

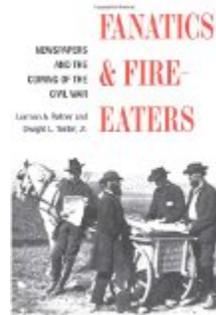
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lorman A. Ratner, Dwight L. Teeter Jr. *Fanatics and Fire-eaters: Newspapers and the Coming of the Civil War*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003. xiii + 138 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02787-1.

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In this brief book, Professors Ratner (History, emeritus, University of Tennessee) and Teeter (Journalism, University of Tennessee) seek to explain the role of newspapers amid the rising intensity of conflict between North and South in the decade prior to the American Civil War. Newspaper accounts of six significant episodes prior to the Civil War are examined, beginning with the Brooks-Summer beating incident in the U.S. Senate in 1856, and concluding with the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861. The authors depict a rising tide of violent, bellicose language employed in newspapers of the North and South during this period in describing and commenting on the events surrounding slavery. Explicit in their analysis is the assumption that newspapers both influenced and reflected opinion and, thus, reading newspapers of the day will reveal the views of the readers. Moreover, Ratner and Teeter contend that newspapers played a leading role in fomenting the violence that culminated in the Civil War. Newspaper writers in both the North and South expressed the common desire to protect what they viewed as republican government handed down to them by the Founding Fathers. The writers from those sections, however, could not agree on the attributes the American republic should take, with freedom for white people, with or without African-American slavery, representing a critical component. Ratner and Teeter's overall analysis is framed by the assumptions understood by journalism and "mass media" historians regarding the development of the American newspaper press in the nineteenth century.

The six episodes under examination each claim a short chapter. Ratner and Teeter look at how different newspapers in different sections of the United States re-

ported each incident. The first incident, in May 1856, involved U.S. Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina entering the Senate chamber and severely beating Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. Sumner had just finished a long speech castigating slavery and those who wished to see it extended into the Kansas Territory. The authors point to the widely varying ways in which newspapers depicted the incident. Southern newspapers accented how Brooks comported himself as a gentleman, revealing their anxiety to know that he had not dishonored himself in caning the senator. Northern papers saw the attack as symptomatic of rampant southern brutality. Newspapers from both sections stressed the preservation of civic virtue and social order as attributes of republican government, but the issue of slavery promoted "demonizing hatred" (p. 42) toward the other; as such, northern abolitionism and southern slavery were threats to the republican and revolutionary heritage. Similarly, the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision in early 1857 became another flashpoint in the press, when northern Republican newspapers decried the decision and southern Democratic papers applauded it. Northern editors such as Thurlow Weed claimed there was a slave conspiracy afoot, while southern editors pointed to the South as the law-abiders when it came to slavery. It was northern, fanatical abolitionists who were the lawbreakers now. The authors argue, "[O]nce again the press's use of extreme language and pejorative explanations of events both reflected and influenced public sentiments and worked to make matters worse" (p. 59).

In 1857-1858, press accounts of the Lecompton Constitution dispute for the Kansas Territory took a similar, polarizing turn. The press in each section portrayed the

other as a threat to the republic. The language employed was “increasingly shrill” (p. 60) and “extreme” (p. 65) in the depiction of the other and its threat to themselves and the national union. The trend continued with the description of the raid on Harpers Ferry by abolitionist John Brown and his followers in 1859. “It was hard to be neutral when writing and reading about John Brown,” admit the authors (p. 73). Southern newspapers voiced increasing calls for disunion, citing the Brown incident as an attack on the South and treason against the whole country. Northern Republican newspapers, reacting defensively, lashed out at northern Democratic papers and politicians, defenders of the slave South, and the South itself. “The level of dissension was heightened, and the tone of newspaper language and imagery became more shrill” (p. 75). The newspapers, “more hard-pressed than before to win over readers,” increased the “drama” (p. 73) and heightened fears, prompting overreaction.

