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Civil War Journalism: Two Rough Drafts of One History

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of History,
University at Albany, State University of New York
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in History

Brianna Collora

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Abstract

This paper addresses journalism in the Civil War by analyzing both Northern and Southern reporting. The severity of censorship changed throughout the duration of the war, with it less harsh in the Union by the end. Southern officials did not censor as much, both because their resources were scarcer, and their officials were more opposed to the use of censorship. While past historians have argued that the decrease in Northern censorship is because the Union began to have the upper hand in the war, I argue that the decrease in Union censorship was not only because the Union was now winning, but likely an early effort to begin the process of reconciling with an anti-censorship South. The goal early in the war for the North was to preserve the Union. Towards the end, officials realized this goal was now attainable. Similar acts were also performed by Union officials; most famously Grant's refusal to take Lee's sword and his orders to his men not to celebrate and cheer for the defeat of the Confederates, who were now their own countrymen once again. The paper uses secondary sources on Civil War journalism as well as newspaper articles from the North and South to discuss the topic through three events that cover the beginning, middle, and end of the war.

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Introduction

As shots rang out between the North and the South, the newspapers on each side illuminated one half of a house divided, creating two rough drafts of history through journalism. Journalism is the first rough draft of history and during the Civil War, officials recognized the importance of the press and tried to use it in their favor. In the beginning of the war, the Union found it beneficial to censor papers that seemed to have an anti-Union sentiment. However, towards the end of the war, the Union significantly decreased its censorship. This decrease came in a time when the war had turned in favor of the Union and the goal of re-uniting the country finally seemed attainable while also achieving the goal of abolition of slavery. In the South, officials including President Jefferson Davis, engaged in less censorship. The current belief held by historians that the North lessened the use of censorship towards the tail end of the war was because they were winning is partially incorrect. This decrease in censorship was also an early example of reconciliation with a South that was against media censorship and did not participate in as much censorship as the North.

During the American Civil War, emotions ran high and were extremely powerful in both the Union and the Confederacy. Newspaper articles from selected major battles and events showcase the anger, hatred, and pride that was seen all at once. The highs and lows for each side were celebrated and criticized. Points of extreme anger and praise make it obvious which battles and events would later be considered turning points. Some of the reports are what would be expected to come from a nation in war, but others are shocking and unlike writing that would be seen in present-day reporting.

What can be seen by examining the reporting during the Civil War is the same events but viewed very differently. Through these different articles emerged talking points and themes that

appear immediately following the Civil War, sometimes lasting many years. At times, reporting from Northern newspapers remained the dominant narrative and in other instances, Confederate newspapers created the lasting narratives. In either case, it was common that the disagreements showcased by comparing the Union and Confederate newspapers continued long after the war. Civil War reporting in both the North and South illustrates that journalism is indeed the first draft of history.

The Union began reconciliation efforts very quickly. The surrender terms agreed upon were very lenient to the South. However, I argue that the Union engaged in censorship earlier in the war and lessened censorship later when reconciliation was likely. Therefore, reconciliation efforts can actually be seen by the North earlier than at the surrender discussions. Lincoln and the Union were considering reconciliation, a goal that they had had from the very beginning of the war, since the middle of the conflict when the war was in favor of the Union. He and the Union utilized newspapers to their benefit throughout the war.

The Civil War is a heavily studied topic in history, as it is one of the most significant events in American memory. However, Civil War journalism and the effect that it had on the war is studied less frequently. Few studies of Civil War Journalism discuss both the North and Southern papers. Furthermore, most previous studies of Civil War Journalism are regarding technical aspects of journalism, such as the advancements and professionalization of the field.

Studying Civil War era reporting by analyzing the newspapers themselves and what was going on behind the scenes for these papers to be published is important to American history because it illuminates disagreements between two sides that continued through many generations, as well as key narratives coming from each side that were reiterated for years to come. Some of the debates that stemmed from narratives seen in Civil War reporting are still ongoing today.

Understanding Civil War reporting and the differences in reporting between the North and the South, as well as how the narratives contributed to historical and public conversations surrounding the Civil War and events that occurred during it is an important part of understanding a key topic in American history that has been discussed and debated constantly, despite the fact that its occurrence was over one hundred years prior. Additionally, in a time when censorship of media and individuals is frequently debated, it is increasingly important to understand and evaluate past instances of censorship and times which the press was used as a tool by the government.

My research was conducted by reading newspaper articles from a wide variety of publications based in various states and regions, such as papers from New York including the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and others from Illinois, such as the *For*. For each event or battle studied, including events that ultimately were not explicitly included in my paper, I gathered newspapers from both the North and the South. I included a range of states to the best of my ability. While reading each newspaper article, I kept note of key terms or paragraphs that were particularly opinionated, strongly worded, or had an exceptionally clear tone. I also noted the general tone of the article. I made sure to take note of the location and whether the article was original or republished. In cases of republished articles, I attempted to locate the original article. Noting the location was particularly important because some of the newspapers were published from a region that did not match the name of the publication. This happened in the Confederacy because newspaper publications moved around as the Union occupied Southern territory.¹

¹ Ford Risley, "Civil War Journalism in Alabama," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, May 20, 2013, <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-3457>

The Civil War was the first war in American history that was so widely reported. At the time, reporting was a new profession, as the field was only just becoming professionalized. As a result, there were not many journalistic norms and there was debate in terms of the ethics of journalism and what material should or should not be published. In a time of war, it goes without saying that it would be a threat for war plans and information to be published, especially when these publications could be easily obtained by the enemy, as they were during the Civil War. The question then becomes whether or not opinions could be considered a threat.

