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## A conversation with Harold Holzer, author of **LINCOLN AND THE POWER OF THE PRESS**

**Sara Gabbard:** You set the stage for Lincoln’s understanding of the need to influence public opinion with a statement he made in 1858: “He who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions.” How had he developed this philosophy as an Illinois politician with relatively limited experience on the national scene?

**Harold Holzer:** As I learned in researching this book, Lincoln seemed amazingly aware of the power of the press even while still living in a log cabin with his parents. The fuzzier myth fueled by artist Eastman Johnson’s famous painting—of Lincoln sitting by the fireside late at night reading a *book*—is only partly true. As contemporaries testified, he often read newspapers, too. And while still a young man, Lincoln began submitting editorials to local papers on subjects like education and temperance. Don’t forget, too, that when he was village postmaster at New Salem, the local joke was that subscribers got their newspaper subscriptions late, and sloppily re-folded—because the postmaster had read them first. And meanwhile he was serving concurrently as the local agent of the *Sangamo Journal* and submitting unsigned editorials lambasting Democrats. Talk about combining press and politics! This was a young man clearly attracted to reading and influencing the press almost from the outset. And the task grew increasingly sophisticated as his professional sphere expanded. I was fascinated by another aspect of Lincoln’s early self-training. It seemed that whenever he visited a new Illinois town, whether on legal business or to make a political speech—even before the Lincoln-Douglas debates and that famous comment about “he who moulds public sentiment”—he took pains to visit the local Whig, and later, Republican newspaper, to make new friends and create new alliances. Sometimes the initial reception he got was indifferent or even hostile—who *was* this strange-looking guy trying to use my precious time to chat?—but Lincoln persisted, he won almost all of them over, whether from his passion for issues, his humor, or his amazing knowledge of local political trends. Using these new friendships as ballast, he began expanding his political reach—carried along the way by supportive editorials from new and old friends. But I think it all started at the family hearth—with the boy who loved to read, riveted not just by the Bible, Shakespeare, and Robert Burns, but by newspapers, too.

**SG:** Was Lincoln’s relationship with Joseph Medill and the *Chicago Tribune* a factor in his developing sense of the importance of the press if one was to pursue a life in politics?

**HH:** I think wooing and winning Medill was certainly crucial in terms of Lincoln increasing his political influence and press support in tandem—but I think by this point in time Lincoln was already well aware of the power of the press—a veteran of the press wars, one might say, albeit mostly at the hometown level. To be sure, Medill was a “catch”: he was a pro-Republican editor through and through, and Chicago was a fast-growing city in a progressive region of the state. What Lincoln knew was that he had to become the newspaper’s favorite son before he could hope to become Illinois’ favorite son. And despite the fractious nature of Chicago politics—yes, it was so even then—he got Medill strongly on his side, and later had the paper not only reporting and supporting him during those 1858 debates, but providing stenographic transcripts and editorial praise during the Lincoln-Douglas debates. The *Chicago Tribune* unabashedly combined the worlds of politics and the press, and I think Lincoln’s friendship with Medill, Charles Ray, and others there, helped him see how easily the so-called “firewall” between reporting and campaigning could be breached. Who threw all their political and press power behind Lincoln’s 1860 presidential hopes at Chicago? The *Chicago Tribune*—putting out special editions that lauded Lincoln while buttonholing delegates on the floor. Oh, Lincoln was still capable of underestimating those Chicago editors. As early as 1858, the *Tribune* wanted Lincoln to provide an autobiography detailing his inspiring rise from hardscrabble obscurity. The editors were sure it would win voter support for Republicans statewide that year and make Lincoln senator. But Lincoln ignored the request—didn’t follow through until 1859 and 1860, when he provided just such an autobiographical sketch, twice. I think this was one of those rare occasions when Lincoln should have listened to an editor instead of the other way around.

**SG:** You specifically mention Lincoln’s relationship with three major publishers: Horace Greeley, Henry Raymond, and James Gordon Bennett. Please elaborate on each, including their lives after Lincoln’s assassination.

