

How the Telegraph Helped Lincoln Win the Civil War

by Tom Wheeler

Mr. Wheeler is the author of Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails: The Untold Story of How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War (HarperCollins, 2006)

“What became of our forces which held the bridge till twenty minutes ago...? The President of the United States telegraphed a colonel in the field during the Civil War Battle of Second Manassas (Bull Run) in 1862. Abraham Lincoln was using the new medium of electronic communications in an unprecedented manner to revolutionize the nature of national leadership.

When Lincoln arrived for his inauguration in 1861 there was not even a telegraph line to the War Department, much less the White House. Storm clouds were brewing, but when the US Army wanted to send a telegram they did like everyone else: sending a clerk with a hand written message to stand in line at Washington's central telegraph office. That unwieldy situation changed rapidly, however, as wires were strung to the War Department and other key installations. The White House, however, remained without any outside connection.

The national leaders were like their constituents in their understanding of electronic communications. While an interesting and growing technology, the telegraph's potential was still widely underappreciated and it certainly had never been tested in a time of crisis. This reality makes Lincoln's subsequent embrace of the new technology even more remarkable. Without the guidance of precedent, and in the middle of a battle for the nation's survival, Abraham Lincoln used the new electronic

communications to transform the nature of the presidency. The telegraph became a tool of his leadership and, thus, helped to win the Civil War.

Four months into his presidency Lincoln sat with his generals and waited while the thunder of cannon could be heard from the battlefield at Manassas, just 30 miles outside the capital. Their lack of activity was almost surreal. The General-in-Chief, Winfield Scott, was so accepting of the tradition of being unable to communicate rapidly with the front that he took a nap during the battle. The president found it necessary to awaken his top commander as the battle raged.



US Military Telegraph Operators, Headquarters, Army of the Potomac.

A young Pennsylvania Railroad supervisor named Andrew Carnegie had been given the responsibility of extending a telegraph line into Northern Virginia. The task was incomplete by the time the two armies clashed; the line stopped ten miles short of the battlefield.

In a hybrid of the old and new, messengers from the field galloped to the end of the telegraph line. “Lincoln hardly left his seat in our office and waited with deep anxiety for each succeeding despatch [sic],” recorded the manager of the War Department’s new telegraph office.

The telegraph was beginning to change the executive’s relationship with his forces in the field. While General Scott napped, the new president consumed the electronically delivered updates. Thirteen months later, when the armies battled again along Bull Run, it was a different story in the telegraph office. No longer was Lincoln content to sit idly by and await information, he was actively in communication with the front.

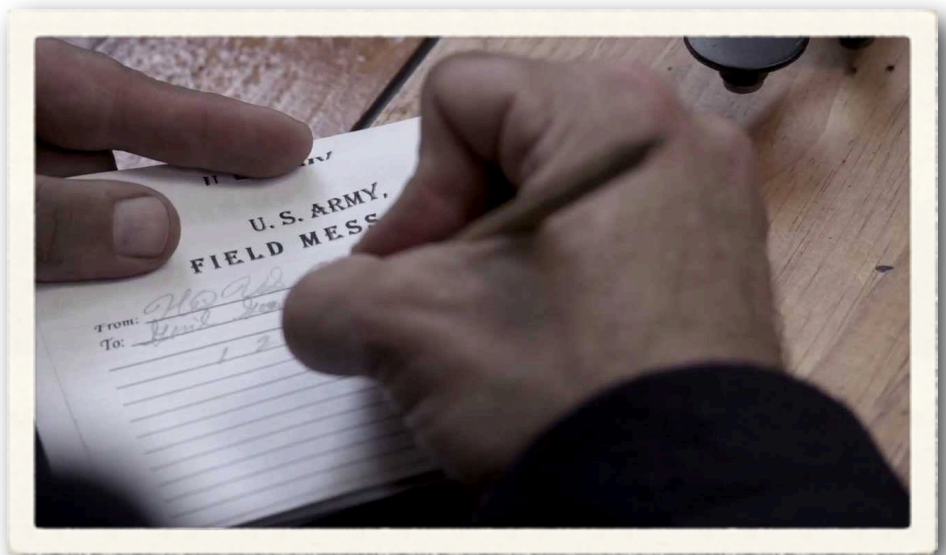
During Second Manassas (Bull Run) the Confederates cut the telegraph connections with Washington. Unable to communicate with his key generals, Lincoln opened a telegraphic dialog with a subordinate officer that continued for several days. The telegrams between the president and Colonel Herman Haupt were at one point the national leadership’s best source of information. The telegraph office became, as Eliot Cohen identified, the first White House Situation Room where the president could be in almost real time communication with his forces while at the same time participating in strategic discussions with his advisors.

