

# LINCOLN AND THE POWER OF THE PRESS

## *The War for Public Opinion*

“In this engaging history of one of the most divisive periods in American politics, the buildup to the Civil War, Lincoln historian Holzer tracks how the great political clashes played out in the lively press of the day, creating not-so-delicate marriages between politicians and the journalists writing the “news” (which was more opinion than actual news)... An exhaustive feat of research with a focused structure and robust prose.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*, Starred review

“A must-read that is accessible and well researched for anyone interested in Lincoln, the media, and public opinion in our democracy.”

— *Library Journal*, Starred review

“This is a well-written reminder that the independence of the press, then as now, has its limits.”

— *Booklist*, Starred review

“Lincoln believed that ‘with public sentiment nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.’ Harold Holzer makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Lincoln’s leadership by showing us how deftly he managed his relations with the press of his day to move public opinion forward to preserve the Union and abolish slavery.”

— *Doris Kearns Goodwin*

“Harold Holzer has written a fascinating study about Abraham Lincoln’s extraordinary legacy to American journalism. Eye-opening, scholarly, and provocative, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press* adds greatly to our understanding of the presidency and its relationship to the 4th Estate.”

— *Amanda Foreman*

“At no time in our history did newspapers wield more political influence than during the Civil War era, and no political figure was more aware of this influence than Abraham Lincoln. Harold Holzer’s compelling narrative of the intertwined world of politics and journalism demonstrates Lincoln’s canny skill in using the press to advance his own career as well as the cause of Union and freedom. A tour de force.”

— *James M. McPherson*

One of the country’s leading authorities on Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War era offers an original, provocative, and timely view of America’s most revered president in **LINCOLN AND THE POWER OF THE PRESS: *The War for Public Opinion* (Simon & Schuster; October 14, 2014; \$37.50)**. Harold Holzer, the prize-winning author of *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, explores a surprisingly neglected story: how in the age of Lincoln the press and politics often functioned in tandem as a single, tightly organized entity to an extent that would be unthinkable today, even in our own era of partisan media outlets.

In his compelling and authoritative narrative, Holzer adds a new dimension to our understanding of Lincoln’s leadership by examining his lifelong relationship with the press, particularly the three most powerful

## HAROLD HOLZER

newspaper publishers of his day: James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald*, Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, and Henry Raymond of the *New York Times*. Moreover, Holzer considers how Lincoln manipulated these three colorful and immensely ambitious men for his own ends, how his struggle for political power unfolded within a concurrent competition among newspapers to influence politics and politicians, and how he used the press to speak directly to the people throughout his career.

In addition, Holzer chronicles how acute conflicts arose between the government and the press during the Civil War, when Lincoln authorized the most widespread censorship in the nation's history, shattering the prevailing tradition of a free, if partisan, press. Precisely because he recognized the extraordinary power and partisanship of the press, the Lincoln administration shut down papers that were considered "disloyal," and even jailed or exiled editors who backed secession or opposed The Civil War. In a telling action, the government's official telegraph line, which made the speedy reporting of battlefield results possible, was moved to the office of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to deny access to unfriendly newsmen.

### **Politics and the press: "Weapons in the same arsenal"**

Holzer brings to vivid life a time when the line that separates politics from journalism—at least as an ideal—had yet to be drawn. It was an era of tremendous partisan enthusiasm, when readers came to align themselves with party newspapers as passionately as they began aligning themselves with political organizations. As the rapid development of printing technology made newspapers more widely available, they became ever more useful as political tools, reporting with a biased fury unimaginable in previous or subsequent generations. By the time Lincoln and his greatest rival, Stephen Douglas, came of age politically in the 1840s, the press was routinely and overtly participating in grassroots politics. Together, they waged a vigorous, often vicious competition to determine which political belief system would emerge with more popular support and thus shape the national future.

Holzer writes: "Newspapers of the day occasionally manufactured politicians, just as politicians often manufactured newspapers—but in the end they were of, by, and for the same environment. They became mutually dependent and totally inseparable—weapons in the same arsenal. In some cases, they synchronized their efforts so closely that it was impossible to determine where one organization ended its work and the other began it. Lincoln embraced and thrived in this milieu, yet the story has escaped full scrutiny since." One fascinating but little-known aspect of that story is that in 1859, Lincoln bought a newspaper printed in German—a language he could not read—in order to boost his standing among the growing number of immigrants. For some eighty years, his involvement remained largely unknown even to his biographers.

