

## Abraham Lincoln and Press Suppression Reconsidered

By David W. Bulla

*During the Civil War the federal government was responsible for the greatest amount of newspaper suppression in the nation's history. More than 300 newspapers were shut down, most of them Democratic papers that were sympathetic to the Confederacy. Some historians have criticized President Abraham Lincoln for allowing such widespread constraints on the press. This article reconsiders the nature of Lincoln's view of press freedom. Based on a letter the president sent to a Union general, it concludes that Lincoln changed his thinking about midway through the war and began to believe that suppression of the press was not the appropriate policy.*

During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln tried to preserve the tenets of a constitutional democratic republic as set forth by the founders in the Constitution. This proved to be a daunting challenge. After all, Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus, a power given explicitly to Congress, and his administration arrested more than 14,000 political prisoners and suppressed more than 300 newspapers.<sup>1</sup>

Lincoln may not have signed any of the orders that led to the actions taken against critical journalists, but he was ultimately responsible for these restraints since the First Amendment expressly prohibits Congress from abridging freedom of the press—and it implies that the president has no jurisdiction over publishing.

Lincoln faced a large number of journalistic critics, in large part because he was elected with so little of the popular vote. The 1860 election was a rare four-way race. Lincoln won no Southern state and received less than forty percent of the vote. Thus, from the beginning, he had an unusually high percentage of detractors in the press: Northern Democratic editors, Southern editors, and even radical abolition

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## Fiend, Coward, Monster, or King: Southern Press Views of Abraham Lincoln

By Mary M. Cronin

*This article examines Southern editors' views of Abraham Lincoln from 1860-1865. The press's role in shaping, defining, and reflecting the public's views of Lincoln was crucial for the region's readers, many of whom did not even know the Illinois lawyer in 1860. Southern press views of Lincoln are examined during five key periods: the president's election and inaugural address; the opening of the war; his issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation; the election of 1864; and Lincoln's assassination. The research finds a diversity of Southern press views for much of 1860. Once war was declared, however, editorial criticism did not subside until the president's death. Even then, some newspaper editors voiced happiness at the assassination.*

On December 8, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln gave his third annual address to Congress. Much of the speech was devoted to detailing the administration's actions to end slavery. Lincoln promised the Emancipation Proclamation would remain law and added that the Confederate states could not return to the Union without abiding by it. The president also told Congress that his war efforts, including the enlistment of black troops, were a necessary means to return the seceded states to the Union.<sup>1</sup> One Southern editor responded to the speech by proclaiming Lincoln a "Yankee monster of inhumanity and falsehood."<sup>2</sup>

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A mere three years earlier, Southern editors were scrambling to learn any information about the Republic

## The President's Editor: John W. Forney of the *Press* and *Morning Chronicle*

By Ford Risley

*Unlike many of his predecessors in the White House, Abraham Lincoln did not have an official publication. However, in John W. Forney, the publisher of the Philadelphia Press and the Washington Morning Chronicle, the president had the kind of unwavering editorial supporter he needed. Forney made his newspapers into virtual political organs for the administration. In return, Lincoln helped Forney secure a position with the Senate, and the administration steered government patronage to his newspapers. The president found an intensely loyal supporter in Forney. And Lincoln was more than glad to oblige him, knowing he would need all the support he could muster in order to tackle the monumental tasks ahead of him.*

In the midst of the long trip to Washington for the inauguration, Abraham Lincoln's advisers had become concerned about the president-elect's safety. For weeks, newspaper accounts had described numerous threats against Lincoln's life. Two days before he was scheduled to travel through Baltimore, a city with thousands of Southern sympathizers, Lincoln's security detail got word of a plot to assassinate him as he changed trains. On the recommendation of his advisers, Lincoln reluctantly agreed to change his schedule so that his train would secretly pass through Baltimore in the middle of the night. A correspondent for the *New York Times* reported that to go unrecognized Lincoln wore a Scotch plaid cap and a long military cloak. As the story spread, Lincoln was widely ridiculed. Opposition newspapers called the president a coward and cartoonists had a field day with the imagined disguise. Even many of Lincoln's supporters in the

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## Lincoln's Other War: Public Opinion, Press Issues, and Personal Pleas

By Jeffery A. Smith

*Claiming a need and an authority to act for public safety during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln and his generals used prerogative powers to restrict freedom of expression. A number of citizens disputed the denials of their rights. Their responses raised many issues such as violations of the U.S. Constitution, the need of voters to have information, and the hardships, errors, and inconsistencies of the enforcement. Confronted with the consequences of suppression, the president sometimes relented or implemented more lenient policies. The decisions tested the principles of one man and a nation.*

**D**espite the “no law” wording of the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of speech and of the press, expression has been restricted in wartime by federal statutes and presidential-military orders. The basis for denying the right to disseminate news and opinions typically has been the claim that the “higher law” of self-preservation supersedes the Constitution.<sup>1</sup> During the Civil War, journalists were hindered in newsgathering and were arrested for publishing opinions. Telegraph dispatches were censored and editors were given instructions on what could or could not be published. Some newspapers were excluded from the mail and some publications were shut down. President Abraham Lincoln and his generals asserted a need to prohibit information and ideas they claimed could imperil the Union cause, but the suppression, which could conceal embarrassing facts and stifle democratic dissent, had a price. Northern critics condemned the restraints as despotic and Southern leaders were able to exploit

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