

Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails: The Untold Story of How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War

Frank J. Williams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Williams, Frank J. (2007) "Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails: The Untold Story of How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss3/14>

Review

Williams, Frank J.

Summer 2007

Wheeler, Tom *Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails: The Untold Story of How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War*. Collins, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780061129780

Communicating in Wartime

The Telegraph and the Commander-in-Chief

The Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana contains this telegram, dated September 27, 1861, from President Lincoln to his lawyer friend, Samuel T. Glover, in St. Louis, Missouri:

What news from up river?---Lexington, Booneville, or Jefferson City?
Please answer. A. LINCOLN

This is one of the twenty telegrams that Lincoln sent during the first year of the war though he had only seen a telegraph for the first time three years before he took office. But by 1862, with General-in-Chief George B. McClellan sick with typhoid and the president frustrated with his lack of action on the battlefield, Lincoln had grasped the significance of the telegraph. He used it often to seek operational control of his armies as well as intelligence, so that by the end of the war he had sent nearly 1,000 telegrams. Though Lincoln recognized that the Union had overwhelming advantages of a more industrialized economy, larger population, extensive rail system, and the ability to resupply, In reality, however, Wheeler writes, the Civil War was, as Wellington said of Waterloo, a damn near thing.'

The author points out how useful and essential intelligence is during wartime. As the Duke of Marlborough said, No war can be conducted successfully without early and good intelligence. Lincoln's evolving use of the telegraph comes as no surprise as he was one of the most technologically savvy lawyers of his time despite his education which he described as defective. As an

attorney, he took on the most complicated cases that required broad knowledge in the fields of medicine, engineering, and science. He became the first and only president to have a patent registered to him (though it was never manufactured, Patent No. 6469 was a device to lift boats over shoals).

Nonetheless, Lincoln was the first president to use real-time electronic communications. With his understanding of the telegraph's value, Lincoln practically lived at the telegraph office reading dispatches and sending messages. As the author clearly demonstrates, Lincoln used the telegraph to glean information directly from the field, oversee military actions, and convey his military thinking — strategic and tactical — to his commanders. Not to be understated was his use of the telegraph to mobilize political support throughout the Union, as well as control the flow of information, since the War Department seized control of the telegraph lines early in the war. Wheeler, the CEO of high-tech companies and author of *Take Command! Leadership Lessons from the Civil War*, is just the right person to make the comparisons between technology — then and now. The title of his present book cleverly captures the resemblance between yesterday's telegrams and today's e-mails. Rapid knowledge of battlefield conditions might make a difference in modern warfare.

Yet, there are countless examples provided in this book of Lincoln's attempt to use the telegraph to direct the army and gather intelligence only to be thwarted by his generals in the field. The author discusses, at length, the contentious relationship between the President and General George B. McClellan through the use of telegrams from Lincoln in which he attempts, unsuccessfully, to prod his general-in-chief. While Wheeler may overstate the case that the telegraph changed the war and brought it to an earlier conclusion than otherwise with this evidence, one gets the sense that if Lincoln's generals had been more forthright in their dealings with the Commander-in-Chief, the war could have been shortened.

Of course, this changed when Ulysses S. Grant took Vicksburg, Mississippi in July 1863. Inspired by Grant's success, the Commander-In-Chief used the telegraph in such a way that this communications network aided the destruction of the Confederate army. Many of the telegrams exist today because Lincoln often wrote draft messages and a number of them are reproduced in this book.

It was the telegraph along with other technology and Lincoln's leadership skills that made the President an effective wartime leader. As Wheeler opines,

the President was able to shape public sentiment by communicating directly with multiple interests via the telegraph. His management of the news also helped. During his re-election campaign in 1864, candidate Lincoln would sit with journalists to discuss the war, emancipation, and his policies, knowing they would transmit his views over the wires to newspapers throughout the North.

This book, by emphasizing the new technology of the telegraph and its extensive use by the Commander-in-Chief gives a different perspective to the operations during the Civil War and the leadership of Abraham Lincoln. As the President once said in exasperation with one of his generals, We must use the tools we have. Lincoln proved his own admonition by his use of the telegraph. As military historian John Keegan makes clear in his *Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al Qda* (2003), War is ultimately about doing, not thinking. Abraham Lincoln understood this and, through, in part, the use of electronic communications he did do and forced and coerced his generals to do likewise.

Frank J. Williams is Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island and served for almost five years in the United States Army in the 1960s in the 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment along the East/West German border and as an infantry advisor in the Republic of Vietnam. He is a member of the U.S. Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and founding Chair of The Lincoln Forum.