Lincoln and the Union “commenced an additional war” against the press that was considered antiwar or anti-Union.² Public sentiment was very important to Lincoln, and he understood how important the press could be in influencing that public sentiment. Lincoln knew that many people relied on the press for their news which formed their opinions, and believed that “he who molds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions”³ The Union used censorship in its favor in the beginning of the war and stopped using it when they recognized the possibility of reconciliation efforts. Lincoln knew how to control the press and the Union “devoted a remarkable portion of their energies to mold public sentiment through the press: not just by appealing to journalists but in influencing the press directly and in some cases managing the press themselves.”⁴

My paper is organized into sections, representing the beginning, middle, and end of the war and how reporting and the censorship of that reporting was evolving. My paper will include reporting from both the Union and Confederacy, which is a practice that is rare in Civil War

² Harold Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion*(New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015), 335.

³ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, XXIX.

⁴ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, XXIX

journalism research. I first discuss reporting and censorship in the North and South immediately following the Battle of Bull Run, and will then discuss The Emancipation Proclamation, and Lee's surrender at Appomattox, and the evolution of the censorship. Although the first Battle of Bull Run, the Emancipation Proclamation, and General Robert E. Lee's surrender will be extensively covered in the paper, these were not the only topics that were of interest throughout the course of my research. Reporting on other topics, including the battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, were also researched, but ultimately are not included in the paper for the sake of brevity and to prevent repetition.

A limitation of my thesis comes from the fact that the newspapers are from so long ago and were not always well-preserved and readily available to use for research, particularly with Southern newspapers. The South simply had less adequate resources and smaller circulation numbers, resulting in less of the newspapers being preserved. The circulation numbers were so uneven that the circulation of newspapers in all of the Confederate states combined did not amount to that of New York alone.⁵

⁵ Ford Risley, *Civil War Journalism* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), XV.

1861- The Start of the War

Prior to the Civil War, the question of censorship was an open ended one that was a new issue. The lengths to which a government should go to suppress newspapers was and is subjective. “The governments of the North and South had few precedents to guide them in censoring journalists because the America press did not actively report conflicts until the Mexican War, and even then, only on a limited basis.”⁶ There was no norm for what material should be published and what material should be restricted or censored.

In general, the Confederacy was not in favor of government censorship. This is not to say that there were not examples of censorship of the press taking place in the South. Confederates would censor the press by having the commanders themselves restrict access to reportable news. For example, in Yorktown, Virginia, newspaper reporters were forbidden to report information on “the size of forces, the movement of units, and the results of fighting.”⁷ However, the newspapers fought back and retaliated by publishing unflattering stories about the colonel who had restricted them from publishing the information.⁸

The South expressed an opposition to government censorship that was not seen in the North in the beginning of the war. Overall, throughout the entire war, the South took less action against publications than the North did. Jefferson Davis was adamantly opposed to the censorship of the press and the North’s attempts and successes in doing so to their own newspapers. Davis made sure to highlight this, including by discussing it in his inaugural

⁶ Risley, *Civil War Journalism*, 84.

⁷ Risley, *Civil War Journalism*, 86.

⁸ Risley, *Civil War Journalism*, 86

address, stating that “through all the necessities of an unequal struggle there has been no act on our part to impair personal liberty or the freedom of speech, of thought, or of the press.”⁹ The press was critical of Davis but even then, the Confederate president believed that it would be a worse evil to shut down the paper and have lost liberty in the Confederacy, a cause which the Confederacy claimed to have fought the war to protect. General Lee was also supportive of journalists while annoyed with them at times, writing to his wife that “no one wishes them more success than I do & would be happy to see them have full swing.”¹⁰ The Confederate government in general tried to ensure that newspapers would not be suppressed; the Congress was prohibited to infringe upon the freedom of speech or freedom of the press, according to the Confederate Constitution.¹¹ Furthermore, according to Robert Neil Mathis, “there is an abundance of evidence to indicate that the maintenance of a free press was a major concern of the Confederate Government, newspaper editors, and the public, and that the Confederacy’s determined protection of an untrammelled press while waging an unsuccessful war was a reality deserving greater recognition and understanding than it has received.”¹² The Confederate’s vocal support of liberties and constitutional rights within their own government despite it being during a time of war makes sense. Southern states had just seceded in the name of their own

⁹ Davis, Jefferson. 1862. “Second Inauguration Address” (speech, Richmond, Virginia, February 22, 1862), Rice University. <https://jeffersondavis.rice.edu/archives/documents/jefferson-davis-second-inaugural-address> .

¹⁰ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 362.

¹¹ Robert Neil Mathis, “Freedom of the Press in the Confederacy: A Reality,” *The Historian* 37, no. 4 (1975): 633–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1975.tb00046.x>.

¹² Mathis, “Freedom of the Press in the Confederacy”

rights as a state, citing the unconstitutionality of the federal government's stance on state vs. federal power. It would have been hypocritical for them to infringe on the personal liberties of citizens by violating freedom of speech or freedom of press .

