A
s the eighteenth century was giving way to the nineteenth, the January 1, 1799, issue of the *Boston Columbian Centinel* quoted a wise judge who said, “Give to any set men the command of the press, and you give them the command of the country, for you give them the command of public opinion, which commands everything.” One month later, Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison with a similar insight. “We are sensible,” Jefferson said of the efforts it would take to put their party—the Republicans—in power, “The engine is the press.”

Both writers were correct in their assessment of the role the press would play in American life in the years ahead. The press was already helping shape the opinions and direction of America. It had been doing so for decades, but its influence erupted following the Revolutionary War and continued into the 1920s and further. From less than 40 newspapers in 1783—each with circulations of about 500—the number of papers erupted in the United States. By 1860, newspaper circulation exceeded 1 million, and in 1898, Joseph Pulitzer’s *World* alone had a daily circulation of 1.3 million. By the beginning of World War I, about 16,600 daily and weekly newspapers were published, and circulation figures passed 22.5 million copies per day with no slowdown in sight. Magazines grew even more impressively. From about five at the end of the Revolution, journalism historian Frank Luther Mott counted 600 in 1860 and a phenomenal 3,300 by 1885. Some circulations surpassed 1 million, and the number of magazines continued to grow into the twentieth century.

The amazing growth of the press happened because the printed page of periodicals assumed a critical role in the United States. Newspapers and
magazines became the place where Americans discussed and debated the issues that affected them. Newspapers, editors, and citizens took sides, and they used the press as the conduit for discussion. The Debating the Issues series offers a glimpse into how the press was used by Americans to shape and influence the major events and issues facing the nation during different periods of its development. Each volume is based on the documents, that is, the writings that appeared in the press of the time. Each volume presents articles, essays, and editorials that support opposing interests on the events and issues, and each provides readers with background and explanation of the events, issues, and, if possible, the people who wrote the articles that have been selected. Each volume also includes a chronology of events and a selected bibliography. The series is based on the Greenwood Press publication, *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers*. Books in the Debating the Issues series cover the following periods: the Revolution and the young republic, the Federalist era, the antebellum period, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the progressive era, and World War I.

This volume on the Civil War focuses on the issues and events that affected the nation in its most volatile time. The very nature of secession created highly partisan newspapers and newspaper editors. One should not assume, however, that all newspapers in the North and the South supported their respective governments; they did not. In the North, especially, many editors sympathized with the South. Here, you can read how newspapers editorialized about the major battles and events of the war, as well as how they debated the issues that led to war and those that arose as a result of the conflict that divided a nation.
By the summer of 1862, *New-York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley had become convinced that the United States could not wait any longer to free the country’s slaves. Greeley, a brilliant writer who was one of the founders of the antislavery Republican Party, published a series of editorials in his newspaper calling attention to the problems of slavery. But the editorials, which called on Union leaders to enforce the confiscation bills recently passed by Congress, seemingly had made little impact. An exasperated Greeley then used the editorial page of his newspaper on August 20 to write an open letter to President Abraham Lincoln demanding ungrudging execution of the confiscation laws granting freedom to the slaves of those resisting the Union. Titled “The Prayer of Twenty Millions,” it was a bold editorial and considered intemperate by many readers, even those who admired the feisty editor.¹

Greeley’s editorial stature was such, however, that the savvy president knew he must respond. The *Tribune* had become one of the most popular newspapers by the time the Civil War began, and Greeley was widely respected for his views, including his opposition to slavery. Significantly, Lincoln chose another newspaper to publish his reply, the *National Intelligencer* in Washington, D.C. In one of his most memorable public statements, the president responded to Greeley simply and directly. Lincoln wrote, “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.”²

The president’s response in summarizing the contentious issue defused Greeley’s criticism. A month later, after the Union victory at the battle of
Antietam, Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. It decreed freedom for slaves in the Confederate states on January 1, 1863, and it cited sections of the Confiscation Act dealing with slavery and ordered military service to enforce the provisions. Greeley was ecstatic over the announcement, and the next day the *Tribune* proclaimed, “It is the beginning of the end of the rebellion; the beginning of the new life of the nation. GOD BLESS ABRAHAM LINCOLN!”

The remarkable exchange between Greeley and Lincoln is an indication of the important role that newspaper editorials played during the Civil War. When the war began, newspapers were the most popular reading material available to most Americans. The director of the Census of 1860 wrote that newspapers and periodicals “furnish nearly the whole of the reading which the greater number, whether from inclination or necessity, permit themselves to enjoy.” Americans learned of almost everything taking place outside their own communities from newspapers. This gave editors tremendous influence and responsibility, a fact recognized by observers of the period. In 1860, statesman and political philosopher Edward Everett said, “The newspaper press of the U.S. is, for good or evil, the most powerful influence that acts on the public mind—the most powerful in itself and as the channel through which most other influence act.” The influence of newspaper editorials continued to increase after the war began and as the demand for newspapers soared. The interest in newspapers was probably best expressed by Oliver Wendell Holmes, a Union officer who would go on to become chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Toward the end of the war, Holmes remarked, “We must have something to eat, and the papers to read. Everything else we can give up.”

Newspapers played a pivotal role in events leading up to the Civil War. Beginning in the 1830s, abolitionists made great use of papers to spread opposition to slavery. For example, the *Liberator*, published by William Lloyd Garrison, called for an immediate end to slavery, which made it the most controversial and influential abolitionist publication. Garrison was physically threatened for his radical views but always managed to escape unharmed. Elijah Lovejoy, a former Presbyterian minister turned abolitionist editor, met a worse fate. Local mobs destroyed the press of his newspaper, the *St. Louis Observer*, three times. Lovejoy vowed to protect his paper and in 1837, when an armed mob arrived to seize the press, shooting broke out. Lovejoy was killed, making him a martyr for the abolitionist movement.

White abolitionists such as Garrison and Lovejoy were joined by African American publishers who also fought to end slavery. The best known of these was Frederick Douglass, whose *North Star* was first published in 1847. Douglass, a former slave, used his publication on behalf of various causes for black Americans. It later was renamed *Douglass’ Monthly* and published
during the Civil War when it took up various causes, including the enlistment of black troops.

At the same time that abolitionist publications agitated for an end to slavery, a new group of newspapers emerged in big cities such as New York. Dubbed the penny press, these low-priced papers were aimed at attracting a large audience through their news coverage. Although the penny papers emphasized news, they remained advocates for political parties. Greeley’s *New-York Tribune* helped found the Republican Party and supported Abraham Lincoln’s bid for president in 1860. The *Tribune* was joined by other newspapers in supporting the Republicans, most notably the *Chicago Tribune*, *New-York Times*, and *Springfield (Mass.) Republican*.

Many Southern newspapers used their editorial pages to fight the growing opposition to slavery. These papers were devoted supporters of the South’s way of life and were sharply critical of any threats to it. Even the South’s handful of penny papers, which declared themselves independent of political parties, could not stay out of the debate over slavery. Particularly outspoken were the so-called fire-eaters, who defended slavery and attacked abolitionists at every opportunity. The dean of Southern fire-eaters was