**HH:** What a trio—and they all knew each other, tried early on to work with each other, and ultimately came to hate each other—and it was not only personal, but political. Bennett was a racist conservative who tilted Democrat, but became more independent when the Jackson administration failed to give him the political rewards he felt were his due—yet he had amazing business acumen and press instincts, and he once tried to make Greeley his partner in his *New York Herald*. Instead, Greeley went on to start his own anti-slavery daily, the *New York Tribune* (Bennett never forgave him and devoted years to making him a laughingstock). Greeley in turn employed Henry Raymond as an apprentice, then an associate editor. But Raymond found his boss too unorthodox, too easily wooed by crackpot causes, and left him eventually to start the party-line Whig *New York Times*.

So by 1851 each had his own paper and his own political base. And they attacked each other as often as they attacked the politicians they opposed. All three hoped to combine politics and journalism from the start—maybe Bennett less so, at least in terms of his personal elevation. Raymond served as Speaker of the State Assembly, New York lieutenant governor, and congressman, all while working as an editor. Greeley wanted to be all of the above (he was briefly an appointed Congressman, filling a vacancy, during Lincoln’s Congressional term in Washington)—plus a senator—and was repeatedly thwarted, which is why he broke with William Seward and never forgave him (Seward was Raymond’s man). This is the tinderbox of complex New York press relationships Lincoln tried to unravel to his benefit in 1860 (and again when war started in 1861). That he managed, for the most part, with only occasional, albeit dispiriting and potentially dangerous bumps in the road, to keep all three of these egotistic, competitive geniuses in line and generally supportive of the Union cause throughout the war is perhaps the greatest example of Lincoln’s superlative management of the press. Greeley went off the reservation after Bull Run, growing almost suicidal as he begged Lincoln to abandon the war. Raymond plotted to have his friend Seward seize power in a kind of unofficial *coup d’etat* after Sumter (but was outsmarted by Lincoln). And Bennett questioned going to war until a mob threatened his headquarters, demanding he raise the American flag. All three changed course, and oddly, no one became more loyally pro-Union and pro-war than the finger-to-the-wind Bennett. Lincoln worked hard and successfully to soothe both Raymond and Greeley—and where Bennett was concerned, let the people bully him into supporting resistance to the rebellion.

What happened to these extraordinary men afterwards? First, they spoke nearly with one voice—in remarkably similar words, even—when Lincoln died. And with that, as if their entire *raison d’être* had died, too, they sort of went on the decline a bit. Oh, Greeley tried to ratchet up his influence by signing a bail bond for Jefferson Davis and running as a hopeless outsider against Grant’s re-election bid in 1872. As usual, he lost, but this time lost his wife too, then had a nervous breakdown, and died. Raymond preceded him in death, broken, some said, by his ill-advised but predictably doctrinaire support of Andrew Johnson during the postwar impeachment imbroglio. And Bennett just lost interest, retiring early, handing the *Herald* over to his playboy son, who promptly began letting the paper run down. It was almost as if without Lincoln, the war, and black freedom to squabble over, all three lost steam and relevance at once.

**SG: Please comment on the influence of Frederick Douglass and his *Douglass’ Monthly*.**

**HH:** So hard to know for certain. And it’s important to resist the temptation to exaggerate or mythologize here. I mention in the book, I hope not too glibly, that back in the 1850s reading the African-American, even the abolitionist, press was tantamount, at least in Central Illinois, to reading pornography: middle of the road guys just didn’t do so. Eventually Lincoln (through his law partner Billy Herndon) did take the anti-slavery *New York Independent*, and I could swear that he got his “right makes might” idea for the closing lines at Cooper Union from Frederick Douglass’s newspaper. Certainly Douglass came later to influence and partner with Lincoln during the White House years, when the two forged a remarkable relationship for the time—but, then, perfectly in keeping with the President’s constant efforts to woo, and frankly, use, editors. For Douglass *was* an editor, that is before Lincoln urged him to become the nation’s recruiter-in-chief for “colored” troops and Douglass finally closed his monthly. I like to point to an event in August 1864 as an example of how far their relationship came. During a simply terrible month for Lincoln in which both Greeley and Raymond (who by then was his campaign manager!) bluntly told him he couldn’t possibly win a second term as president, ex-editor Douglass came to visit him and instead of complaining, worked out a plan with him to free as many enslaved people in the Confederacy as possible before George McClellan became president and in all likelihood rescinded the Emancipation Proclamation. What an extraordinary moment: the white editors turning on Lincoln, while a black ex-editor worked as a partner literally to free the people whose emancipation Raymond and Greeley had given lip service to, for years.