Throughout the entire history of armed conflict, the ability to have a virtually instantaneous exchange between a national leader at the seat of government and his forces in the field had been impossible. As a result, field commanders had been the closest things to living gods. Cut off from the national leadership, the unilateral decisions of the generals determined not only the fate of individu-

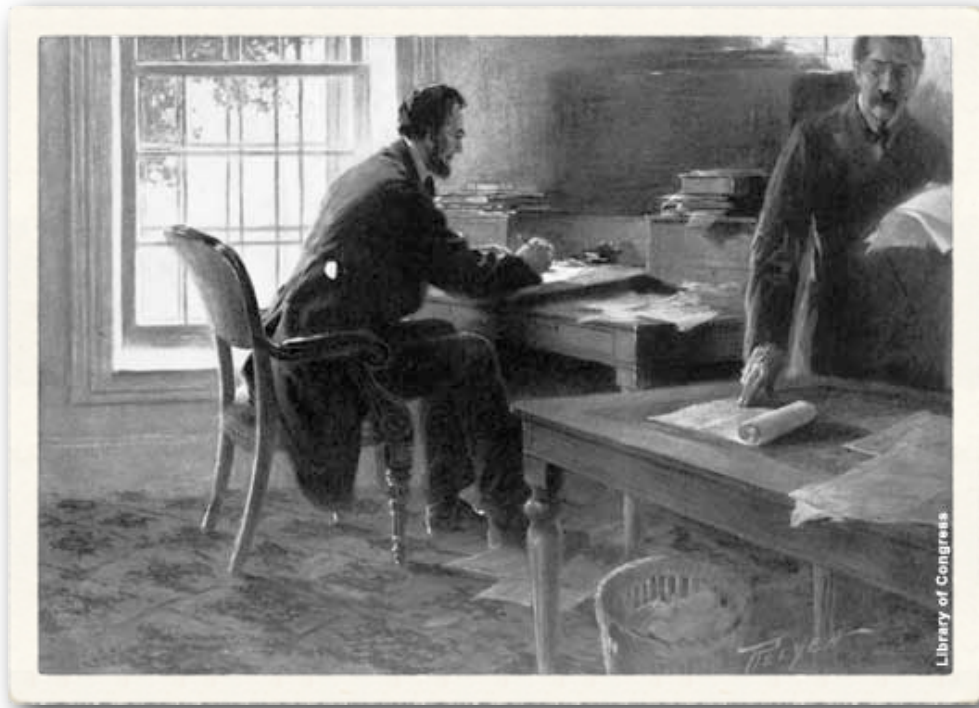
als’ lives, but also the future of nations. It was for this reason that heads of government, such as Henry V at Agincourt or Bonaparte in Russia, had remained with their troops to combine both national and military leadership.

The American democratic experiment was different, however. American wars had always been fought with the head of government removed from the scene of battle. When General Scott decided to march on Mexico City in 1847, for instance, the nation’s leaders learned of the attack days after the event.

Had the traditional model of generals divorced from speedy interaction with the national leadership persisted during the Civil War the results could have been quite different. Lincoln used the telegraph to put starch in the spine of his often all too timid generals and to propel his leadership vision to the front. Most importantly, he used the telegraph as an information gathering tool to understand what was going on in the headquarters of his military leadership.



When General Joseph Hooker floated a trial balloon at the start of the Gettysburg Campaign in 1863, Lincoln used the telegraph to reinforce his strategic redirection away from the acquisition of real estate to the destruction of the enemy. Hooker saw the Confederates’ move north as an opportunity to move



This drawing of Lincoln working on the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation in the Telegraph Office is by C.M. Relyea, and appears as the frontispiece of the 1907 book Lincoln in the telegraph office by David Homer Bates, who was the manager of the War Dept. Telegraph Office.

against their capital. Lincoln responded succinctly, reminding Hooker of his objective, "If left to me, I would not go South of the Rappahannock, upon Lee's moving North of it...I think Lee's army, and not Richmond, is your true objective point." Of course couriers could have carried these messages back and forth, but the immediacy of electronic messages put the president in his general's tent, capable of a rapid-fire back-and-forth exchange almost as if he were physically present.

The year before his exchange with Hooker, during Confederate General Jackson's Shenandoah Valley Campaign, Lincoln had done more than simply counsel on strategy; he used the telegraph to take command. As Jackson threatened Washington, the president telegraphed direct orders to generals in the field, moving men around as though on a chessboard. That the orders did not produce the desired result is more of a reflection on their poor implementation than on the president's strategy and tactics.

When Lincoln and the nation finally found the general they deserved in Ulysses Grant the president continued to evolve his use of

electronic messages. The wire became a way for the president to stay informed and assert himself.

