

Lincoln dealt shrewdly with the publishers and editors of politically powerful 19th-century newspapers.

By DAVID S. REYNOLDS

ABRAHAM LINCOLN HAS been portrayed in many roles — as emancipator, politician, military leader, orator, self-made man and others — but his canny manipulation of the popular press has received little attention. Harold Holzer, a prominent author-

LINCOLN AND THE POWER OF THE PRESS
The War for Public Opinion
By Harold Holzer
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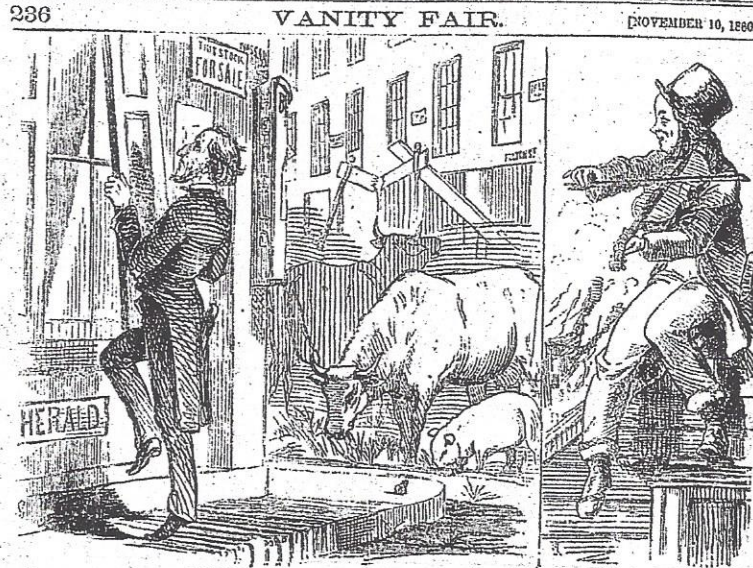
ity on America's 16th president, opens many vistas on this fascinating topic in his new book, "Lincoln and the Power of the Press," a monumental, richly detailed portrait of the world of 19th-century journalism and Lincoln's relation to it. Holzer demonstrates that even as Lincoln juggled many war-related demands, he kept a close eye on American newspapers and tried to influence them however he could.

Lincoln declared that "public sentiment is everything," and in his era nothing shaped public sentiment more powerfully than journalism. Advances in printing technology and newspaper distribution caused a rapid rise in the number and circulation of American papers. As the lexicographer Noah Webster commented, "In no other country on earth, not even in Great Britain, are newspapers so generally circulated among the body of the people, as in America." By the eve of the Civil War, America's 4,000 newspapers and periodicals, more than three-quarters of which were political in nature, had a strong impact on voters.

Newspaper editors were a brazen, contentious lot. Holzer focuses on the so-called Big Three of American journalism — James Gordon Bennett of The New York Herald, Horace Greeley of The New York Tribune and Henry J. Raymond of The New York Times. These editors, Holzer writes, "loved their profession as passionately as they loathed each other, and each believed, in his own way, that he was all but ordained to chart the course for the future of civilization." The three took different stances on Lincoln and the Civil War. Raymond, a moderate Republican, was the most supportive of Lincoln, while Bennett, a racist Democrat, was the least. Greeley, an important antislavery voice and a promoter of faddish reforms, swung between glowing praise and harsh criticism of the president, even as he battled his rival editors.

The popular press, therefore, was slip-

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DEPLORABLE RESULT OF LINCOLN'S ELECTION,
AS DEPICTED BY THE HERALD AND EXPRESS.

ON THE HOUSE-TOP HORACE GREELEY IS, OF COURSE, SEEN FIERCING OVER THE RUINS OF OUR LOVED COUNTRY. TO THE LEFT YOU BEHOLD THE FUR-HEADED AND SQUIGGLE J. G. B. JETTING UP SHOUTS, PREPARATORY TO RETURNING TO HIS NATIVE LAND. COWS CHARGE IN FULSON STREET DEFLAGRATION EVERYWHERE, AND THE WORLD DOGS FOR GENERALLY.

