly planted and fertilized during the Civil War.

Few scholars have attempted the sort of holistic study that examines not only the nature of Civil War journalism but, more significantly, the symbiotic relationship between the press and its culture. The twentieth century's most prominent journalism historian, James W. Carey, argued that communications and culture both shape and are shaped by one another. His contention was just as applicable in the nineteenth century as it is today. Southern and Northern cultures were both essentially American in nature and so very similar, yet they were sufficiently different to endow the journalism in their regions with some subtle but important distinctions. For example, in the name of unity, the Confederacy established a partiless national political system. That made it much harder for Southern political leaders to single out journalistic dissenters for suppression. All men were nominally on the same side. The absence of an official opposition press, coupled with Southern thinking about civil liberties, account in large part for the fewer instances of censorship in the Confederacy. This was a major cultural difference from the North where, as this book demonstrates, the Republican administration was less reluctant to silence Democratic newspapers. The true significance of this book comes from its exploration of this relationship between culture and journalism.

David Bulla and Gregory Borchard have done the hard work of digging out the necessary evidence to paint a full-color portrait of journalism during America's bloodiest conflict. They deal with how a large daily like the New York *Tribune* covered the news and the editorial politics that directed that

coverage, as do so many histories. However, they go further and include in their study a picture of the struggles of smaller newspapers to get the news their readers wanted. Further, they ground their study in an accurate interpretation of pre-war journalism as essentially political in nature. From the earliest days of America through the antebellum period, news and politics were two sides of the same coin. Editors were politicians and politicians were journalists. As historian Jeffrey Pasley has pointed out, newspapers were the locus of American political life, and their editors were front-and-center leaders. Bulla and Borchard's work clearly supports Pasley's contention, demonstrating how America's press transformed from political to factual in the crucible of war.

Students of history always believe their period of specialization is the most interesting and important ever. Sometimes, they're right. In the case of American journalism, there is no doubt that the Civil War was a major turning point. The seeds of the political press may have been planted with the rise of the penny newspaper, but that was an essentially urban phenomenon. It was not until the Civil War that small-town newspapers like Schuyler Colfax's St. Joseph Valley *Register* began the move to a new way of thinking about the practice and principles of journalism. This was due in large measure to changes in reader tastes. The political upheavals of the nineteenth century consumed Americans as they slugged through debates over Nullification, expansion of slavery to the territories, and Secession. Politics was the agenda of the day, and that was what newspaper audiences wanted to read about. With the advent of war, the agenda changed. The time for political commentary had passed. The time for news arrived. The whos, whats, wheres, whens, and hows of the war became the new reader passions, and newspapers followed, developing new practices and principles, adopting new technologies, and adapting to changed social, political, and economic circumstances as necessary. Bulla and Borchard lay out this story, the story of journalism in the Civil War, in the pages ahead.

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Augusta, Georgia

PREFACE

This book began as a conversation in graduate school, more specifically, as presentations we began making in the late 1990s at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga's Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression. The dialogue between the authors will no doubt continue well after we have added *Journalism in the Civil War Era* to the histories of journalism and the Civil War. After countless discussions inside the classroom and out, in e-mails, on convention tours, at battle sites, and while exchanging source materials about the press and politics, past and present, David Bulla put our words to action and contacted a trusted editor about a book proposal. Ten years after first plotting the journalistic stories about personalities from politicians to publishers, inventions from the telegraph to the daguerreotype, and places from Gettysburg to Fredericksburg to Atlanta and to a host of related sites—and within the past few months back to Chattanooga again—we have what we believe reflects a robust perspective on an extraordinary era in American history.

Given the durability and popularity of the Civil War among amateur and professional historians, we realized well before we began writing the book that we have a wide audience to reach. What makes this particular endeavor unique, we believe, stems from the time we write it, a time in which the press as we know it has changed in ways more dramatically than any other era. No doubt, the years leading to the Civil War also saw an explosion of technological innovation that increased the ability of publishers to circulate unprecedented numbers of newspapers in a short amount of time. The democratization of the press in our own era to some extent mirrors this transformation; however, current conditions facing the press also relegates an understanding of print media to a new category of history, one that signifies the potential passing of an industry. And, as traditional members of the press wait to see if newspapers will continue to exist, historians, ourselves included, will continue to reconstruct the past based on our best sources—in this case, the leading newspapers of the Civil War. In this respect, *Journalism in the Civil War Era* comes at a critical time, a period in which historians and citizens alike are reinterpreting the value of newspapers in contributing to social discourse.

Personally, Bulla has roots in a Southern tradition and Borchard in a Northern one, and our different backgrounds, we think, contribute to a balanced interpretation of the press and of the war's participants. In time, we have grown to understand that we also share conflicted opinions about the events and characters we have studied, sometimes remaining true to regional loyalties, and at others, readily looking at events from the other's perspective. This understanding has roots in our training as historians, academicians, and as former newspaper writers, based in an agreement that the stories by and about the journalists featured in this book simply deserve to be told.