**SG: Many claim that Lincoln was masterful in manipulating the Press. Do you agree? If so please give some examples.**

**HH:** Oh, yes, manipulator-in-chief, to be sure. As president, he controlled many of them—maybe purchased their loyalty is a better phrase, harsh as it may sound to modern ears—by giving out political or military patronage to his friends. Greeley got jobs for some of his editors. Raymond sent dozens of names into the White House for appointments. Lincoln gave Bennett’s son a naval commission. The new president won the undying loyalty of John Wein Forney—editor of papers in both Philadelphia and Washington—by pushing for him to get the plum job as secretary of the U. S. Senate. Such blatant exercise of political power to reward journalists was an ingrained part of the political culture, but Lincoln masterminded the tradition like the conductor of a philharmonic orchestra. As President, he mastered the pro-Republican Washington press as brilliantly as he had bought the Springfield and Chicago Republican press into line. Over the years he played one editor against the other, made sure his friends were rewarded and his critics denied, wrote anonymous column items on occasion to get his views into the newspapers (presidents did not hold press conferences in those days), and welcomed editors and correspondents into the White House to hear his jokes and, occasionally, his well-timed leaks. The most famous example of manipulation is undoubtedly his response to Horace Greeley’s “Prayer of Twenty Millions,” in which he prepared white America for emancipation by hinting he wouldn’t do what he had already determined to do—issue his proclamation—unless it helped save the Union. What’s reported less often is *how* Lincoln issued his letter to the editor. Rather than send it to Greeley, to whom it was addressed but with whom he was annoyed for writing that editorial in the first place, he released it to a rather conservative Washington paper—and on a day Lincoln knew Greeley would not be able even to reprint it, for the next day was Sunday, when the *New York Tribune* did not publish! Now that is an “in your eye” response, and Greeley knew it. After trying to outfox Lincoln for weeks, for he was told a proclamation was imminent and wanted to get some credit for it by demanding it when he already knew it was coming—wow, this is complicated, no?—he reportedly sighed, “Old Abe is too smart for me.”

**SG: Did any of his attempted manipulations ever backfire?**

**HH:** Occasionally. Lincoln tried to be a bit too cute with his famous, so-called “Conkling Letter”—really an 1863 speech to be read aloud back in Springfield—refusing to allow John Wein Forney to get an advance copy to prevent it from being published in Washington prematurely. But why *not* release it in the East first? It would have been smart to do so. Instead it was released first in the West, but in a garbled state, infuriating Lincoln, who thought he had the whole rollout beautifully planned (he got plenty of editorial praise for it anyway, once corrected versions found their way into the papers). Then in 1864, he kind of made a secret political deal with Bennett—Bennett would stop attacking him at the end of the presidential campaign, and in turn Lincoln would name the editor Minister to France: quite a reward for a longtime critic! In fact, while some historians have claimed that Bennett promptly stopped criticizing, even started supporting, Lincoln, the published evidence shows that he did nothing of the kind; he merely increased his attacks on Lincoln’s opponent, McClellan. But maybe Lincoln had asked for no more, for he ended up offering the diplomatic post to Bennett anyway, and then Bennett refused it. It seems he just wanted to be asked, and maybe Lincoln had the whole thing worked out in advance. Bennett had become so disreputable, to so many really a pariah, that it seems all he ever really wanted was social recognition, something Lincoln had denied him for three years (though Mary Lincoln wrote to and visited him—as her husband’s secret emissary? That’s another story I tell in the book).

**SG: When he began his national political campaign, did reporters usually give him a fair “hearing” or did they concentrate on such things as his appearance, voice, and frontier mannerisms?**