Since the Confederacy won the first Battle of Bull Run, officials did not have to worry about unfavorable newspaper reports right away. In fact, Confederate newspapers described the battle as “the great victory” and, in the words of the *Richmond Dispatch*, “the most hotly contested and most important battle ever fought on the American continent.”¹³

In the Union, however, the newspapers were not nearly as supportive as the Confederate officials seemed to be of their respective publications. The Union did not only have to fight Confederate forces, but they were also struggling to rein in and control the press on their own Northern soil. The North immediately began suppressing papers, especially because the war did not go well for the Union at first. In fact, “throughout 1861, the administration had proven much more successful at fighting journalists than at battling Rebel armies and standing up to hostile foreign governments.”¹⁴ Postmaster General Montgomery Blair argued that the measure was within his power and that it was important to prevent newspapers that were supportive of the enemy from reaching the enemy and encourage support of the enemy from others. It was very important at this time that the border states of Maryland, Delaware, and Missouri remained in the Union, and therefore, according to Union officials, people there should not be reading encouragement for the Confederates.

¹³ *The Richmond Dispatch*, July 22, 1861, <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/28418719/virginia-newspaper-reports-on-the/> (accessed February 20, 2023).

¹⁴ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 364.

The Union initially argued that they suppressed newspapers in order to keep sensitive information, such as battle plans and travel routes, confidential and out of the hands of the public and the Confederacy. However, the Union was also suppressing newspapers that they believed promoted an antiwar or anti-Union attitude and may have swayed some of the border states who the administration was desperately trying to keep in the Union.¹⁵ The apparent worry was that if people in the border states were reading press of Union failures and criticism, they may too be skeptical or unsupportive of the Union and the state would be at risk of seceding.

The difficult situation regarding the Battle of Bull Run was that it had initially seemed that the Union forces had won the battle. Because there was such intense competition among reporters, there was a desire of reporters to get their story out first so that their publication could be the one with the most recent, most exclusive news, and some reporters left the battlefield before the battle was completely over. As a result, Union newspapers published stories saying that the Union had actually won the battle which they would go on to lose shortly after. For example, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported on July 22, 1861 that the battle had been a “great slaughter and brilliant victory” and “a glorious day for the Union.”¹⁶ However, later in the day, the Confederate troops were reinforced and were able to go after the Union forces that had retreated. The Confederate forces finally defeated the Union forces, making the prior reports from the Union newspapers inaccurate. By the time that reporters had returned to the Union with the updated news, though, the War Department had blocked stories from going out. As a result,

¹⁵ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 336.

¹⁶ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 22 1861, <https://newseumed.org/tools/artifact/false-reports-union-victory-bull-run-1861> (accessed February 20, 2023).

the public in the Union was left to read reports of a Union victory and did not read updated reports in their newspapers for days.

The Union censored newspapers in many different ways. For example, similar to the South, generals and military leaders would sometimes block reporters from their camps, especially if there had been unfavorable reporting on that particular general. Sherman was known for doing this and his opposition to the press will be discussed in the next section. The Union would also force disloyal newspapers to close, arrest the editors of papers that were anti-Union, take other legal action against the newspapers, and block the newspapers from being mailed out in order to suffocate the publication. After the Battle of Bull Run, some Union papers called for peace and an immediate end to the war. As a result, a grand jury in New York said that five newspapers : the *Daily News*, *Journal of Commerce*, *Day Book*, *Freeman's Journal*, and *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* crossed the line of freedom of speech and promoted the ideas and sympathy of the Confederates.¹⁷ The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, for example, argued for freedom of speech and said that the publication was not disloyal, encouraging the rebels, or encouraging the North to give into the demands of the rebels. The grand jury did not hand down indictments, but the threat alone did not end the attempts to censor the publications. Blair, had the power to determine what had or did not have the privilege of being mailed through the postal service. Blair ordered the that the New York postmaster not accept the newspapers for mailing.¹⁸ Blair knew that the post office did not have the power to block publications from publishing certain

¹⁷ Risley, *Civil War Journalism*, 84.

¹⁸ "History of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle," Brooklyn Public Library, September 5, 2019, <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/brooklyncollection/history-brooklyn-daily-eagle>.

information, but he did have the power to prevent those publications from being circulated via the US mail. The House Judiciary Committee later agreed with Blair¹⁹ The *Daily News* tried to find a loophole in this punishment by shipping the papers using the railroad rather than the US postal service. However, this was unsuccessful because government officials found the shipments of the newspapers and confiscated them so that they could not travel to the South. It is certain that Lincoln knew of this censorship because he received telegram messages informing him of the confiscation. However, Lincoln did not directly take accountability for the censorship.

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Lincoln authorized Maryland military commanders “to arrest, and detain, without any resort to the ordinary process and forms of law, such individuals as he might deem dangerous to the public safety.” Leaving the authorization open to be so general made it so that military officers had significant discretion in regard to who should be arrested. Since he did not include any protection for journalists in this authorization, they were quickly targeted by the agencies tasked with executing this authorization. The publications that were anti-Union or anti-war were deemed dangerous to public safety, and therefore suppressed. . Reporters were taking a risk by continuing to collect and publish war news due to this authorization. For example, the editors of the *Baltimore Exchange* were arrested and sent to prison without a trial. Other editors were also arrested and imprisoned without a trial.²¹

Despite having had direct knowledge of censorship and having issued authorizations that he knew would result in censorship of newspapers, Lincoln was careful to avoid blame for the

¹⁹ Risley, *Civil War Journalism*,.

²⁰ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 347.

²¹ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 338-339.

ensorship and knew that it was controversial. Reporters visited the White House to meet with Lincoln regarding the censorship and argued that it had gone too far and was unnecessary. Lincoln deflected the correspondents' complaints and avoided the topic without directly responding to their complaints.²²

Lincoln's knowledge of the situation further speaks to the idea of the Union's lessening of censorship being an early act of reconciliation. If Lincoln was able to deflect the complaints and conversations with journalists so well, he was clearly well-aware that his use of the press was upsetting Americans. He was not blind to the effects the press had on people or the ways that it was received.

