

PROJECT TITLE: Lincoln and His Use of the Telegraph.

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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question(s)

How did Lincoln's use of the telegraph during his presidency change the role of the Commander in Chief? How can his use of a new technology be compared to President Obama's use of current technology?

Contextual Essay

It is tempting to think of modern communication systems as unique, with a vast divide separating the past from the mobile and equipped technology consumers of today. But the electric telegraph as used in the 1860s and into the early 20th century was in many ways a breakthrough technology in much the same way email or social media are. We think of President Obama as exhibiting an unprecedented level of public relations acumen in his use of Twitter, websites and interactive mobile sites; he is often characterized as the first online President. In that sense, he has redefined the presidency with his openness and insistence on government transparency. Similarly, through his almost daily use of the telegram, Lincoln was the first President to use a new technology to extend his reach, his thought and his political and military strategies.

Before Abraham Lincoln's tenure as president, communication with persons at a distance could take weeks or months. With the development of the electrical telegraph, the stage was set for Lincoln's use of the medium to influence important events and assert leadership in a dramatically new way. Although Lincoln had not much in the way of experience with the telegraph (and no tech-savvy advisors), by 1862 he was gathering information from many places and sending vital directives to his generals.

Telegraph technology had been used successfully in Europe in the form of optical telegraphing devices, and the French had the most extensive network. Frenchman Claude Chappe invented the optical telegraph in 1791 and soon messages were passed from station to station via moving arms and shutters. By the mid-1830s, there were nearly a thousand optical telegraph towers across Europe. Telegraph Hills in London and in San Francisco still remind us of locations where once optical signaling towers stood. By 1855, Paris was connected to all major French towns. (Hurdemann 107)

In 1825, a portrait painter named Samuel Morse was painting the Marquis de Lafayette during his visit to America. When he received a message by horse and rider that his wife was ill, he left immediately, but was too late. The wish that he could have known sooner and seen his wife before she died, or attended her funeral, never left him. Between 1832 and 1836, Morse worked on his version of an electric recording telegraph, unaware that in England Cooke and Wheatstone were doing similar experiments. In 1837, he finally solved a battery problem that prevented long distance transmission, and demonstrated his invention in his tiny room at NYU. Morse petitioned for a patent in October of that year.

Morse and his partners had petitioned Congress to fund a line between Baltimore and Washington and work began in Baltimore, using Ezra Cornell's new machine to lay pipes holding the wires. When this underground method failed, they turned to stringing wire from posts along the right of way of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The code used to transmit the historic message upon the official opening of the line May 1st, 1844, was a co-invention of Morse and another partner, Alfred Vail. Although Morse and many others had visions of the telegraph linking the world and thereby producing an astonishing level of global world peace, the transatlantic attempts during Lincoln's time worked only for a few weeks. During the war, news to and from Europe went via ships.

Lincoln understood how telegrams worked. In 1857, a hotel office telegraph operator named Charles A. Tinker had shown him when he was in Pekin, Ill. for a court case. Later, Tinker worked in the War Department telegraph office and reminded Lincoln of their earlier meeting. President Lincoln also had a life-long interest in inventions. He is the only president to hold a patent (for a device for buoying ships over shoals).

When Lincoln was inaugurated, no telegraph wires connected the White House or the War Department with the rest of the country. Telegraphs were primarily used for business and commerce. Some military figures were aware of the telegraph's potential, however. General George B. McLellan had observed the first use of the telegraph on the battlefield, when he was sent to observe the Crimean War; telegraphs connected the headquarters of allies and allowed them to communicate with their capitals. (Wheeler 38)

Within a short time after the war started, the government took over lines, appointed Captain Anson Stager to head the Military Telegraph Department and ran lines to the War Department, next to the White House at that time. The most used cipher during the war was one worked out by Stager.

By 1863, an estimated 1,200,000 telegrams were transmitted over military lines. Stager's report for fiscal year 1864 included an estimate that "600, 000 more telegrams were transmitted than during the previous year." (as stated in Administrative History Note, NARA)

During the course of the war, 15,000 miles of lines were in use, with 1,200 military telegraph operators. Numerous supplemental soldiers were often detailed to check and repair lines, help with setting up field stations, and transport wire and equipment.

Stager said that the public had "but faint conception of the magnitude of the uses of the army telegraph." (as stated in Administrative History Note, NARA) Later, after Lincoln's assassination, the emphasis shifted to include a renewed and successful attempt at a transatlantic cable.

Applying his formidable analytical skills, Lincoln began studying military methods and history. Initially he was hesitant to break with tradition. He sought out information, but it wasn't until 1862 that he inserted himself more boldly into the communication lines. Lincoln's frustration with McClellan grew as the general withheld information, hesitated and balked. The Balls Bluff battle was the beginning, when Lincoln discovered that McClellan had a policy of keeping information in military circles and not executive office ones. Then, as McClellan hesitated and missed the opportunity to execute Lincoln's well-thought out and clearly articulated plan to

capture the Shenandoah Confederate Forces in a double-pronged vise grip at Massanutten, Lincoln's patience ran out. By January 1862, he had replaced Secretary of War Cameron with Edwin Stanton and the seizure, civilian administration and growth of telegraph lines rapidly proceeded.

Lincoln walked over to the Telegraph office daily. He would peer over the shoulders of the receiving operators, eager for all news. Often he would stay late and rest on a horsehair couch. It was here in the telegraph office that he would send reprieves for certain offenses, suspending executions indefinitely. The telegraph officers witnessed him sending many telegrams urging his generals to hasten and not hesitate. Until Grant, several of the Union generals made the mistake of not attacking swiftly because they overestimated Confederate numbers. Telegrams enabled Lincoln to clearly see mistakes and allowed him time to urge other options.

