

Kentucky's Rebel Press: Pro-Confederate Media and the Secession Crisis

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Recommended Citation

Raney, David A. (2018) "Kentucky's Rebel Press: Pro-Confederate Media and the Secession Crisis," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.20.4.23

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss4/23>

Review

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Fall 2018

Berry, Craig. *Kentucky's Rebel Press: Pro-Confederate Media and the Secession Crisis*. University Press of Kentucky, \$45.00 ISBN 9780813174594

As the secession crisis yielded the bitter fruit of civil war in the spring of 1861, Abraham Lincoln understood well the multifaceted importance of the border states, including his native state of Kentucky. He is said to have remarked that, while he hoped that God was on his side, he needed Kentucky. Indeed, Union and Confederate partisans in and out of the state coveted Kentucky's manufacturing capacity as well as its ability to provide military resources such as soldiers and draft animals. The state's geographical position was vital as well. Kentucky offered a springboard for invasion of the North or the South, and the forces that controlled the state's portions of the Cumberland, Ohio, and Tennessee rivers would be well positioned to drive deep into enemy territory—a fact that Ulysses S. Grant demonstrated effectively with his seizure of Forts Henry and Donelson in February of 1862.

Historian and journalist Berry Craig explains in his new monograph that, in light of the aforementioned realities, Kentucky's pro-secession newspapers struggled mightily to lead their state out of the Union, often using humor, historical and literary references, and caustic personal attacks in an attempt to achieve their goal. Craig acknowledges that historians have written extensively about the Northern and Southern press during the Civil War, but he laments the dearth of scholarship focused on border state newspapers. He then declares his intention to help rectify this oversight by focusing on the state of Kentucky, explaining that a chief aim of his book is to analyze “how the Confederate press [in Kentucky] argued for secession rather than how it reported the news” (p. 8). Finally, he expresses the hope that his study will provide some insight into the age-old question of whether the press shapes public opinion or merely reflects it.

The author scoured a host of pro-secession as well as unionist Kentucky newspapers in pursuit of his objectives, and his opening chapter introduces the reader to some of the most influential publications on both sides of this divide. Although he engages a wide array of papers throughout the state, he focuses much of his attention on the two leading publications of

Louisville, the state's most populous city: the pro-secession *Louisville Daily Courier* and the unionist *Louisville Daily Journal*. In many respects, the battles between these two papers and their editors closely resembled many others that raged across the state. However, Craig notes that, although the number of pro-secession and unionist papers was roughly equal in Kentucky during the secession crisis and the first months of the war, public sentiment continued to be overwhelmingly in favor of remaining in the Union during this period as well as for the duration of the conflict. Thus, it appears that, in significant ways, the Kentucky press neither shaped public opinion nor reflected it; the disproportionately large number of pro-secession papers in the state convinced few in the overwhelmingly unionist majority to abandon their views.

As the balance of Craig's book makes plain, Kentucky's pro-Southern press shifted its objectives and rhetoric in response to changing conditions. During the 1860 presidential election, many pro-Southern papers rejected secession and embraced John C. Breckinridge as the last best hope of the republic—a man who would preserve the Union and safeguard the liberties of all Americans. Immediately following the election, these papers frequently lamented Lincoln's victory while at the same time pronouncing it an insufficient reason for a state to leave the Union. Lincoln's anti-slavery views were anathema to them (and to most Kentuckians), as was the prospect of his administration using force to keep states in the Union against their will. When South Carolina and the other Lower South states seceded, Kentucky's pro-Southern press shifted its approach to advocating for a "sovereignty convention" that they hoped would lead to the secession of their state. The formation of the Confederacy, along with the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's subsequent requisition for militia troops, led some erstwhile unionist papers into the pro-secession fold and amplified calls for a Kentucky secession convention. Unfolding events emboldened the pro-Southern press, and many papers went beyond promoting secession to advocating Kentucky's admission to the new Confederacy.