Nor were these NY newspapers alone. After the Battle of Bull Run, for example, the *Sentinel* in Pennsylvania and the *Jeffersonian* in New York were opposed to the war and faced mob attacks immediately after publishing speaking out against the war. The people who attacked the offices were never arrested.²³

²² Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 375.

²³ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 343.

1863- The Emancipation Proclamation

In his Emancipation Proclamation, President Lincoln declared that “all persons held as slaves within said designated State, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.” Lincoln argued in the Proclamation that he had the power, as commander-in-chief, to issue such a measure, which affected states and regions that were still in rebellion, since it was a time of an armed rebellion against the United States.²⁴ The Emancipation Proclamation was significantly contested from the second it was issued on January 1, 1863. Lincoln’s intentions were put under fire and questioned immediately after he issued the Proclamation.

Lincoln knew how to manipulate the press in his favor when it came to the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln used the press to prepare white Americans for the Proclamation. He knew that he had to be careful with issuing the Proclamation because there would undoubtedly be backlash. Before he issued the measure, the *Philadelphia Press* published an article in support of the abolition of slavery and demanding that the president himself take action to accomplish abolition. It is believed that Lincoln leaked the fact that the Emancipation Proclamation was in the works, and it is possible that Lincoln himself wrote the *Philadelphia Press* article. He also invited a group of African Americans to the White House where he discussed the potential solutions of migration of African Americans to Central America or Liberia. Lincoln brought a

²⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation*, 1862, Pdf, <https://www.loc.gov/item/scsm000950/>.

reporter with him to this meeting to be able to send his message not only to the group that was immediately at the meeting, but also the general public.²⁵ Lincoln knew that some Northerners, particularly in New York, were concerned that freed African Americans would migrate North and take their jobs and in turn, were unsupportive of emancipation. Lincoln making sure that the public knew that he had a solution for the problem that he knew they were anticipating was a clear example of him manipulating the press in his favor yet again. Instead of censoring the press at this time, Lincoln was feeding reporters information and using newspapers to calm the public's worries.

The Emancipation Proclamation did not affect Illinois, whose Constitution outlawed "slavery and involuntary servitude" in 1848., *the Illinois State Journal*, animatedly defended Lincoln in his authority to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, the fact that he had intended to free the slaves before he officially did, and in the content of the Proclamation itself, in terms of enslaved people being freed. In a column entitled "The Proclamation of Freedom," the newspaper opens by stating that anyone who had assumed that President Lincoln would not issue the Emancipation Proclamation was wrong and had no reason to believe so. This was very different from the Southern opinion of Lincoln's intentions, which would go on to be debated for centuries to come. The article goes on to say that the justification in defense of the Proclamation being issued had only grown in the recent past, especially after the recent election of 1862, when the Republicans were able to gain a two-thirds majority of the Senate. The article argued that the results of the 1862 election, which resulted in "a majority of the popular vote being with the Administration" illustrating that the people in the loyal states approved of Lincoln's

²⁵ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 397.

administration and his decisions and plans. Therefore, Lincoln was just because he had electoral vindication that the American people would support the Emancipation Proclamation.

The article goes on to argue that the reason for the Emancipation Proclamation is clear and it is that the enslaved people are now considered citizens, just as they should have already been considered citizens. The article points out that enslaved people had entered the army and had given their lives defending the Union. Furthermore, African Americans, including those who were formerly enslaved, have only proven their patriotism and deservingness of being legally considered free by Lincoln.

The article argued that formerly enslaved people who enlisted to defend the Union have proved their patriotism and citizenship even more than people in the Union who did not enlist in the military and instead stayed at home and voted in opposition to the Republicans. The article concludes by arguing that “the downfall of the institution of slavery is not an unexpected result of the war,” which proves that during the war, people, in this case in the North, were acknowledging that it was presumable that Lincoln would free enslaved people, that the Emancipation Proclamation did not come out of nowhere and have main intentions other than to free the slaves, and that slavery was the key component of the war.²⁶ More importantly, though, the paper stating that it is not surprising that abolition of slavery came as a result of the Civil War seems to be an example of a Northern newspaper acknowledging that the abolition of

²⁶ “The Proclamation of Freedom,” Illinois State Journal, January 7, 1863, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/756992428/?terms=proclamation&pqsid=R0tS785KD2RwQrstMzSkJA%3A51000%3A800629035> (accessed October 25, 2022).

slavery was now a goal of the war for the Union, rather than the only goal of the war being to end the fighting and reunite the country.

However, there was dissent seen in Northern papers regarding the Emancipation Proclamation. The *Chicago Tribune* in Illinois published an article the day before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued arguing that the Proclamation would divide the North. The article stated that “in issuing the proclamation he will, therefore, proceed deliberately and maliciously to divide the North... and he will, if the proclamation shall be persisted in, have made restoration of the Union impossible.”²⁷

The *Chicago Tribune* published direct opposition to Lincoln and a major wartime decision of his to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, a decision that the newspapers in the North acknowledged as one so significant that it altered the goal of the Civil War itself for the Union; the war was now not only fought to preserve the Union but also to abolish slavery. The *Chicago Tribune* being able to publish this article without any apparent backlash from Lincoln or the Union government, despite it being opposed to such a significant wartime measure by Lincoln, is a very telling example of the censorship in the North decreasing. In the earlier years of the war, Lincoln and the Union were censoring newspapers that promoted what they felt to be an anti-Union sentiment more liberally.

