

# Fanatics and Fire-eaters: Newspapers and the Coming of the Civil War

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## Review

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**Ratner, Lorman A. and Teeter, Jr. Dwight L.** *Fanatics and Fire-eaters: Newspapers and the Coming of the Civil War*. University of Illinois Press, \$34.95 ISBN 252027876

The power of the press

Authors inspect journalism's influence

Lorman A. Ratner and Dwight L. Teeter, Jr.'s **Fanatics and Fire-eaters: Newspapers and the Coming of the Civil War** is a worthy contribution to the voluminous literature on the causes of the war. The authors undertook this study because they wondered what newspapers—a mass media by the 1850s—might reveal about the societal conflicts resulting in the war. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the sources that they used, Ratner and Teeter found that the conflict between North and South was intensely ideological: both sides believed that they defended the true interests of the republic against adversaries who intended to undo all that they held sacred.

Though there is not much new here, what sets **Fanatics and Fire-eaters** apart is the authors' singular focus on the role newspapers played in the sectional conflict. Ratner, an emeritus historian at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Teeter, Jr., a professor of journalism at the University of Tennessee, are uniquely qualified to explore such a topic. They begin with a detailed and informative overview of the evolution of the press during the late antebellum period. The authors argue that newspapers had become a true mass media by the 1850s. The steam powered press made inexpensive mass publication possible, railroads and the postal service enabled large urban newspapers to increase circulation into smaller cities and towns, and the telegraph facilitated near instantaneous communication. Newspapermen soon realized that they could make large fortunes if they could attract a broad readership. As they did, they became less dependent upon political parties for financial support and more in tune with the consumers that they hoped to attract.

Meanwhile, the press worked to increase their hold over the public imagination by sensationalizing the news—as if words had no consequences for harm. In this way, newspapers provided sparks and tinder for the coming conflagration.

In the remaining six chapters, Teeter and Ratner examine newspapers' coverage of the sectional conflict. Each chapter focuses on a significant event in the deterioration of sectional relations: the Brooks-Sumner incident, the Dred Scott decision, the Congressional debate over the Lecompton Constitution, John Brown's raid, Lincoln's election, and the firing on Fort Sumter. Predictably, they find that with each event, the press became more tied to section than to party, more vitriolic and accusatory, and more adamant that theirs was the only just position.

So long as Ratner and Teeter chronicle the press's response to events, they are on solid ground. The narrative is lively and informative and the authors do an admirable job of balancing Republican and Democrat, Southern and Northern newspaper editorials. They stumble a bit when they try to overreach their evidence. From time to time, the authors raise the question of the press's influence upon mass political ideology. Did the press shape public opinion? If so, how much? If not, did the press reflect public opinion? Initially, the authors take a conservative approach, noting that while they assume that newspapers must have influenced the opinions of their readers, they have no way to measure that influence. Later, however, the authors overreach their evidence, concluding that newspapers did indeed contribute mightily to the shaping of an imagined community and, ironically, to the shattering of that community. Unfortunately, the authors' source of evidence—newspapers—is too singular for them to make this claim.

There are other problems with Ratner and Teeter's use of evidence. Though the authors claim to have surveyed a number of newspapers representing different sectional and political interests, they offer no specifics of how thorough their survey was. How many newspapers? Did they read each newspaper for the entire period from 1855 to 1861 or did they read selectively? For two events, Lincoln's election and the firing of Fort Sumter, the authors used published collections for some of their newspapers, *Northern Editorials on Secession* and *Southern Editorials on Secession*, suggesting that their research was not horribly extensive. The authors relied almost exclusively on big city newspapers, arguing that they were highly influential. Unfortunately, they do not argue the point with much vigor. One wonders if small city editors followed the lead of the larger

journals or tried to develop their own voice. One also wonders if readers in the hinterlands welcomed the arrival of the big city newspapers or viewed them—and their editorial stances—as alien and intrusive.

**Fanatics and Fire-eaters** offers a sharp and accessible narrative of one aspect of the political debate that emerged during the crisis of the 1850s. Nevertheless, scholars interested in a thorough analysis of the media's role in defining and intensifying the crisis may be disappointed in the final product.

*Steve Tripp is a professor of history at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. His first book, Yankee Town, Southern City: Race and Class Relations in Civil War Lynchburg, was named an Outstanding Academic Book by Choice Magazine. He is currently working on a study of the social history of Virginia immediately after Confederate defeat.*