Significantly, Craig builds on the vital work of Charles B. Dew by illuminating the role of Southern secession commissioners in the movement to lead Kentucky out of the Union. By highlighting the efforts of men such as Alabamian (and Kentucky native) Stephen Foster Hale, Craig helps to demonstrate that secession was driven primarily by the desire to preserve slavery as the only viable guarantor of white supremacy. Kentucky's rebel press often echoed the racially-charged arguments of secession commissioners, hoping they would resonate with the state's sizable pro-slavery majority.

Kentucky's rebel press shifted its objectives and tactics again in light of political setbacks in 1861. When Kentucky's legislature declared neutrality between the belligerents in May of 1861, many rebel papers decried the move, characterizing it as a craven capitulation to a "Black Republican" conspiracy to force Kentucky to join the Union's war against the South. In June, unionist candidates captured nine of the state's ten congressional seats, and in August unionists won an overwhelming majority in the state legislature. Although many of Kentucky's pro-Confederate papers remained unaware of or, more likely, chose to ignore the state's staunch unionism, they could not escape the legislature's composition and inclinations. Fearing that the new legislature might attempt to lead Kentucky into the war on the North's side, the rebel press belatedly embraced neutrality as the best possible outcome for their cause.

The pro-Confederate press's strategy to embrace neutrality and peace in order to forestall Kentucky's participation in the Union war effort failed miserably. The legislature allowed a Union Army training center to operate on Kentucky soil, and when Confederate and later Union armies invaded the state in September of 1861, state lawmakers demanded that only the Confederates leave. With these actions, the state became an active participant in the North's drive to maintain the Union. Thereafter, Union forces in Kentucky suppressed rebel papers as treasonous. The *Louisville Courier*, which among other things attempted to send publications on military tactics to the South, was shut down by federal authorities and its publisher sent into exile. A few other pro-Confederate editors were arrested, but their stints in prison were typically brief. The remainder of the rebel press either moderated their pro-Southern tone or ceased publishing for the duration of the war.

Craig concludes his work with a fascinating discussion of Kentucky's post-war press, which he characterizes as a resurrection of the wartime rebel press. The author notes that Kentucky papers became intensely pro-Southern in the aftermath of the war, driven in large part by emancipation—a measure widely opposed throughout the state. They became zealous propagators of the "Lost Cause" myth, and their message found a receptive audience in a state where many were disillusioned by the war's ramifications. Henry Watterson, an editor and former Confederate soldier who helped to spawn the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in 1868, advocated tirelessly for his "New Departure." This program, which anticipated Henry Woodfin Grady's "New South," embraced "Lost Cause" mythology, accepted the end of slavery and

limited rights for the freed slaves, and promoted the industrialization and diversification of the Southern economy.

Like any human endeavor, Craig's book is not without shortcomings, but they are relatively minor. The author inaccurately describes Lincoln's April 15, 1861 summons of state militia forces as a call for 75,000 "volunteer soldiers" (p. 78), and he misleadingly asserts that Lincoln "had not even been on the ballot in ten of the eleven future Confederate states" (p.106), suggesting that the states rather than local political parties printed and disseminated ballots to voters. In addition, some of Craig's claims about public opinion in Kentucky are strained and difficult if not impossible to support with available evidence. For example, although it may be true that the Breckinridge press's reaction to Lincoln's election "mirrored the views of almost all white Kentuckians" (p. 51), the author does not offer sufficient proof for this claim. Craig rightly acknowledges the difficulties in determining accurate readership levels for wartime papers, but a similar problem exists to an even greater extent in attempting to discern public opinion regarding political questions of the era. Finally, although the author makes it clear that he has no intention of focusing on the broad (and well-studied) question of press freedoms during the Civil War, a more extensive consideration of how a free press (or the lack thereof) in Kentucky related to the national landscape would have been welcome. In the final analysis, though, Craig's work ably fills a notable void in Civil War scholarship, and readers will enjoy his elegant and often amusing treatment of his subject.

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