His grasp of the need for real-time involvement in wartime led to a form of leadership distinctly different from that of leaders in past conflicts. Lincoln could insist on strategic moves, based on military intelligence that gave him a view of the whole. He could feed information to field commanders and attempt to change crucial outcomes. His innovative and consistent use of the telegraph allowed him to enlarge his role as Commander in Chief in a pioneering way.

2. Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Bates, David Homer.(1907) *Lincoln in the Telegraph Office*. Washington, DC: Alfred

Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana (Library of Congress) retrieved from Google

Books March 3, 2011.

Summary: Wonderful memoir by Bates, manager of the War Depart and cipher-operator from 1861 through 1866. This book is available to read or download from Google Books. It contains numerous references to Lincoln's frequent visits to the War Department, as well as photographs, and the famous drawing of Lincoln writing the Emancipation Declaration. The details of daily operations in the War Department telegraph are aided by records from Major Thomas Eckert.

Many archival documents. Washington, DC: The National Archives retrieved from docsteach.org on several dates in March, 2011.

Summary: photos used have source info in their description on the Flickr set I made to hold images. Among the documents I used for research are:

ARC no. 301637 – telegram from Sherman to Lincoln announcing surrender of Savannah 1864

ARC no. 301638 – descriptions only, not avail online

ARC no. 299960 – Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation 1863

ARC no. 299998 - Emancipation Proclamation 1863

ARC no. 301639 – 1864 telegram from Lincoln to Mrs. Lincoln re \$50 draft and news of goats

ARC no. 301640 – 1864 telegram from Lincoln to Grant – "...chew and choke..."

Secondary Sources

Abraham Lincoln's White House. *Mr. Lincoln's White House – Telegraph Office*. Lincoln

Institute. retrieved March 1, 2011 from

<http://www.mrlincolnwhitehouse.org/inside.asp?ID=630&subjectID=4>

Summary: The Lincoln Institute's website "Mr. Lincoln's White House" has this thorough and descriptive page under the link to "Nearby Washington". It contains many quotes, descriptions of Lincoln's visits and footnotes.

Coe, Lewis. (2003) *The Telegraph: a History of Morse's Invention and Its Predecessors in the United States*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co. retrieved from Google Books March 12, 2011.

Summary: This book covers the history and workings of various telegraphs. Chapter 5 "The Military Telegraph" has details of use by both armies, anecdotes and information about the dangerous work of "tapping" lines and spying.

Huurdemann, Anton A. (2003) *The Worldwide History of Telecommunications*. Wiley – IEEE Press. retrieved from Google Books May 10, 2011.

Summary: A long and complete history of telecommunication inventions. The section on the transatlantic cable gives a thorough overview of the failed pre-Civil War attempts and the electrical and insulating difficulty leading to those failures.

National Archives and Records Administration. "*Administrative History Note for List of Names of Military Telegraph Operators, 1863 - 1865.*" n.d. Washington, DC: NARA. retrieved March 4, 2011 from <http://bit.ly/hQN5bJ>

Summary: The historical administrative note about this bound volume (not available online) is an excellent and concise overview of the formation of the War Dept's U.S. Military Telegraphs with close estimates of inventory, details of its activities and pertinent quotes from top managers.

Oates, Stephen B. (1994) *With malice toward none: a life of Abraham Lincoln*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Summary: Oates has written a fascinating book about Lincoln's life, making him vivid and dimensional. So many admirable traits can be seen from their earliest expressions: his love of law, his constant desire to better himself and his enjoyment of and skill in writing. The part of this book that contributed the most to my work was those sections dealing with his focused acquisition of military knowledge and the strategic implementation of that knowledge, via telegrams.

Standage, Tom. (1998) *The Victorian Internet: the remarkable story of the telegraph and the nineteenth century's on-line pioneers*. New York: Walker And Co.

Summary: Well-written and with a dry sense of humor, Standage's study brings the history of various forms telegraphic inventions to life. The first 6 chapters are most relevant to understanding what led to the telegraph of Lincoln's time.

Wheeler, Tom. (2006) *Mr. Lincoln's T-mails: the untold story of how Abraham Lincoln used the telegraph to win the Civil War*. New York: Collins.

Summary: This historical narrative allows the reader to feel close to the action as Lincoln goes from being barely conversant with this new fast technology to using it frequently and to dramatic effect. This source was the most helpful, in terms of focus, however the editing mistakes were annoying ("conern" for "concern"; "Anton" Stager in several places (should have been Anson Stager) as was some of the author's "business world" vocabulary: "Managing by Walking Around"; Lincoln "dialogued".

Wheeler, Tom, moderator. (Sept. 20, 2008) *Lincoln's Legacy as Commander in Chief*.

Lincoln and American Values Symposium. Washington, DC: National Archives,

Transcript: www.archives.gov/nae/news/.../080920ILincolnIntroTranscript.pdf

Summary, from the transcript: "As the only President whose entire administration was surrounded by war, Lincoln became one of the most active Commanders in Chief in U.S. history. This panel discussed Lincoln's legacy as a wartime President and his leadership of the Civil War. Moderated by Tom Wheeler, author of *Mr. Lincoln's T Mails: The Untold Story of How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War*, panelists include Craig Symonds, author of *Lincoln and His Admirals*; James L. Swanson, author of *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer*; and David Work, professor of history, Texas A&M University."