**HH:** Never a “fair” hearing—that wasn’t the way it worked in Lincoln’s day. Coverage, pro or con, depended on what political party the paper represented. The thing to remember is that nearly every newspaper in the country—probably four of five, were supportive of and bound to either the Republicans or Democrats, and sworn to character assassination and harsh political criticism of their rivals. So there was really no such thing as a “fair hearing” for Lincoln as he rose in political popularity and influence, and he didn’t expect it. For example, the pro-Whig (and later pro-Republican) Springfield *Journal* lauded his every word and move, and if it commented at all on his appearance, it marveled at how he never lost his frontier-bred humility and sympathy for the common man. The Springfield *Register* labeled him a dangerous firebrand, and also a homely-looking bumpkin who lacked manners and dignity. And so it went, respectively, with the *Chicago Tribune* vs. the *Chicago Times*, with the *New York Tribune* and *New York Herald* and papers in Boston and Philadelphia all following suit—and on and on. That’s why, for the new book, I concentrated on the internecine feuds between these otherwise rigidly partisan editors—especially Greeley fighting with Bennett, since they both published popular and influential national editions, though they both believed in Union and, to different degrees, an end to slavery. It’s when party orthodoxy was challenged that the fun began, and Lincoln showed his real savvy by brokering deals, healing wounds, or simply letting the editors fight among themselves, or even with him, until they played themselves out and became, as Lincoln described Greeley late in his presidency, like an old shoe that had worn out and could no longer be repaired and be of use to anybody.

**SG: In your opinion, were the texts of speeches which were reported in newspapers basically accurate?**

**HH:** Oh, there could always be problems, even among friends, as Lincoln learned to his consternation when the local Springfield *Journal* mangled the opening paragraphs of his House Divided speech in June 1858—a blunder that wasn’t really caught and corrected until historian Don Fehrenbacher sorted it out for the Library of America collected writings books in 1989. Surely the risk of typographical error explains why an exhausted Lincoln spent the wee hours of the night after delivering his Cooper Union address proofreading the typeset version in the *New York Tribune* press room before releasing it in final form to all the New York papers; he wanted it just right. But let’s go back a bit—Lincoln had just begun his political career when newspapers first began to reprint *any* political speeches. It was considered a huge advance in the reporting of government news, much more timely than reading reprints in the *Congressional Globe* or in mailers that local Congressmen later sent (free) to constituents. During the Lincoln-Douglas debates, of course, we have the other side of the coin: Republican stenographers and editors cleaning up Lincoln’s speeches and rebuttals and leaving Douglas’s remarks rough, or maybe maimed; and Democratic journalists doing the same for (or was it against?) Lincoln. The issue of unfair transcripts became almost as big a story as the debates themselves in 1858—and here, of course, Lincoln the manipulator had the final word as usual: after he was defeated in the election, after licking his wounds for a bit, he assembled the Republican transcripts of his remarks, and the Democratic reports of his opponents in a scrapbook and had the debates published in a book. Douglas howled with indignation, because he charged that Lincoln had edited his own speeches one more time and failed to give him the same opportunity—true enough, though Lincoln changed his own transcripts very slightly. And so Lincoln won by losing. Douglas re-took his Senate seat in 1858, but Lincoln made sure his own popularity spread nationwide by issuing the book, which became a best-seller, and oh-so-conveniently, just before the 1860 Republican convention that the dark horse candidate hoped to take by storm, and did.

**SG: Please “replay” the story of newspaper coverage of Lincoln’s visit to Antietam in 1862. Did it start with coverage by Copperhead papers? If so, was it eventually also carried by less opinionated sites?**

**HH:** Lincoln visited the front so often that reporters didn’t always cover his travels, as they would a president at any battlefield today. There is no evidence that *any* journalist covered Lincoln extensively or authoritatively during his tour of the Antietam battlefield, but two years later in 1864 the Democratic *New York World* began “reporting,” day after day, that the President had disgracefully desecrated that site at the time by asking his aide Ward Hill Lamon to sing a comic ditty while strolling past the dead and wounded still littering the field. Lamon was furious—it simply

was not true; he had sung sad songs for Lincoln on their way *back* from the tour (he often did so to cheer up his melancholy friend), but certainly not on the Antietam battlefield among the dead and wounded. Lamon prepared an indignant reply for the press, but Lincoln thought it best to ignore the unfounded partisan attacks. Those attacks, however, intensified, and Republican readers began writing the White House begging for a denial and warning of the political fallout if the calumny was not rebutted. Finally, Lincoln drafted a beautiful letter of his own—to be sent over Lamon’s signature—insisting that during his 1862 visit he had not seen a single dead body on battlefield, or even a grave on which rain had not already fallen (what a phrasemaker Lincoln was). It might have been one of Lincoln’s greatest letters to the editor ever, but in the end he got the anger and hurt out of his system just by writing it out, and in the end decided not to send it. If he hadn’t built enough reputation for high character in three-and-a-half years as president, he told Lamon, it was useless to protest now. The calumnies continued—the Democrats wouldn’t let the issue go. The *New York World* even added a vicious political cartoon to its arsenal of rebuke—but Lincoln (and even Lamon) held their tongues. And in the end, the President survived the campaign to discredit him, though he won New York State by a smaller margin in 1864 than he had in 1860.

