
In this relatively short work Gregory Borchard sets out to bring new insight and perspective to the lives of President Abraham Lincoln and *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley. Unlike many books that have been written about those two men since the nineteenth century, this one seeks to reinterpret the development and intricacies of their complex relationship. Borchard’s study investigates how their lives, views, and careers consistently intersected and how the two influenced one another over approximately a seventeen-year period. For two men about whom so much has been written, there is not a huge amount of new information to be uncovered, but new interpretations and insights can be derived from analysis of the material.

The multitude of books penned about Lincoln and Greeley has demonstrated that it is difficult to write about one without discussing the other, witness such works as Ralph Fahrney’s *Horace Greeley and the Tribune in the Civil War* (1936), William Harlan Hale’s *Horace Greeley: Voice of the People* (1950), Robert S. Harper’s *Lincoln and the Press* (1951), Harlan Hoyt Horner’s *Lincoln and Greeley* (1953), James Trietsch’s *The Printer and the Prince* (1955), and Douglas Wilson’s *Lincoln’s Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (2006).

Borchard, however, makes a heretofore undeveloped case for the commonality in thinking and the influence of each man on the other. In his notes on sources, Borchard states that “few (if any [authors]) have attempted to interpret the life of each on equal footing, with both contributing in commensurate amounts to a shared legacy rather than merely each to his own.” While other authors have sought to provide a broader context for the two men, Borchard focuses on how their careers (one in politics, the other in journalism) developed along parallel lines and how the growth of their respective careers intersected before and during the most traumatic period in American history, the Civil War. Although they displayed a sometimes-contentious but occasionally beneficial association during their nearly two-decade
relationship, Lincoln and Greeley helped develop each other’s career, and both played significant public roles in reacting to and influencing the events of the day.

Borchard’s book is an updated attempt to interpret the historical evidence and is built upon primary sources—including personal papers—as well as the efforts of previous historians in secondary sources. Borchard provides a revisionist view of the two men’s parallel lives as they attempted to interpret and shape mid-nineteenth century America. He sculpts a reasoned narrative concerning their relationship. The interpretation of the source material is logical, which permits the author to build a historically sound case for his point of view. He notes, for example, that both developed their views of what America could or should become as disciples of Henry Clay’s democratic philosophy. Borchard notes, however, that though they both esteemed Clay, they differed on the best way to achieve his vision. Lincoln and Greeley also, notes Borchard, shared the commonality of the Whig vision of American “self-improvement and self-reliance,” which the men displayed in the ways they defined their political vision and built their national reputations.

If Lincoln is generally considered the greatest American president, Harper's Weekly once referred to Greeley as “the most perfect Yankee the country has ever produced.” Between 1841 and 1871 he edited “the greatest single journalistic enterprise in the country [the Tribune].” This thirty-year time period likewise encompassed a span of time in which the nation splintered and then reinvented itself. Not coincidentally, Lincoln’s and Greeley’s careers were caught up in and defined by this transformation. Despite both men’s eccentricities and the criticism that two such public men attracted, these two were giants in their fields, and as a result of their very-public statements and activities, they continue to impact the fields of American politics and journalism.

In the preface Borchard notes that his purpose is to examine the “dialectical relationship between Lincoln’s role as a politician and Greeley’s role” as a journalist. Throughout their relationship the two men present an interesting “point-counterpoint,” as their stated views regarding the Civil War and other policy issues sometimes converged but often diverged. Lincoln’s views remained consistent with his goals, and he displayed patience and steadfastness, but the eccentric and impatient Greeley continually waffled in his editorials and in letters he sent to Lincoln on how best to prosecute the war. As the founder and editor of, by 1860, the largest circulation newspaper in the world, the Tribune, Lincoln could not afford to ignore Greeley’s views.
Particularly interesting in this work is Borchard’s discussion of the days preceding the Civil War during which Greeley and Lincoln grew to know and support each other while serving together in the House of Representatives. During that time they agreed on a number of public issues, including the most controversial one of the day: abolishing slavery. Also particularly interesting is the role Greeley played in helping Lincoln win the 1860 Republican nomination for the presidency, when Lincoln had initially seemed to stand little chance of capturing the prize and Greeley had doubted his suitability for the office. Greeley’s change of heart and vociferous support of Lincoln in the Tribune, as a means of achieving revenge against his own political enemies, then helped Lincoln defeat Stephen Douglas in the general election. Lincoln, however, alienated Greeley by failing to reward the editor with a cabinet position because the president correctly saw him as a gadfly. Borchard also seeks to debunk some of the popular myths about the two men. Lincoln, he argues, was not the backwoods “country bumpkin” portrayed by some biographers. Rather, by honing his legal skills and learning from his political losses, he developed the skillfulness of a shrewd politician and an accomplished leader. On the other hand, the quote that has so often been misattributed to Greeley: “Go West, young man, go West,” actually was first penned by Indiana editor John Soule, though in his position of influence as the Tribune’s editor, Greeley popularized the phrase.