Not everyone was pleased that Lincoln defeated Douglas.

pery, making Lincoln's efforts to deal with it immensely challenging. Deal with it he did, in masterly fashion. Sometimes he used his "rustic charm," as with Raymond, who during the war turned against Lincoln but was won back to the president's side after a relaxed chat at the White House. At other times, Lincoln wisely backed off from confrontation, as when his fruitless efforts to fight and woo the belligerent Bennett led him to realize that responding publicly to the nation's leading newspaperman was a losing proposition. With the unpredictable Greeley, Lincoln exhibited patience and tact. When in 1864 Greeley arranged a peace conference at Niagara Falls with Southern representatives, to whom he offered lax terms for ending the war, Lincoln confided to a friend that Greeley was causing him "almost as much trouble as the whole Southern Confederacy." But instead of interfering with the quixotic editor, Lincoln let him go on his peace mission, knowing it would fail; the Southern agents, it turned out, had no authority to negotiate for the Confederacy, and Greeley's toothless proposals made him appear craven.

As tricky as handling the Big Three editors was for Lincoln, counteracting the effects of uniformly hostile ones was even more so. Most Americans today forget that Lincoln in his time was despised by a substantial number of Northerners who saw him as dictatorial, or overly sympathetic to African-Americans. Anti-Lincoln

emotions ran high in newspapers like The Chicago Times, The Brooklyn Eagle and The New York World. Some of the attacks on the president were merely clueless, as when a Chicago reporter described the Gettysburg Address as a string of "silly, flat and dishwatery utterances" that would make "the cheek of every American . . . tingle with shame."

More damaging were hoaxes concocted by Democratic journalists intent on derailing Lincoln's bid for a second term in 1864. Correspondents for The New York World published a 90-page tract, "Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races," that claimed that if Lincoln were re-elected he would ruin the nation by making blacks socially equal to whites and by encouraging interracial marriage. This pamphlet caused a stir, as did another fraudulent document, allegedly by Lincoln, that pointed in warning to "the general state of the country" as the reason for proclaiming a national day of "fasting, humiliation and prayer" and for calling up 400,000 new troops. The latter ruse impelled Lincoln to sign an order for the arrest and imprisonment of the editors who had published the document.

Although this was the only time Lincoln got directly involved in the suppression of a newspaper, strong-arm tactics against hostile journalists were not uncommon during his administration. In what Holzer calls "the 'Salem Witch' hunt of the Civil War," a summer-long hysteria seized the North in 1861, when some 200 newspapers

and their editors were subjected to scattershot menacing by federal agencies, civilian mobs or Union troops. A number of Democratic editors were imprisoned at Fort Lafayette in Brooklyn, which came to be known as the American Bastille.

This suppression fever ebbed during the war, but it did not disappear; in 1864, more than 30 papers were attacked by mobs. Lincoln had to harness animosity against the press on the part of some of his generals. When Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside ordered that The Chicago Times be "padlocked and its gun-toting editor arrested," Lincoln revoked Burnside's order, and the newspaper resumed publication.

A reporter said the Gettysburg Address consisted of 'silly, flat and dishwatery utterances.'

When Gen. John M. Schofield arrested a St. Louis editor for publishing a letter by Lincoln without identifying his source, the president secured the editor's release, cautioning Schofield not "to unnecessarily harass and persecute the people."

As Holzer notes, such acts of clemency signaled a remarkable tolerance on the part of Lincoln, who let most journalistic attacks roll off his back. Actually, the president was adept at exploiting editors while courting their political influence. Known for his liberal use of patronage, he frequently gave plum governmental posts to friendly newspapermen, including the editor of a German-language Republican newspaper in Illinois of which Lincoln was a co-owner in 1859-60.

Holzer also reveals that Lincoln prepared the American public for the Emancipation Proclamation by performing a pas de deux with Greeley in competing newspaper pronouncements on slavery in which the president played the sensible conservative to Greeley's flaming radical. Having outmaneuvered one editor, Lincoln adopted the strategy of another when he pragmatically offered the controversial proclamation as a military measure — an echo of Henry Raymond, who had advised him that the proclamation should be couched as "a military weapon purely and exclusively." And one of Lincoln's most famous lines may have been lifted from a newspaper: His paean to "a new birth of freedom" in the Gettysburg Address was anticipated by a New York Times reporter who had lost a son at the Battle of Gettysburg, which the reporter hailed as "the second birth of Freedom in America."

Full of fresh information and superb analysis, Holzer's engaging, deeply researched book is destined to be recognized as a classic account of Civil War-era journalism and the president who both swayed it and came under its sway. □