Interpreting sources relied on a method of analyzing primary sources, such as personal letters, editorial musings, books, newspaper articles, and historical artifacts. We located these materials at a number of locations, including archival searches at libraries, museums, historical societies, through online searches, and through the exhausting—but satisfying—process of transcribing microfilm.[1] The scope of sources generally ranges from the Penny Press Era (1830s) to Reconstruction (1870s), and the articles featured commented directly on the major themes of this book, including the cultural, economic, institutional, political, and technological issues of the day.

In constructing an account of this transformative period, the book provides an interpretation of journalism that uses a broad cultural account, also reflecting on political, military, and legal developments. Its various chapters also examine individual facets of journalism during the period, with each chapter connected by what we call (and by what other historiographers have called) the developmental aspects of the wartime press. This theme, which emphasizes the internal and external factors that affected the press, focuses on the partisan, social, and technological features of the nineteenth century that played a role in both the journalistic narrative about the conflict and how it influenced a national audience. Essentially, this book examines how the war affected the press and how the press affected the war.

The picture of the press during the Civil War that we discovered is one of a group of participants who played a role in reshaping a nation—a nation that had come into existence only a few generations before. The war was the Second Revolution, both in a political sense and a professional one, as technological innovations of the time allowed faster and more efficient means of newspaper production. This revolution in the production of news turned the penny press on its head, as the largest daily publications became complex institutions that made fewer demands of actual labor from leading editors and publishers, and as a result, well into the twentieth century, advertising agents replaced functions formerly reserved for editors.

This book contributes to literature on the subject by including analyses based (in terms of historiography) in cultural and developmental perspectives; that is, our interpretations analyze the roles of both society and technology in shaping events.[2] This book, for example, features an examination of a typical newspaper—not just the popular urban penny papers, but a small-town newspaper in the Midwest. At the same time, it revisits the contributions of leading editors and publishers, such as Horace Greeley, editor of The New York *Tribune*, who used his newspaper as a way to advance press freedoms under unprecedented circumstances. The book describes journalism as a specialized profession by including an analysis of technology's role in carrying timely information to a national audience. It features the beginnings of visual representations of war via Mathew Brady's photographic exhibitions and explains the development of journalistic conventions such as the inverted pyramid and the use of graphics, particularly maps. It describes the role of press organizations, including the Associated Press, in diffusing war information and the reaction of readers to major policy issues, including emancipation, taxation, conscription, and the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus. In short, it synthesizes work on individual subjects—both those that have been examined to some extent in secondary literature and those that have not—along with unexplored primary sources to form new interpretations of issues that have often gone missing in other accounts of the press and the war.

Although countless scholars have addressed either the press or politics during the nineteenth century, fewer played a particularly direct role in shaping our interpretation of the interconnection of the two during the Civil War. While we cannot claim to have made revolutionary discoveries in our own research—and can only reflect in awe at more than a century of scholarship—we have found, we believe, areas that deserve reconsideration. For example, one of the leading works on the press during the Civil War, Robert S. Harper's *Lincoln and the Press* (1951), looks at both the pro- and anti-war press; however, it was written more than half a century ago and focuses on Lincoln's political relationship with the press, not on the relationship between the press and society. In some respects, a comparable, more recent book, *The Civil War and the Press* by David Sachsman, S. Kitrell Rushing, and Debra Reddin van Tuyll (1999), although exceptional in individual contributions, touches on issues explored in this book but without a cultural or developmental theme.[3]

Books providing general treatments of journalism during the Civil War have meanwhile tended to focus on the contributions of individual editors only. While *Bohemian Brigade* by Louis M. Starr (1954) and *The Greenwood Library of American War Reporting* by Amy Reynolds and Debra Reddin van

Tuyll (2005), both provide extraordinary analyses of Civil War reporting, both focus more on issues of press freedoms than on the technological or developmental aspects of journalism. Among sources by writers with a professional background in journalism, James Moorhead Perry's *A Bohemian Brigade: The Civil War Correspondents, Mostly Rough, Sometimes Ready* (2000) (not to be confused with the Starr book of a similar title) provides a colorful account of the subject, but does not develop an examination of the social context examined in our book.[4]

Topical studies, while useful for interpreting specific subjects, also rarely fully explore the larger cultural or developmental arcs in which their topics played a role. For example, *Editors Make War* by Donald E. Reynolds (1971) looks at Confederate editors who pushed the war in the South without wholly contrasting them with their counterparts in the North. *Fanatics and Fire-Eaters* by Lorman A. Ratner and Dwight L. Teeter (2003), another example, examines specific events, six key developments leading up to the war and how the nation's newspapers covered them, but its timeline ends with the hostilities at Fort Sumter.