**SG: You have mentioned Lincoln’s understanding that, during the Civil War, it was especially important to use photography so that citizens could “connect” with him. Was this concept the same when it came to newspaper articles?**

**HH:** Absolutely. And as much as I’ve written over the years about Lincoln’s understanding of the power of images, his understanding of the power of the press was always much keener, and he always had far more faith in the power of words than in the capacity of his own homely face to move people to support his causes. And so to kind of sidestep the endless bickering of the political editors he began writing so-called “public letters” to go above the editor’s heads and directly to readers. He did so time and again—with the 1863 Erastus Corning Letter that explained and defended his decisions to suppress free press and free speech, if it proved traitorous, in order to preserve the Union from rebellion; with his reply to Greeley on emancipation; with his letters defending black recruitment; and with the Conkling letter, too, to name the most justly famous examples. Did he believe their appearance in the press was important? In one instance we have the example of Lincoln writing to a Kentucky editor saying, well, why hasn’t the letter appeared already? He knew he had developed a foolproof system of reaching his constituents from a perch above the discord of the squabbling editors and he was determined to keep the innovation alive and well. That’s why Lincoln always used homespun language in these so-called letters: because they were not really intended for their recipients but for the broad public for whom they were really crafted. When, for example, the head of the U. S. Government Printing Office, John Defrees (a Republican editor Lincoln had rewarded with that job, of course) urged the President not to use the phrase “sugar-coated” in his July 4, 1861 message to Congress, Lincoln rejected the proposed edit. His explanation? To paraphrase it, as he put it to Defrees: I don’t suppose we’ve come so far that plain people won’t understand what sugar-coated means. Lincoln was very smart to issue these letters (the equivalent of modern presidents giving speeches from the Oval Office or East Room). He had learned from experience. For example, he may have expected major coverage for his Gettysburg Address, but he failed to get it—the press focused on Edward Everett’s speech instead. Why bother to travel (he disliked being away from the war office telegraph) only to play second-fiddle to an elderly former senator (it took history’s judgment to reverse that assessment) when he could far more profitably stay in Washington and send out public letters from the White House?

**SG: Did future politicians learn from Lincoln’s relationship with the Press?**

**HH** Oh, every president believes he masters the horrible, hypercritical press as ingeniously as Lincoln did, at least at the beginning of their terms, but few really do so—just look at the fights that Presidents from Andrew Johnson to Barack Obama have had after their so-called press “honeymoons.” They (or their surrogates) have complained bitterly about enduring the slings and arrows of the opposition media, whether it was the *New York Tribune* during the Johnson impeachment trial, or Fox News during the rollout of Obamacare. Maybe the two great exceptions who really learned from Lincoln were both named Roosevelt: Teddy, as Doris Goodwin has so brilliantly shown in her latest book, *Bully Pulpit*, for befriending progressive journalists and taking them into his confidence; and Franklin, for suggesting he was taking journalists into his confidence by holding repeated press conferences *and*, Lincoln-like, going directly to the people with Fireside Chats. Bill Clinton did the same thing—alternately showing courage and contrition until he defeated press critics and became, arguably, the most popular man on earth. But the real storyline from Andrew Jackson all the way to Obama and Romney is much the same: they all chase press friendships and howl at press criticism. And notice one thing, party affiliation notwithstanding: there isn’t a national political figure alive who doesn’t believe the press is out to get him, or her. T’was ever thus. The answer is still to find a way around the partisan criticism. And just as Lincoln found new ways to evade the roadblocks, smart politicians now use TV commercials, twitter, Facebook, and instagram to get their messages out unfiltered. Can you imagine how effective Lincoln would have been tweeting his succinct messages? As young, internet-savvy political groupies might say today: simply awesome!