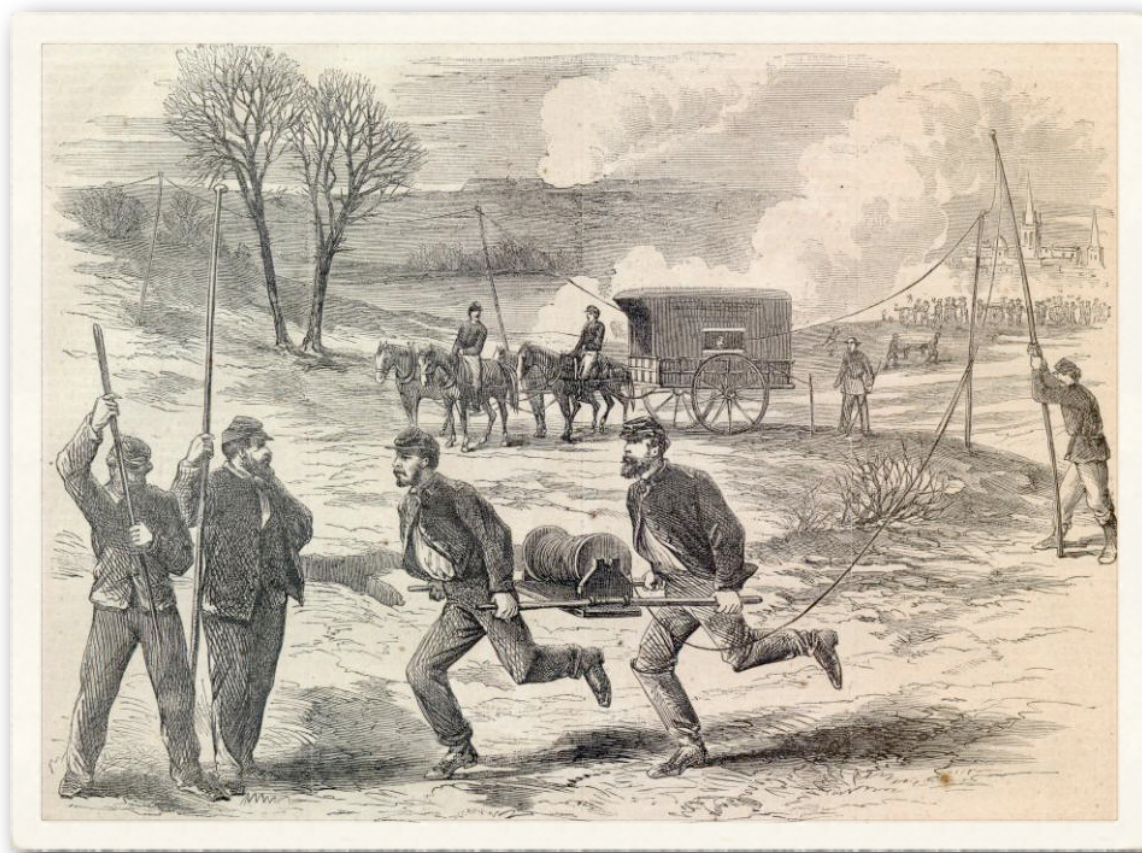
After reading a message from Grant to Chief-of-Staff Halleck which fretted that quelling the draft riots of 1864 might deplete the force at the front and thus affect his operations, Lincoln intervened directly. "Hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew and choke, as much as possible" he wired Grant. It was as good as walking into Grant's headquarters, sizing up the general's state of mind, and responding through conversation. As he put down the president's telegram, Grant laughed out loud and exclaimed to those around him, "The President has more nerve than any of his advisers." Grant was, of course, correct in his observation. More important, however, he had just held in his hands the tool Lincoln used for reinforcing his resolve and making sure that neither distance nor intermediaries diffused his leadership.

The slightly fewer than 1000 telegrams Abraham Lincoln sent during his presidency also provide us with an insight that his other writings cannot. Because Lincoln kept no di-

ary we must rely on his correspondence and speeches for insights into the workings of his mind and the nature of his interactions with others. In this regard, however, Lincoln's telegrams can be the next best thing to a transcript. Whereas Lincoln's letters were well thought out précis designed to stand on their own, many of his telegrams are spontaneous responses to a specific stimulus. Thus they constitute the closest we will ever get to a tape recording of Lincoln's interaction with his generals. Read in tandem with the messages he received, these telegrams are like eavesdropping on a conversation with Abraham Lincoln.

The story of Abraham Lincoln and the telegraph is perhaps the greatest untold story about this great man. Through these messages it is possible to watch Lincoln's confidence grow and in turn to observe his growth as a leader. What is most remarkable, however, is that Abraham Lincoln applied the new telegraph technology in an absence of precedent. Without the guidance of text, tutor, or training Lincoln instinctively discerned the transformational nature of the new technology and applied its dots and dashes as an essential tool for winning the Civil War.

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Union soldiers stringing telegraph wire.