

### An Indispensable Liberty: The Fight For Free Speech In Nineteenth Century America

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## Review

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**Cronin, Mary M.** *An Indispensable Liberty: The Fight for Free Speech in Nineteenth Century America*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 809334728

### In Dangerous Pursuit of a Fundamental Freedom

Early in its pages, *An Indispensable Liberty: The Fight for Free Speech in 19th Century America* features a political print from 1838, saluting the memory of the murdered Rev. Elijah Lovejoy. A Presbyterian minister and a journalist, he had died defending his printing press, attacked by a pro-slavery mob in Alton, Ill., the previous year. The print labels Lovejoy a “martyr,” but also treats his killing as foreshadowing a coming triumph of his principles: Liberty, in female form, raises a hand as if to bless his press; at her side, a black man sheds his shackles.

Lee Joliffe, author of the article in which the illustration appears, “A Press Ablaze: Violent Suppression of Abolitionist Speech, Press, Petition and Assembly,” regards the crime as fundamental in its effect: Northern newspapers began increasingly to turn critical of slavery after this brazen assault on press freedom. It helped that Lovejoy had hardly been obscure. Mobs had earlier wrecked three of his presses when he lived in St. Louis. Shortly after the final assault, Abraham Lincoln, then a rising young lawyer in Springfield, Ill., spoke to the lyceum there, warning that mob actions threatened democracy itself.

Joliffe’s is one of 11 informative articles collected in *An Indispensable Liberty*, edited by Mary W. Cronin. Focused on the long and dangerous struggle for free speech and a free press, these works describe the tenacity of an American ideal and the pressure that could be brought to bear against its exercise 150 years ago. When slavery was the issue, its opponents found their efforts to denounce it would be checked by Congress, which barred anti-slavery journals from the mails, or lynched by thugs. (Lovejoy hardly stood alone.)

The Civil War's outbreak in 1861 added a substantially greater challenge to newspaper editors. Political and military leaders could—and did—suppress journalists out of concern that the latter might expose troop movements, possibly tipping the scales in coming battles. Notably, civil authorities in Washington and Richmond regarded press freedom as a fundamental American ideal, and decidedly not simply a peacetime luxury. But from time to time, they did step in call a halt to the work of individual journalists and their publications.

Debra Reddin Van Tuyll cites research showing far more of these incidents occurred in the North than the South—reflecting at least in part that the North had many more newspapers and a more developed news culture. The Confederate government incorporated provision for a free press into its constitution—not entirely surprisingly, given that its political leaders saw themselves as the true heirs of the Founders.

Interestingly, in her essay, “Freedom of the Press in a Slave Society at War,” she tells us that 35 percent of Southern newspaper editors owned slaves, a higher proportion than among Southern society as a whole. However, shared economic interest did not prevent Southern journalists from criticizing political leaders, up to and including President Jefferson Davis. The Charleston Mercury's Richmond correspondent accused Davis of corruption. Davis let the press alone. His doing so, Reddin Van Tuyll indicates, fit with the overall attitude toward freedom that existed among Southern whites in a slave-owning society. “Such close proximity to those who had lost all vestiges of freedom could not have helped but give Southerners radical notions about the value of their freedom,” she writes.

As for the North in wartime, David W. Bulla describes the shuttering of the *Chicago Times* in June 1863 as the best-known—and perhaps least popular—example of press suppression under Abraham Lincoln. The paper's editor, the Copperhead Wilbur Storey, campaigned hard against slave emancipation and its supporters, most definitely including Lincoln. His fiery editorials eventually provoked General Ambrose Burnside to regard the newspaper as a font of treason and to order the *Times* shut down, for “repeated expression of disloyal and incendiary sentiments.” No sooner had Burnside acted than a fierce backlash developed within the Illinois legislature and among Chicago's citizens, thousands took to the streets in protest. Three days after Burnside issued his order, Lincoln overrode it and ended the suppression. Storey resumed bluntly criticizing the president.

*An Indispensable Liberty* relates valuable stories of how individual journalists coped with all manner of official and public hostility to their dedicated pursuit of free expression. Erica J. Pribanic-Smith, recounting the intense antagonism experienced by journalists of different political views during Reconstruction, highlights the story of Jason Clarke Swayze, a New Jersey journalist come south to Georgia. Swayze, an ardent Unionist, drew continuing threats from his unreconstructed neighbors for his defense of African American civil rights and his criticism of the Ku Klux Klan. For some, the freedom to speak out and publish public attacks against injustice is a near-useless right unless the bearer of that freedom is prepared to shout it from the housetops.

Stories of unflinching courage in defense of First Amendment rights are particularly important now. Daily, it seems, we are reminded of the public's disdain for news organizations and their vital work. Add to that the vociferous hostility aimed at the press during a very long election season—it is a trend deeply corrosive of a foundational liberty granted us by our nation's Founders who regarded an unbound press as a bulwark of the republic. The essays in this book help remind us of a fundamental freedom we should always value.

*Gustav Niebuhr, author of Lincoln's Bishop: A President, a Priest and the Fate of 300 Dakota Sioux Warriors (Harper, 2014), and he is working on a book about religion in America. A former newspaper journalist, he teaches at Syracuse University.*