

# The Presidents vs. the Press: The Endless Battle between the White House and the Media from the Founding Fathers to Fake News

Meg Groeling  
bloodnight@aol.com

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## Review

Meg Groeling

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**Holzer, Harold.** *The Presidents vs. the Press: The Endless Battle between the White House and the Media from the Founding Fathers to Fake News.* Dutton, August 2020. 576 pp. ISBN-13 978-1524745264, \$29.95 hardcover

Harold Holzer's newest offering, *The Presidents vs. the Press: The Endless Battle between the White House and the Media from the Founding Fathers to Fake News*, is a profoundly timely work. Proclaimed the "dean" of Lincoln historians, it is interesting to learn that author Harold Holzer was not, in fact, born a Lincoln historian. He began his post-college life as a reporter for a weekly newspaper, the *Manhattan Tribune*. After what turned out to be a brief foray into print journalism, Holzer became a political press secretary for Bella Abzug, and then for Mario Cuomo's mayoral election in 1977. Given the information in this book, it should be noted that only Harold Holzer could have offered his readers the perspective of *The Presidents vs. the Press*.

The book is divided into five parts, presented chronologically. Part One, "Malignant Industry," covers Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. Be prepared to learn that the Father of our Country had quite a temper when it came to newspapers. The First President was also the first to claim **Fake News**. It seems he became a bit unglued at a cabinet meeting when he saw a cartoon maligning his intent for siding with England over France in a foreign kerfuffle. Adams and Jefferson followed suit during their terms in office. In particular, Jefferson used his relationship with Thomas Callender, a less-than-scrupulous scandalmonger, to smear John Adams whenever the chance appeared. (I must admit to a personal disappointment: Holzer does not discuss the mess Jefferson created when he told Callender to spread the libel that Adams was a hermaphrodite. Holzer has more class, I suppose, than *Drunk History*!)

Holzer discusses the press and Abraham Lincoln in much detail. Specifically examined are the legal maneuvers Lincoln took to shut down presses and papers that did not support the Union during the Civil War. Holzer clearly explains one issue--Lincoln not only had to hold Republican-leaning papers to their course, but he also had to encourage pro-war Democrats to support the war effort. Whether it was arranging secret conferences or kicking reporters out of

army camps, Abraham Lincoln was controversial. Lincoln did not seem to care what the press said about him personally. It was support for the war that concerned him the most, and if that took aggressive press suppression, well, that is what he provided. The forfeiture of civil liberties came in a distant second. Holzer points out that the potential relaxation of Lincoln's wartime press policies will never be anything but a point of discussion, as Lincoln's assassination cut short his second term.

Chapters Six through Nine are very compelling reading. Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt's term in 1901, press coverage at the White House changed. The evolution of TR's "barber sessions" is covered with depth and humor. Journalism changed during this period, as well. Photographs could now be published in newspapers, and silent newsreels could be seen between silent movies. For the first time, the general public could see the United States president move, smile, laugh, or ride horses. Wire services moved news all over the world. Roosevelt himself, photogenic and quotable, was a perfect subject to cover. The "cult of political personality" took hold of the American imagination at this time, and even when TR argued with the press, there was generally a good feeling between the president, reporters, and those who owned the papers. Roosevelt realized that he needed the press as much as they needed him.

FDR's delicate relationship with the press is covered in two parts: the Depression, when he depended on the press to push his economic reforms for the country, and World War II. Roosevelt's Fireside Chats set a new standard for the media, the public, and the executive. They have been emulated in some form ever since the 1930s. Four terms as president ushered in many changes in both the office of the president and the papers that covered him.

In our era, Holzer writes about "Presidents we remember." He includes John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, although sometimes two presidents share one chapter. This part of the book moves faster than the earlier part for precisely the reason Holzer references: most readers are familiar with these presidents. "I remember that!" is a phrase most of today's readers might utter. Holzer hits all the rough spots as well as the smooth ones. When JFK's womanizing is compared to Clinton's and Trump's, it is easy to see the changes in the relationship between the president and the press. Holzer uses his comparisons with skill and authority, drawing parallels between Nixon's impeachment and that of Donald Trump. Civil unrest in 2020 is thrown into stark contrast with that of the 1960s, and

the role of the press is examined in the creation and destruction of public trust. The ability of George W. Bush to pull America together after 9/11 is reviewed in detail, demonstrating the necessity of being able to depend on the press to spread a message of hope and cooperation to the public. It is contrasted, unfavorably, with similar events in the current administration. The estrangement between politics and the public can often be contributed directly to the president's relationship with the press.

Many terrific new books are being published right now that help us see the Civil War in a new light, a contemporary light. Not since the mid-1800s has our country been so divided. Understanding that divide is necessary for understanding the issues we face today. There is no one better to explain it all than Harold Holzer. This book is readable, fascinating, and timely. Get a copy.

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**Meg Groeling** received her Master's Degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, *The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead*, in the fall of 2015, and she has written *First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, which Savas Beatie has contracted for publication sometime in 2021. She is a regular contributor to the blog *Emerging Civil War*.