In May 1863, Lincoln praised a Union newspaper, *The Washington Chronicle*, for a positive article regarding Stonewall Jackson. The article described Jackson by praising “his heroism, his bravery, his sublime devotion, his purity of character” and said that “he is not the first instance

²⁷ “The Threatened Fulmination,” *The Chicago Tribune*, December 31, 1862,

of a good man devoting himself to a bad cause.” The article essentially excused Jackson for serving in the Confederate Army. Lincoln personally wrote to the editor of the paper to thank him for his article. This extent of praise to an enemy was unprecedented from Lincoln, who knew that his letter would be published for the public, including those in the South, to be able to read.²⁸

In the South, however, there was a very different sentiment surrounding Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. The Confederate newspapers immediately began to criticize the Proclamation, dismiss its effect on Confederate states, and threaten retaliation. Tennessee was except from the terms of the Emancipation Proclamation because the Proclamation was a military order. As a result, it only took effect in states where there was rebellion, and could not have had an effect in states such as border states that were still a part of the Union or under Union control, as Tennessee was at the time. In Tennessee, the *Winchester Daily Bulletin* began by calling Lincoln a buffoon, and did not, throughout the article, mention him by name. Immediately, the newspaper insisted that the main reason that the Republicans had in wanting to issue the Proclamation was not to free any slaves, but instead to prevent foreign governments from interfering in the war. The article argued that the Republicans knew that without them freeing the slaves, public opinion in foreign nations would be heavily in favor of the Confederacy. The paper argued that the public opinion would be so strong that the previously neutral governments would be forced to support the Confederacy. Therefore, the Emancipation Proclamation was not issued with the main goal of freeing enslaved people, but instead, only to prevent foreign nations from aiding the Confederacy. The article states that for that reason, they

²⁸ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 432.

are extremely opposed to the Proclamation and will not accept it, in fact, calling it “one of the most deplorable blunders that any Government ever committed,” and stating that it will “die the death”.²⁹

In addition to being skeptical regarding Lincoln and the Republicans’ intentions in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation and rejecting it, many Confederate newspapers were incredibly angry about the Proclamation. As a result, they were threatening severe retaliation against the Union in terms of its military officers. In Alabama, *The Montgomery Weekly Mail* argued that as soon as the Emancipation Proclamation was set to take effect, all Union officers that were captured should either be immediately executed or turned over by the Confederates to state authorities and considered felons. The newspaper not so fondly referred to the Union officers as “minions of Lincoln” and “fiends,” or demons. If they were turned over to the state, then no punishment should be considered “too severe,” and Union officials should be aware that they will be killed.³⁰ In fact, the Confederate newspapers reflected an anger in the South that was so intense that it continued to be remembered for years.

On August 31, 1864, nearly two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, a newspaper in Virginia called *The Alexandria Gazette*, mentioned the Proclamation. The newspaper argued that Lincoln could not save the Union and that his administration had displayed hate and placed obstacles in its own path that were too significant to overcome. The

²⁹ Winchester Daily Bulletin, January 6, 1863, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/171582130/> (accessed October 25, 2022).

³⁰ Montgomery Weekly Mail. January 7, 1863. <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/356163956/> (Accessed October 25, 2022).

obstacle that the newspaper references as this significant obstacle is the Proclamation.³¹ The fact that the Emancipation Proclamation was still being mentioned by Confederate newspapers toward the end of the war displays their anger towards the measure.

Years after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Lincoln, historians continued to debate it in different ways. There has been debate over whether Lincoln truly intended to free enslaved people and issued the Proclamation for moral reasons, or whether he did so strategically as a move to give the Union an advantage in the war. There has also been debate over whether the Emancipation Proclamation truly accomplished freeing the slaves, as the Southern newspapers explain that the Proclamation would not be respected by the Confederacy.

Simultaneously, around the time of the Emancipation Proclamation being issued, in the middle of the war, there are examples of Lincoln himself dialing back on press censorship in the Union. General William Sherman was not a fan of the press at this point of the war, nor was the press always a fan of his. While Sherman claimed to be a supporter of free press, he was not fond of reporters publishing articles that spoke of him negatively, especially when those reporters were gathering news from his camps.³² Sherman also had a hatred for “men who will not take a musket and fight but follow an army and pick up news for sale.”³³ In December 1862, just before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, Sherman took significant action against the press, demonstrating his lack of support for reporters, despite his claims to support freedom of speech and of the press. Sherman banned all civilians from traveling with his army, with transport crews

³¹ The Alexandria Gazette. August 31, 1864.
<https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/347280698/> (accessed October 25, 2022).

³² Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 439.