The political contest between Lincoln and Douglas constitutes one major strand of Holzer's story, while the other is focused on the press competition among Greeley, Bennett, and Raymond, who were alternately coddled, battled, and manipulated by Lincoln. In the words of one contemporary, the three newspaper editors were "constantly hammering away at each other," as if their own rivalry transcended those of the leaders whom they covered. The three became the most widely read and famous journalists of their age, national celebrities in their own right who invented their newspapers and made them bold reflections of their own outsized personalities. They loved their profession as fervently as they loathed each other, and each believed that he was all but ordained to chart the course for the future of civilization.

Holzer writes: "As sure as did the principal political advocates of the day, the *Times*, *Tribune*, and *Herald* vigorously defined and debated public issues. As overtly as candidates, they sought and corralled votes. As aggressively as armies in the field, they fought battles. Although they differed enormously in personality—Bennett was an audacious showman, sly and given to the grandiose; Greeley a self-righteous reformer, passionate but easily dismayed, diverted, and bruised; and Raymond a civic-minded moderate, progressive but sometimes maddeningly practical—each believed without question that he best understood the pulse of the country, and offered the only worthwhile advice to keep it beating."

Outside of New York, Holzer recounts simultaneous journalistic rivalries in Springfield, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. He surveys the impact of the abolitionist and black press; the overtly white supremacist papers; the pro-secession and Confederate journals; the new pictorial weeklies; and the foreign-language press, whose importance was demonstrated by Lincoln's year as a "German publisher." In addition, there are insightful observations on Lincoln and his world from many of the leading literary figures of his day, including Whitman, Trollope, Dickens, Emerson, Hawthorne, William Cullen Bryant, William Dean Howells, and Charles Dana.

Yet Holzer keeps his focus fixed firmly on "The Old Philosopher" Greeley, "The Little Villain" Raymond, and "His Satanic Majesty" Bennett—derogatory sobriquets that haunted them for much of their careers. Despite their endless squabbling, they brought newspapers to the summit of their power over American life. Among them, for better or worse, they invented American journalism, with templates that endure down to today. Along the way, they produced the first draft of nineteenth-century American history. In Holzer's view, it cries out for a reappraisal that takes into account the filter through which it was originally accomplished: that of unbridled partisanship, and a desire to influence and even participate in government.

### **"Public sentiment is everything"**

"Public sentiment is everything," Lincoln declared during his 1858 senatorial debates with Stephen Douglas. "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions." Holzer writes, "It is time we took Lincoln at his word and examined his extraordinary focus on—and mastery of—political journalism as a way to earn and sustain voter support." For the most part, history has always focused on "statutes" and "decisions." Yet as Holzer convincingly demonstrates, Lincoln and his political contemporaries devoted a remarkable portion of their energies to "moulding public sentiment" through the press: not just by appealing to journalists but by influencing the press directly and in some cases managing the press themselves.

With **LINCOLN AND THE POWER OF THE PRESS**, Harold Holzer has given us the story of an epic partnership involving political giants who rose and fell on the currents of American journalism and newspapermen who labored to abet, or impede, their political aspirations. Furthermore, he paints a singular and fresh portrait of Lincoln through the eyes of those who covered him from his early career through the very night of his assassination, when one reporter ran to the theatre box where Lincoln was shot and emerged to write the story covered in blood. Holzer's story is one of both unexpected alliances and brutal wars—uncivil wars—that sheds new light on a crucial but under-appreciated aspect of Lincoln's leadership.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Harold Holzer**, a leading authority on Lincoln and the Civil War, is chairman of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Foundation and a Roger Hertog Fellow at the New-York Historical Society. Widely honored for his work, Holzer earned a second-place Lincoln Prize for *Lincoln at Cooper Union* in 2005 and in 2008 was awarded the National Humanities Medal. Holzer, senior vice president of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, lives in Rye, New York.

### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

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