Newspaper writings about the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 come under analysis next. The character and positions of Lincoln were the focal point in newspaper discussions. While the candidate was rather elusive in enunciating his views, newspapers from the different sections and partisan positions painted him in clear-cut terms. “The newspapers brooked no subtlety from a would-be political leader,” write Ratner and Teeter. “As newspapers shaped their readers’ sense of the reality of events, so, too, did they describe public figures” (pp. 86-87). Again, heated language prevailed. Disunion sentiment increased in the southern press. The authors speculate:

“Had the press used different, more measured, vocabulary and shown respect for the rules of common decency would the political process that had held the Republic together up to that time have continued to work, and would the division of the Union, followed by war, have been avoided? Did the press have such power over readers? We can only guess at an answer.” (p. 89)

The rebel attack on Fort Sumter serves as the final case study of press language. Here, the authors say, affairs reached a point of no return. Northerners and southerners alike rallied in defense of their respective version of republicanism; sectional ties transcended former national or partisan ties. Again, “press rhetoric served to inflame passions” (p. 103) that made compromise impossible. In concluding, the authors lay blame for disunion and war at the feet of “strutting and posturing” newspapers (p. 118). “We can only wonder,” they write, “what might have happened had the press been fairer,

more balanced, and less strident” in writing about political affairs in the 1850s and early 1860s (p. 118). “Newspapers contributed mightily” to the destruction of the union (p. 119).

Ratner and Teeter’s thesis of the demise of national unity and republicanism as a result of bad newspaper journalism follows the pattern of much of journalism history. An important strain in this body of work, written by journalism teachers for their journalism students, focuses on the development of today’s professional journalism practices and standards. In this view, newspapers rose from being the tools of political parties and bosses to become independent, nonpartisan, impartial, and professional “mass media” purveyors of information to readers. The first chapter, “The Emergence of a Democratic Press,” is an overview of current journalism history of the nineteenth-century U.S. press. In it, we learn of the technological revolution that allowed for widespread circulation of newspapers, the rise of the “penny press,” and the development of the trade of reporting in the 1830s. Moreover, “[a]s late as the 1840s, many of America’s newspapers were the creations or creatures of political parties and their leaders” (p. 19), although during the 1850s a “modern mass media” (p. 18) was born, financially independent and thus divorced from partisan interests. This body of work has been described by one British historian as “teleological progressivism,” or what used to be called the “Whig interpretation of history.”<sup>[1]</sup> This work chronicles the march of progress, in this case that of newspaper journalists, toward the pinnacles of professionalism considered to be prevalent today.

Ratner and Teeter follow the lead of other journalism historians in decrying the lack of today’s journalism standards in the newspapers editors and writers of the 1850s, who had “no sense of responsibility” to provide a “full and fair view” of events, and who followed no ethical standards in their work (p. 19). One wonders if what such journalism historians really lament is that nineteenth-century newspapermen did not attend today’s professional journalism schools. This Whiggish interpretation fails the reality check. There is a significant disconnect between the deeply partisan, political realities of newspapers of the mid-nineteenth century and the world portrayed in much of journalism school history. Fundamental to this disconnect is the assertion that by the 1850s newspapers had escaped the stranglehold of political bosses. This may have been the case in a small handful of eastern (i.e., New York City) newspapers, but this elite class of newspapers does not represent the large number of newspapers around the country. Throughout

the country, newspapers were hand-in-glove with the political parties and the bosses that ran them.[2] To assert that Indiana's newspapers, with which I am most familiar, were independent from political parties in the 1850s and 1860s would be folly. Indiana newspapers, big and small, dailies and weeklies, were the paid mouthpieces of the parties, enunciating the views of the party and faction leaders. Often the newspaper editors and publishers were candidates themselves. We find editors stumping for their party's candidates in local elections. Many newspapers, especially in small towns, survived on cash infusions from politicians and printing contracts from county governments when their party won local office.

Ratner and Teeter undermine their own thesis throughout their text when they consistently identify newspapers they study as Republican or Democrat. A newspaper cannot be "neutral" if it is understood both then and today to have been a mouthpiece for a party. However, if we understand newspapers to have been tools of political parties, then it follows that newspapers employed partisan language to describe the opposition. The "shrill," "extreme," "heated" language in the papers was the same language used by politicians stumping for office. Political parties used newspapers to convey political messages to readers. Rather than asserting, as Ratner and Teeter do, that newspapers reflected readers' opinions, it would be more to the point to say that news-

papers reflected what newspaper editors as party actors wanted said. What the authors describe as victimization of the reading public (p. 8) by mass media using divisive, polemic language in a "feral pursuit of profit" (p. 19) was actually heated partisan discourse about slavery heard at all levels of political contest throughout the United States.

#### Notes

[1]. See the book review by Jeremy Black of Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows, eds., *Press, Politics and the Public Sphere in Europe and North America, 1760-1820*, published by H-Albion in December, 2002, <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=322421040943533>, accessed December 26, 2002.

[2]. Jeffrey L. Pasley's *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), is an important study of the centrality of newspapers to the politics of the early nineteenth century, with application to the study of newspapers and politics throughout the antebellum period. Ratner and Teeter do not cite this work in their text.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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