³³ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 439.

being an exception to the order. In January 1863, Sherman faced setbacks and, in an effort, to control the coverage of his losses, delayed reports that were unfavorable published by the *New York Times* by interfering with mail out of his headquarters. The reporting that Sherman delayed accused him of wasting time and effort “bullying correspondents, overhauling mailbags, and prying into private correspondence,” and described Sherman’s recent efforts as “one of the greatest and most disgraceful defeats of the war.”³⁴

Although Sherman was still dismissive of the press and was trying to restrict their access to news and censor unfavorable reporting of himself, Lincoln was not supportive of Sherman’s efforts against the press, despite his desires not to intervene in the matter. In 1863, Sherman attempted to expel and court-martial Thomas W. Knox, a reporter from the *New York Herald*. Knox was only found guilty of one charge, accompanying the army without permission, and was punished by banning from army lines. Still, after he was found guilty, a group of reporters signed a petition in an effort to fight press censorship and met with Lincoln at the White House, asking him to pardon Knox. Lincoln agreed to pardon Knox, if Grant approved of the decision.³⁵

At first glance, it may seem as though Lincoln did not really make a statement against press censorship in his decision to require approval from Grant for the pardon of Knox. However, in reality, this meeting was very telling of Lincoln’s shift in attitude towards press censorship at the middle of the war. Lincoln told the reporters who were not happy with this decision that “at present, our generals in the field are more important to the country than any of the rest of us, or all of the rest of us. It is my fixed determination to do nothing whatever which

³⁴ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 436.

³⁵ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, -437.

can possibly embarrass any one of them.”³⁶ Lincoln seemed to have believed that it would be unwise to anger his most talented generals in a time which the war was turning in the favor of the Union and he needed their talents and efforts more than ever. Sherman was so strongly opposed to what was, in his opinion, inappropriate conduct by the press, especially when it involved himself, that he likely would have had a very strong reaction to Lincoln embarrassing him more than he did by leaving the decision up to Grant. Lincoln knew this and had to protect the Union army while still making his opinion on the matter clear, saying that “Mr. Knox’s office was technical, rather than willfully wrong.”³⁷ In taking this approach, Lincoln was able to signal to reporters that he supported them, while also demonstrating his respect and appreciation for his more talented generals. Lincoln was careful to protect his generals and emphasize their importance to the war effort and furthermore, the preservation of the Union. In this particular moment in time, the country was in desperate need of successful leadership and war efforts at the hands of the Union generals. Lincoln was humble in recognizing this importance.

It is clear that Lincoln’s approach to the Knox case was because Sherman was an important general because Sherman displayed more power in restricting the press than other less important or talented Union generals. In May 1863, William McKee of *Missouri Democrat* obtained and published a letter from Lincoln in which he appointed General John M. Scholfield commander of the Department of the Missouri. McKee did not provide a source for the letter, which angered Scholfield, who ordered McKee to be arrested for the publication. The public was very angry about Scholfield’s reaction, and Lincoln made his opinion on the situation very clear. Lincoln wrote explaining to Scholfield that his actions were likely to anger citizens, even stating

³⁶ As quoted by , Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 437-438.

³⁷ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 438.

“I fear this loses you the middle position I desired you to occupy.” Lincoln also later wrote that he was entirely willing to overlook the case and did not feel that any harm would come from McKee’s publication. As a result, McKee did not have to reveal his source, and walked without charges.³⁸

In his warnings to Scholfield in regard to the case against McKee, Lincoln was very clear in demonstrating his feelings on censorship of the press during this time of the war. In fact, historian Harold Holzer considers Lincoln’s most evident statement on these opinions to be when he gave Scholfield the advice to “let your military measures be strong enough to repel the invader and keep the peace, and not so strong as to unnecessarily harass and persecute the people.”³⁹

³⁸ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 440.

³⁹ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 440.

The conclusion of the war

In the concluding weeks of the Civil War, the Confederacy was no longer appearing to be as unified as it once had and there were disagreements among leadership regarding the fate of the war. General Lee had been seeing firsthand the difficulties that the Confederate troops were experiencing. His troops had been starving and struggling, with very little resources and an even less morale; General Lee and his men marched for five days without food. As made obvious by his surrender at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865, General Lee knew that the war was over – more frankly, he knew that the war had been won by the Union and that the Confederacy had reached a dead end.

However, there was dissent from General Lee's opinion of the fate of the war. For example, President Davis did not agree that the South was doomed, and wanted to continue fighting, even after General Lee's surrender. It took convincing from General Joe Johnston, who surrendered to Sherman weeks after Lee's surrender on April 26, 1865, for President Davis to really believe that the war was over.

While the Confederacy was experiencing disagreement within itself, the Union, specifically led by Grant, was beginning to unite once again. Obviously, this was not unanimous, and there were disagreements about how much the South should be punished, the steps they should have to take, etc. While some were celebrating the end of the war, others were focusing on avoiding unnecessary humiliation of Confederate officials and soldiers, a step that historians agree is an example of a reconciliation effort.

In the nineteenth century, a surrendering general was expected to offer his sword to the victorious general. Against tradition, Grant wanted no glory and politely refused to take Lee's

sword. This was a sign of respect and unity shown from Grant and spoke volumes about the way that Grant felt the nation should view the South. Additionally, Grant did not permit his men to cheer or celebrate at the surrender. Grant reminded his troops that the Confederates, including the men in Lee's army that had just surrendered, were now their countrymen once again. Grant did not aim to humiliate Lee or his men, who, regardless of their cause, he recognized had fought long and hard against the Union while experiencing unspeakable hardships. Perhaps even more telling, Grant allowed Lee and his men to keep their side arm weapons as well as their horses, many of which had been brought by the soldiers themselves. Grant allowed the Confederate men to keep these materials in order to allow them to return home safely and to have animals that they needed on their farms. At the same time, there was major celebration in Washington D.C., which is sometimes thought of as the most joyful night in American history since the American Revolution had been won. Grant's gentleness was a clear act of respect and an early reconciliation effort but was not an isolated incident.

Towards the end of the war, the newspaper articles written, particularly in the North, were shocking but seemed to shadow the perspective of Grant and his early reconciliation efforts and the disagreement in feelings regarding the South and the end of the war, in the North. Confederate newspapers showcased the bitterness of the South.

