

The Most Fearful Ordeal: Original Coverage of the Civil War

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Review

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Writers and Reporters of the New York Times and McPherson, James M.
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The Big Apple's perspective

News from the frontlines

Twentieth century author George Orwell once wrote, "Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper." And, of course, he was right. During the Civil War newspapers were the only form of mass media available to the public in the North and the South. Whether poorly or well-written, newspapers were feasted on by a population hungry for war news. **The Most Fearful Ordeal** is an uneven collection of Civil War newspaper stories selected from the archives of the *New York Times*, presented here as examples of one newspaper's effort to cover a war unprecedented in scope and violence.

No editor is credited for the selection of these particular newspaper stories, but Pulitzer Prize-winning historian James M. McPherson is the name drawn on the cover. McPherson wrote the introduction and provided notes scattered throughout the book, but the focus is on the *Times* news stories themselves. McPherson's introduction does provide fascinating insight into how the *Times* and other newspapers covered the war. Being a moderate Republican newspaper, the *Times* covered the Union armies and the political scene in the North. Some well-connected reporters traveled with the armies, others wandered about on their own. Few actually witnessed any fighting, most compiled their stories from second and third-hand accounts, military reports, Associated Press summaries, and excerpts from other newspapers. Many stories are emotional, glamorous, and filled with errors (declaring Bull Run a Union victory counts as an error).

Stories were usually submitted by telegraph, courier, or in person. Bylines were infrequently used. Stories often appeared in print with no attribution at all, or by a reporter's initials, or by the anonymous identification of "special correspondent." As today, newspapers then were in the business of selling the news, so many stories contained lurid details, innuendo, outright name-calling, and scandalous suggestion. Reading these selections makes one wonder - Is it journalism or show business? Still, the good work of *New York Times* reporters like L.L. Crouse and William Swinton, and editor Henry J. Raymond are evident in several accounts.

Beginning with numerous stories of John Brown's Harpers Ferry raid, capture, and execution in 1859, the book contains *New York Times* news articles covering most major battles and noteworthy political events through 1865. It also includes many official military dispatches which were printed verbatim, as well as lengthy and glowing obituaries of prominent Civil War figures. Because the *Times* was pro-Union and pro-Lincoln, the stories all contain an element of optimism, bravado, and bluster. Even Union battlefield defeats earn praise or faint criticism: Bull Run - "Our greatest deficiency was in cool and competent officers;" and, Fredericksburg - "The troops are in good spirits and are not the least disheartened."

Selections provide exciting descriptions of Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Shiloh, Chancellorsville, and Petersburg, but give scant attention to Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and the Wilderness. Whoever edited this book and made the selections chose not to include anything about Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, or Appomattox, and naval actions get only brief mention. Also noticeably missing are any *Times* editorials which would certainly have provided colorful perspectives on the war. Best are the riveting and dramatic *Times* news stories of the interview between John Brown and his wife, the bloody New York City draft riots in 1863, and the seventy-four pages of stories devoted to Lincoln's assassination and the political chaos that followed.

Oddly, the book also contains photographs unrelated to most of the *Times* stories, and a few barely legible maps. As an example of *New York Times* journalism during the war, this is an unbalanced and disappointing presentation. However, since there are so few Civil War books dedicated to journalism and war coverage, this will have to do for now.

William D. Bushnell, a retired Marine Corps colonel, is a professional book reviewer with more than 1000 reviews published, and an instructor at the University of Southern Maine. He lives on an island on the coast of Maine.