And although we could list dozens of additional works that have intrigued us, a final book, for this section, deserves note, as its authors have presented with us, and inspired us, at the Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression. Hazel Dicken-Garcia and Giovanna Dell'Orto's *Hated Ideas and the American Civil War* (2008) shows how newspapers from a wide spectrum of political perspectives framed the most controversial issues of the war. Examining in detail free speech issues, their book lays a foundation for additional work on the role and evolution of the First Amendment, as described in Bulla's work on Lincoln's suppression of the press and Borchard's profiles of Horace Greeley.[5]

Indeed, press historians who read our story critically will note the recurrence of Greeley's New York *Tribune* as a primary source—it is the featured subject of Chapters 2 and 3 and makes notable appearances in other chapters as well. We have also cited dozens of newspapers from the era, not the least of them the industry-leading New *York Herald*, but the fact that Greeley's *Tribune* plays a major role deserves explanation.[6] Historians interested primarily in the developmental aspects of the American press might rightfully point to James Gordon Bennett's *Herald* as among the most influential newspapers of era, outselling its competitors and devoting its vast resources to covering the war in an unparalleled manner.[7] But the *Tribune*, for our purposes, described the history of the era in more clearly intellectual terms, illustrating a cultural transformation beyond business sales alone. (It is worth noting here that

Edwin Emery, an honored media historian, observed that few people come close to Lincoln in being the subject of historical studies, but among nineteenth-century figures, Greeley, a personality featured in this book, is one of them).[8]

The resulting story featured the interaction between society and the press. We trust our account will allow readers the opportunity to examine both the achievements of members of the press and their shortcomings. It should also encourage readers to explore and analyze the value of press freedom during the war, a time when that freedom came under intense fire. In subscribing to an observation made by Greeley that "the illusion that the times that were are better than those that are, has probably pervaded all ages,"[9] we also reject an amateurish misconception about history as simply a collection of "names and dates." The story in the pages that follow is, rather, part of an organic body of work that contributes as much to our understanding of the present as it does the past, and we hope you will find *Journalism in the Civil War Era* as compelling as its subjects deserve.

Notes

1 Librarians at the following locations helped locate or provide documents and references: Dayton, Ohio, Public Library; Des Moines, Iowa, Public Library; Duke University Special Collections; George A. Smathers Library at the University of Florida; Goshen, Indiana, Public Library; Herman B Wells Library and Lilly Library at Indiana University; Indiana State Library; Jackson Library at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Library of Congress; Lied Library at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas; New York Public Library; Parks Library at Iowa State University; Roux Library at Florida Southern College; and the Walter Davis and Louis R. Wilson libraries at UNC-Chapel Hill. Museums and historical societies that also provided help include: The American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts; Center for History in South Bend, Indiana; Chicago Historical Society; Greensboro, North Carolina, Historical Museum; Indiana Historical Society; Iowa Historical Society; Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne, Indiana; Maryland Historical Society. The staffs at the following national parks and battlefields provided expertise in historical background as well as referrals for resources: Andersonville; Antietam; Appomattox; Chancellorsville; Chattanooga-Chickamauga; Ford's Theater; Fredericksburg; Gettysburg; Harpers Ferry; Kennesaw Mountain; Lincoln home in Springfield, Illinois; Manassas; Shiloh; Stones River; Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, Virginia.

2 William David Sloan, *Perspectives on Mass Communication History* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum, 1991), 5–9; James D. Startt and William David Sloan, *Historical Methods* (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2003), 19–40. Sloan and Startt have helped to systematize historiographic interpretations based in various schools, including, among others, cultural, developmental, progressive, revisionist, romantic, etc. The most influential schools among scholars of journalism and the Civil War, for our purposes, include those from cultural and developmental schools.

3 Robert S. Harper, *Lincoln and the Press* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 418; David B. Sachsman, S. Kittrell Rushing, and Debra Reddin van Tuyll, eds. *The Civil War and the Press* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 309–24.

4 Louis M. Starr, *Bohemian Brigade* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 367; Amy Reynolds, Debra Reddin Van Tuyll, *The Greenwood Library of American War Reporting: The Civil War, North & South*, Vol. 3, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 530; James Moorhead Perry, *A Bohemian Brigade: The Civil War Correspondents, Mostly Rough, Sometimes Ready* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000), 305.

5 Donald E. Reynolds, *Editors Make War* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), 310; Lorman A. Ratner and Dwight L. Teeter, *Fanatics and Fire-Eaters: Newspapers and the Coming of the Civil War* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 232; Hazel Dicken-Garcia and Giovanna Dell'Orto, *Hated Ideas and the American Civil War* (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books, 2008), 350.

6 James Parton, *Life of Horace Greeley* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1855), 281; Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1873), 529. Circulation leadership in the nineteenth century generally teetered between the *Herald* and the *Tribune*. The *Herald* generally led in numbers of *Daily* issues, but the *Tribune* generally led in *Weekly* newspapers. The account of newspaper historian Frederic Hudson on the numbers of the two newspapers in 1847 epitomizes the tightness of the rivalry: The *Herald*'s combined circulation totaled 28,946 and the *Tribune*'s 28,195.

7 Perry, *A Bohemian Brigade*, 49. "Not very many people liked James Gordon Bennett," Perry wrote. "Yet he was quite probably the greatest journalist the United States has ever produced. He created the modern English-language newspaper—warts, lots of them, and all. He was genius."

8 Edwin Emery, Michael Emery and Nancy Roberts, *The Press and America, An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*, 9th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), 105.

9 Horace Greeley, *The American Conflict*, Vol. 1 (New York, Chicago, Hartford: O. D. Case, 1866), 21.