As discussed earlier, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* had been subject to censorship efforts earlier in the war. The fact that the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* was still publishing at the end of the war speaks to the fact that the Union had let up on censorship.

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, like Grant, was very respectful regarding Lee and his surrender. The publication excused Lee in his decision to join the Confederate army, saying that he "gave his adhesion to the cause of the South with confessed reluctance, but in obedience to

what he falsely considered to be his duty, in opposition to his interest. To the difficulties between the two sections, which culminated in war, Lee contributed nothing.”⁴⁰ The paper is clear in defending Lee in his decision to side with the South but admits at the same time that he was not truly obligated in the way that the publication believed that Lee felt he was. The paper also believed that Lee was in disagreement with the South, and that his interest in the Confederate’s initiatives was not what made him join the war, but rather his loyalty to his home was what “forced him” to join the Confederates. Lee’s motives are debated, however and it is, of course, necessary to note that Lee was a slave owner himself, although the article did not point out that fact. The *Daily Eagle* goes on to appreciate Lee’s surrender and praise him for doing so. The publication felt that both the North and the South should respect and praise the surrender and that “in surrendering his army, in refusing to sacrifice additional bloodshed in a cause which he knew to be hopeless – Lee has entitled himself to the gratitude of the South and recommended himself and his army to the magnanimity and generosity of the people of the North.” Like Grant, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* was not interested in humiliating Lee or his men and was immediately focused on once again viewing them as countrymen.

In other papers published in the North, even when they discuss the surrender,, they are not trashing Lee, his motives, his actions, or his men, and are instead mostly just celebrating the end of the war. For Example, the *West Jersey Pioneer* stated that “the surrender of Lee and his army has virtually ended the war,” and did not talk negatively about Lee, his men, or the South. Instead, the *West Jersey Pioneer* was relieved that the war was over.⁴¹

⁴⁰ The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 10, 1865, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/50248532/> (accessed January 25, 2023).

⁴¹ West Jersey Pioneer, April 15, 1865, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/844422958/> (accessed February 18, 2023).

The reporting of Lee's surrender was completely different in Confederate publications. In Texas, the *Galveston Daily News* defended the South as a whole, including their reasoning for the war. As seen in reporting throughout the South earlier in the war, the newspaper blamed the North, and absolved the South of blame for the war. In fact, on April 12, 1865, just days after Lee's surrender, but while Johnston's army was still in the field, the *Galveston Daily News* argued that the South has no choice in the Civil War, and that "fierce resistance [was] their only alternative."⁴² The paper goes on to say that the South was fighting for their independence, comparably to the American revolutionaries against England. In fact, according to the newspaper, the North was causing harm to the south and in fighting the war, "the crown of thorns that dripped with blood upon the brow of the south, bursting into a crown of glory." Before, the South had been constantly pricked by "thorns" and was "bleeding." However, in standing up for themselves, the paper argued, the South turned this harmful crown into glory.

The South in general and Confederate officials, some of which still believed the war was not over, had no reason to support newspapers reporting moderately. The South did not need to push reconciliation at this point, and did not need to encourage newspapers to do so.

Shortly after Lee's surrender to Grant, Johnston was finally able to convince Davis that the war was truly lost for the Confederates and that he, like Lee, needed to surrender. On April 26, 1865, after days of negotiations, Johnston surrendered to Sherman at Bennett Place in North Carolina. This surrender is another clear example of early reconciliation efforts by the Union and Union officials.

⁴² Galveston Daily News, April 4, 1865, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/21822700/> (accessed January 25, 2023).

Sherman, even more than Grant, did not wish to punish the South and made an effort to create and agree to surrender terms that were extremely lenient. During their original negotiation discussions, Sherman assured a concerned Johnston that the Confederate soldiers would be eligible for a full pardon due to Lincoln's 1863 Amnesty Proclamation and the terms of Lee's surrender and Appomattox. Additionally, Sherman agreed to allow all of the Confederate weapons to be deposited in the state arsenals from which they came, granted that they could only be used within that state. Sherman also said that "the President of the United States would recognize all southern state governments as long as their officers and legislators took an oath of allegiance, the federal court system would be reestablished in the southern states. The President would also guarantee the personal, political, and property rights of the Southern people and grant legal amnesty to all southerners, which implicitly included Davis and his cabinet."⁴³ In fact, these terms were so lenient to the South that the now-President Andrew Johnson rejected them, and Grant was sent to North Carolina. Regardless, the final terms allowed Johnston's army to keep a seventh of its small arms, for the soldiers to bring their arms back to their state capitols, and for the horses and private property to be kept by the Confederate soldiers. Additionally, the Union army agreed to provide field, rail, and water transportation home for the paroled officers and men who took an oath to not take up arms against the United States. Sherman also gave the paroled troops 250,000 rations. Even though President Johnson was unhappy with Sherman's original terms agreement, the final agreement was still merciful and demonstrated the Union

⁴³ "Bennett Place Surrender," American Battlefield Trust, March 25, 2021, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/bennett-place-surrender>.

officials wanting to allow the Confederates to return home from the war and prevent further conflict while welcoming the Confederacy back into the Union.