In previous books about Greeley and Lincoln there has been no shortage of attempts to compare, contrast, or link the views and activities of the two men. The majority of Civil War historians are well-versed in Greeley’s “Prayer of Twenty Millions” confrontational Tribune editorial concerning the freeing of slaves in the South and Lincoln’s subsequent response to Greeley in a letter that he provided the editor of the National Intelligencer for public consumption. Borchard adds to the reader’s understanding of the significance of Lincoln taking this uniquely transparent means to respond to Greeley’s public attack on his strategy.

Indeed, Greeley was presumptuous in his opinion that all northerners shared his beliefs regarding emancipation, just as he had been in many other editorials during the war. Before the conflict began he favored allowing the South to secede, later he sometimes supported the war, but often he called for its end because it cost unnecessary loss of life and property. Greeley’s continual drumbeat in the Tribune for the abolition of slavery rallied northerners to the cause, but Lincoln better understood the political necessity of timing the announcement so as to achieve maximum effect in prosecuting the war. Thus, he kept...
Greeley at arm’s length from official Union policy while simultaneously paying attention to his sustained criticisms.

At one point in early 1862 Lincoln famously commented to Tribune reporter Homer Byington: “What in the world is the matter with Uncle Horace? Why can’t he restrain himself and wait a little while? . . . I do not suppose I have any right to complain,” he added, “Uncle Horace agrees with me pretty often after all; I reckon he is with us at least four days out of seven.” The president’s assessment constituted an accurate summation of their on-again off-again relationship. From Greeley’s perspective, he could never bring himself to concede that Lincoln was proper in his actions nor that he distinguished himself overall as president. Set for printing in the Tribune on the morning after Lincoln’s assassination, Greeley had planned (but his editors pulled) an editorial that was highly critical of Lincoln, even as the war neared its conclusion.

What numerous historians have established, and Borchard concurs with them, is that the relationship between the Illinois politician and the New York editor was often contentious, and yet Lincoln could not ignore Greeley. The president considered Greeley’s ideas so important that he designated a drawer in his desk exclusively for Greeley’s correspondence. While Greeley was often critical in his editorials about and letters to Lincoln, the president remained largely restrained in his responses, recognizing that negative public statements concerning Greeley could cause him more trouble than win him support. While the Lincoln administration muffled critical Democratic papers in the North, the president never sought to restrain Greeley’s Tribune, noting at one point: “No man . . . can successfully carry on a controversy with a great newspaper and escape destruction.” At another point, however, he told members of his administration that Greeley “is so rotten that nothing can be done with him. . . . He is not truthful.”

Unfortunately, Borchard’s relatively short text is not as thorough in its documentation as earlier books on Lincoln and Greeley’s relationship. The evidence to support Borchard’s case could have been more detailed, and the context in which Lincoln and Greeley’s relationship played out could have been more fully developed. While this is a regrettable characteristic of the work, it also means that readers will find it a book that helps them concisely grasp the key elements of this complicated relationship. Some previous works on the topic have been overly ponderous, and readers have been forced to wade through extraordinary detail. However, in painting a portrait of the two men’s relationship, Borchard does leave out some details that have been noted elsewhere that would have made the characterization of the
men’s relationship more insightful and complete. For example, Hale, in *Horace Greeley: Voice of the People*, said this about Lincoln and Greeley: “There was an impersonal quality to their relationship. It was about issues and politics, not quite about friendship. Greeley was a hard man to befriend; he was consistent only in his inconsistency. While Mr. Lincoln seemed to collect friends, Mr. Greeley seemed to collect enemies.” Others have noted that neither man drank nor smoked, that both were somewhat careless with their appearance, and that both were in difficult marriages. Horner, in *Lincoln and Greeley*, assessed that “Greeley used language like a hammer while Mr. Lincoln used it like a scalpel.” These are important diagnostic insights, but such personal character analysis is largely missing in Borchard’s text.

Borchard is charitable in his characterization of his subjects, calling Lincoln and Greeley’s relationship more mutually influential and beneficial than some other historians have. He concludes that they were “political and intellectual allies.” To support his argument, Borchard notes that in eulogizing Greeley upon his death in 1872, Brooklyn Presbyterian minister Theodore H. Cuyler said, “No two men understood the ‘common people’ as well as they did, or could reach the average capacity so exactly by pen and tongue.” As a revisionist portrayal of the two men’s dynamic association, this book is an undemanding and enjoyable read. The writing style is such that it can be appreciated not only by scholars but by amateur historians and even by high school students. It constitutes a quality primer in helping the reader comprehend one of the most tumultuous periods in American history and to understand how the erratic and passionate journalist and the now bigger-than-life yet melancholy president collaborated to help America survive.