

Marketing the Blue & Gray: Newspaper Advertising and the American Civil War

Michael E. Woods
Marshall University, woodsm@marshall.edu

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Review

Woods, Michael E.

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Scholarly study of the Civil War-era press is robust. Thanks to specialized conferences and a steady output of books and articles, we know a lot about how publishers, editors, and correspondents satisfied the ravenous popular hunger for war news and, in the process, reshaped American journalism. Despite their extensive analysis of wartime newspapers, however, scholars have made sustained use of perhaps only half of the available material, because few have closely examined advertisements. Yet ads of all sorts proliferated during the conflict, as sellers seized the opportunity to reach growing numbers of subscribers, while publishers grew increasingly dependent on advertising revenue. Fortunately, Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr., has demonstrated the importance of advertisements as primary sources in this lively and insightful book.

Marketing the Blue & Gray is rooted in the author's prodigious research in some 550 newspapers. Kreiser's impressive bibliography encompasses far more than the oft-cited eastern urban dailies and includes, among many others, the *Mesilla Times*, the *Florida Home Companion*, and no fewer than five papers from Washington Territory. This diverse source base provides refreshingly broad geographic coverage and enables Kreiser to make interesting comparisons between local and national advertisers. Both generally remained neutral on matters of partisan politics, but national advertisers were especially scrupulous on this point, for fear of alienating potential customers.

To give coherence to this vast amount of source material, Kreiser devotes each of the book's six chapters to a specific theme. The first two chapters focus on how disunion and war affected American advertising. Chapter 1 shows that advertisers capitalized on readers' pride, anxiety, and patriotism to sell goods, thereby commercializing the waves of nationalism and militarism which swept the United States and the Confederacy. Many advertisers crassly

referenced secession and war simply to grab readers' attention and then hawk their wares, but Kreiser creatively uses advertising copy to explore the parameters of political participation. Crucially, advertisers targeted both women and men with appeals to "consumer patriotism" (p. 43), thus embracing a vision of political involvement which was more expansive than the one offered by politicians who exhorted "Union men" or the Confederate "band of brothers" to do their duty. In Chapter 2, Kreiser shows that advertisers responded to wartime demand to peddle goods related to the conflict: publishing firms offered books and maps to help readers understand the war's causes and course, while patent medicine manufacturers promised to cure all manner of soldiers' afflictions.

Subsequent chapters explore different ways in which advertising shaped the war and how Americans experienced it. Chapter 3 traces how advertisements energized electoral politics even as they commercialized the parties and candidates: a single newspaper might carry notices for a political rally and advertisements for campaign biographies, portraits, and accoutrements (for women as well as men) which consumers could use to proclaim their political allegiances. In chapter 4, Kreiser turns to the challenge of mobilization, showing that newspaper advertisements were integral in marshaling the Civil War's massive armies. Early in the war, recruiting advertisements appealed to martial fervor and patriotic zeal to rally volunteers; by 1863, advertisements for substitutes and draft insurance exposed the sordid side of mobilization, while ads placed by officers searching for deserters betrayed some soldiers' flagging commitment to the cause.

Chapter 5 focuses on slavery and race, and draws sharper distinctions between Union and Confederate advertisements. Confederate newspapers continued to carry notices of pending slave sales, as well as advertisements for fugitive slaves, all the way through 1865, dramatizing slavery's deep entrenchment in the southern economy and society even as the Confederate political project crumbled. Meanwhile, Union papers ran a strikingly diverse array of advertisements, with abolitionist journals publishing notices of antislavery books and prints, even as their rivals printed ads for minstrel shows. Taken together, Kreiser suggests, the mixed signals from the Union press suggested that white northerners blamed slaveholders for secession and war, even as racism ran deep. The most poignant ads were those placed by freedpeople seeking relatives wrenched away by slave traders; these were joined in abolitionist papers by other notices intended to assist African Americans, ranging from announcements of political

meetings to adverts encouraging emigration to Haiti. Chapter 6 returns to product advertisements and shows how deeply the war reached into everyday life, as opportunistic merchants marketed everything from arms and medicines for would-be soldiers, to dioramas, board games, and coffins for the folks back home.

Keiser's painstaking research yields some fascinating finds. The analysis of how editors repurposed enemy advertisements, for example, is instructive. Confederate editors gloated over Yankee advertisements for draft substitutes, while antislavery editors pounced on notices regarding fugitive slaves. Whether to boost morale or score political points, this ongoing interaction between Union and Confederate newspapers demonstrates that the antebellum war of words did not cease when the shooting started.

There is also much here that will resonate with twenty-first-century readers. Controversies over publishers' moral responsibility for ad contents, for instance, and the strong theme of pervasive commercialization, illuminate interesting continuities between the Civil War era and the digital age. Kreiser carefully keeps these parallels from dominating the historical analysis, but it is interesting to see how the commercialization of the Civil War—a conflict now emblazoned on everything from belt buckles to baby blankets—began well before Appomattox.

Specialists will also appreciate Kreiser's engagement with the Civil War's vast and diversifying historiography. The book is not overburdened with historiographical digressions, but the author judiciously draws on secondary studies to illuminate key issues raised in the newspaper sources. Kreiser's discussion of patent medicines marketed toward soldiers, for instance, builds on recent studies of Civil War medical care, including work soldiers' self-care and the great strides made by army surgeons, to highlight the fierce competition faced by the infamous peddlers of quack cures.

A few other issues would have benefitted from similar contextualization. Confederate merchants' exhortations to buy southern goods, for instance, would look slightly different if situated in the context of the more extended effort to promote southern manufacturing and economic independence, a project which began years before 1861. Advertisers readily appealed to Confederate nationalism, but they were also building on much older sensitivity to sectional economic dependence. Similarly, antislavery notices for goods produced by free laborers were neither as gimmicky nor as novel as one might assume from reading wartime advertisements alone. Promotion of free produce had a long history in abolitionist activism throughout the

Atlantic World, dating back at least to the late-eighteenth-century British campaign to boycott slave-grown Caribbean sugar.

Some readers might also wish for more nuance in the discussion of the new opportunities opened up for women and African Americans. Certainly many advertisers sought to grow their customer base far beyond the nation's enfranchised minority of adult white men, and the sales of Union war bonds famously expanded the number of Americans with a direct financial stake in the government's war effort. But did advertisements help "expand American democracy by offering their readership access to almost every aspect of the Civil War"? (p. 13) By segmenting the consumer marketplace, advertising can reaffirm boundaries of race and gender at least as readily as it weakens them by increasing consumer choice. Advertisers, after all, did not always pitch the same goods to the same audiences: Spencer rifles were endorsed by, and marketed toward, male soldiers, while war themed board games were directly geared toward the "family circle," not men at the front. (p. 147) And while anyone with sufficient disposable income might have been able to buy a portrait of Ulysses S. Grant, the question of who could *vote* for him in 1868 was violently contested and severely circumscribed.

These caveats aside, *Marketing the Blue & Gray* is a welcome addition to the flourishing literature on the Civil War-era press, and a novel contribution to the history of American consumerism. By gleaning so much fresh material from ostensibly familiar sources, Kreiser has demonstrated once more that the Civil War can still surprise us.

Michael E. Woods is associate professor of history at Marshall University and the author of three books on the Civil War era, including Arguing until Doomsday: Stephen Douglas, Jefferson Davis, and the Struggle for American Democracy (University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming in April 2020). Readers can contact him at woodsm@marshall.edu.