The moderate surrender terms at both Appomattox and Bennett Place are two of many examples of the Union being forgiving towards the Confederacy in order to ensure a smooth end to the war and reunification of the country. The soft terms and moderate mindset of the Union officials were one of many examples of reconciliation and being that these lenient terms were agreed upon more than once by more than one Union General, it is clear that there was an active reconciliation effort that Union officials were aware of and were pushing. It is certainly reasonable that officials would not be upset with, and instead would even support, newspapers in the North publishing articles that do not bash the South while they were demonstrating multiple acts of reconciliation, trying to ensure that the Confederacy truly and completely surrenders, and trying to facilitate a peaceful reunion while creating a solution that would be a proper balance of fairness without causing retaliation.

Although the Union military and newspapers showed no interest in revenge, Southern newspaper reporting after the surrender at Appomattox was quite different. In Northern publications, there are examples of forgiveness and grace for the Confederacy and its officials, whereas publications in the South are still divisive and have an angry tone towards the North and the war. Some articles published in the North almost seem as though they could have been published in the South. This clearly demonstrates the change in censorship over time. These publications are likely articles that would have been considered anti-Union early on in the war. At the end, however, these articles were published without traceable backlash from the Union government.

Conclusion

While journalism is believed to be the first rough draft of history, sometimes journalism can be used to create history. Media and reporting also has immense power in forming narratives and opinions at the very time of publication. Even now, many people trust the media and form their feelings and opinions based on the facts and narratives being given to them by the media they are consuming. Today, of course, it is easier to fact check news reporting by means of video recording and other methods such as witnesses taking to social media for the quick spread of information. During the nineteenth century, newspapers were sometimes all that people could rely on to get any sort of information on current events. Thus, during the Civil War, newspapers were incredibly important to the public and were relied on even more than they are today. Officials were aware of the importance of newspapers. Additionally, since journalism was being professionalized, what information should be published and what should be kept secret was debated. Furthermore, each publication wanted to have exclusive information to publish, pushing them to release any and all information that they could. It goes without saying that any official would be uneasy about newspapers publishing war plans and information, especially during a Civil War when newspapers could easily be read by the enemy.

In the early years of the war, Lincoln and other Union officials were very strict in silencing newspapers that they felt would hurt the war effort at all, even if they were not publishing sensitive information. The Union understood the power that the press had and made sure that this power would be used in their favor to the greatest extent possible. In the beginning of the war, the Union was concerned about states seceding, which would have disadvantaged the Union greatly. As a result, they sought to ensure that any publishers or publications promoting

anti-Union sentiment would be silenced by means of legal action and restriction from access to reportable information, such as battlefield reporting.

Simultaneously, many Southern newspapers were angry, bitter, and critical of the Union. The South did not have the same resources as the Northern government did to censor newspapers, nor did they have as much to lose. For example, the South did not have to be as concerned with states re-joining the Union because of anti-Confederate sentiment whereas the Union desperately needed to hang on to the border states. Additionally, the Union shuttered newspapers in occupied territory. These newspapers were forced to move, also resulting in the newspapers themselves having fewer resources than publications in the North to be able to gain information and publish them as widely.

Toward the end of the war, the Union was not as strict with censorship and newspapers that had survived previous attempts at censorship continued to publish; some even continue to publish today. Some historians believe that the Union's lessening of censorship later in the war can mostly be explained by the tides of the war and the fact that the Union would not have been as worried about censorship during a time when they were at an advantageous place. I argue that this explanation is too simple. Since the Union, including Lincoln, clearly understood the power that the press had during the war, they, of course, understood the power that the press would have in shaping the narrative and feelings of a newly re-united America. The Union used the press in their favor to the best of their ability throughout the war. It does not make sense that they would simply forget about the press and disregard it towards the end simply because they were winning. This simple explanation does not give enough credit to Lincoln and other officials and their understanding of the importance of journalism. The goal in the beginning of the war was reuniting the Union. Although towards the middle the war that goal was changed to freedom of

enslaved people, that does not mean that the original goal was irrelevant. It is true that there was division for quite some time following the end of the war. However, there are examples of very different reports from the North and South following Lee's surrender to Grant. While the Southern papers are bitter, angry, and arguing over whether the war was truly over, newspapers in the North could be seen celebrating the end of the war and even being gracious to Confederates, including leaders such as Lee, despite the fact that they could be blamed for a war that killed many Americans. The Union stopped trying to shut down and silence these papers not, as some have argued that an impending victory made it unnecessary, but because the press had voluntarily shifted to writing what Union officials were hoping to read.

A future research topic could be whether Lincoln's extensive use of censorship was a stain on his administration. The question is certainly up for debate, being that on one hand, perhaps Lincoln did was necessary to preserve the Union and win the war. On the other hand, however, the Confederacy seemed to be more concerned about protecting rights that they had promised in the Confederate Constitution. Some wonder whether Lincoln perhaps went too far in censoring papers that were not really as big of a threat as he may have argued them to be to justify the use of censorship.

The First Amendment is a key American value. Freedom of the press is not always guaranteed, though, and during panic, can be reduced or stripped away. Civil War journalism is an important topic in order to fully understand this key liberty. The Civil War is the first major American event that censorship and lack thereof was used strategically.

Although understudied, the history of Civil War journalism and the impact it had on the Civil War and its memory is incredibly important. There are still ongoing debates regarding the Civil War today, such as Lost Cause arguments including why the war was fought and

justification of the war. To come to a shared understanding of the Civil War, which is arguably one of the most significant occurrences in American history, it is important for Americans to understand various aspects of the war, especially those that are not so widely taught, read about, or researched. It is important that going forward, there are even more comparative studies about how journalism impacts people, particularly in a time when there was great change and history and narratives that would impact our nation for centuries to come was actively being formed.

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