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14. ABSTRACT What should military leaders do when they find themselves, or a decision they made, the subject of a criticizing social media post on a unit meme page? Should leaders fight fire with fire, should they remain silent and not engage their critics when called out in social media? Abraham Lincoln was no stranger to the barbs of public criticism throughout his life, although he remains revered among the greatest Presidents in the history of the United States. While Lincoln lived in a different age of media and public discourse, the ways he responded to public criticism reveal some universal principles which can be instructive for today's generation of leaders. With Lincoln we see a measured leader, who knew his media environment and how to use it but did so "with malice toward none."									
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**#WhatWouldLincolnDo?: A Framework for Responding to Criticism
in the Age of Social Media**

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In the summer of 2021 social media users engaged US Army Major General Pat Donahoe in an exchange of Twitter posts disagreeing about the use of social media for free speech and the conduct of Army leaders in the public social media sphere. The disagreement originated from MG Donahoe's call to trainees at Fort Benning to get COVID-19 vaccines and a reporter's opposition to his admonition. The ensuing contest of social media posts between users and this military leader grew vitriolic enough to catch the attention of news outlets around the world and across the Internet.¹ At the current time, MG Donahoe's retirement was pending for more than three months while an inspector general investigation reviewed his conduct in a separate online spat with Fox News personality Tucker Carlson.² During the opening of the 2022 Association of the United States Army, Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth told the audience "general officers should be present on social media but avoid getting pulled into 'the inflammatory kind of environment that, frankly, Twitter really lends itself to.'"³ This is not the first time a US military official has been criticized publicly using social media given its increasing ubiquity in American society as a place for public discourse. Nor is it uncommon in the United States' 246-year history for its leaders to be publicly called to account or even ridiculed in a public way. MG Donahoe's situation may serve as an example of the potential consequences, risks, or complications facing senior military leaders when they choose to engage their critics in the public eye of social media. But what should more junior-ranking leaders at the platoon, flight or ship level do when they find themselves, or a decision they made, the subject of a criticizing

¹ OpIndia Staff, "US Army General has a meltdown after being questioned by Twitter user, netizens accuse him of trying to crush their free speech right," *OpIndia.com*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.opindia.com/2021/07/us-army-general-patrick-donahoe-has-a-meltdown-questioned-by-twitter-user/>.

² Corey Dickstein, "Retirement of former top general at Fort Benning held up amid investigation into social media use" *Stars and Stripes*, last modified September 23, 2022, <https://www.stripes.com/branches/army/2022-09-23/army-general-social-media-investigation-7441241.html>.

³ Ellen Mitchell, "Army Secretary urges officers to stay out of 'culture wars,'" *The Hill*, October 11, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/3682970-army-secretary-urges-officers-to-stay-out-of-culture-wars/>.

social media post on a unit meme page? Should leaders fight fire with fire, should they remain silent and not engage



A social media post and comments directed at the 82nd Airborne Division command team on Instagram from anonymized user, @fancy_fancy_bear⁴

their critics when called out in social media? There are some advisable practices to consider from one of the great leaders in our nation’s history.

Abraham Lincoln was no stranger to the barbs of public criticism throughout his life, although he remains revered among the greatest Presidents in the history of the United States. He received criticism, both public and private, from members of his own party and opposing parties, from the citizens of the North – and especially the South – during the Civil War. He received it on all matters from policy decisions to his personal appearance. As a product of the rough and tumble territories in the early 1800s, Lincoln lived the hardscrabble life of a frontiersman and

⁴ Fancy_fancy_bear (@fancy_fancy_bear), “Math sucks,” Instagram, September 30, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjJs0BWtSQm/>.

laborer, putting in daily effort for survival and building his community. His industrious efforts to self-educate and make a successful law practice in the state of Illinois were remarkable for a man of his upbringing. His temperament was one of an even-keeled, pragmatist. Lincoln's familiarity with public criticism, in 19th century America, began with his early forays into local and state politics and continued throughout his career culminating as President through some of the country's most divisive and trying times.

While Lincoln lived in a different age of media and public discourse, the ways he responded to public criticism reveal some universal principles which can be instructive for today's generation of leaders. To fully understand the relevance of Abraham Lincoln's methods for dealing with criticism, it is important to have some context, beginning with an examination into the landscape of public discourse and criticism in the 19th century as well as the ways in which Lincoln understood and used these media for communicating. It is also important to recognize the things for which Lincoln experienced criticism – his policies, decisions, personal appearance – and how those parallel closely with the ways leaders today might receive criticism from subordinates or members of the public. By comparison, it is necessary to examine today's media landscape and how it provides channels for conveying public criticism. Most important is examining the different methods of response Lincoln used to address the public criticism he received as exhibited by situations throughout his public life and how these could be applied by a leader today. It is necessary to address the potential arguments against why Lincoln's lessons may not be as directly applicable today as this paper will assess. The ways leaders deal with criticism matters. Having a framework through which to view criticism, as provided by one of our most well-known and criticized Presidents, whether from a political cartoon or a social

media post, is a skill for leaders at all levels and in all fields to master in the rapidly moving and evolving social media driven news age.

19th Century Media Landscape and Lincoln's Expertise

The media landscape of 19th century America encompassed a variety of methods for levying public criticism against a public figure like Abraham Lincoln. Researchers identified that from 1819-1839 there were at least 169 newspapers and periodicals published in the state of Illinois alone, where Lincoln began his public career.⁵ By the time he ran for President in 1860, there were 3,000 newspapers across the country, reflecting the sentiments of multiple political parties, publishers and special interest platforms.⁶ The technology of the telegraph and the new field of stenography allowed newspapers to move the text of speeches by public leaders around the nation for publication on the same day or the next morning. Print journalism, enabled by the telegraph, was the way to reach audiences across the country *en masse* and with speed. Papers throughout the United States and its territories reflected the sentiments and news from the local to the national level depending on the paper's origin. Print media, while the primary means of public communication, manifested itself in daily papers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Inquirer*, or *Chicago Tribune*. Here opinion editorials, letters to the editors or daily articles told the stories or criticized, as appropriate, the actions of the government, political figures, or rival newspapers. Letters to the editor might even take the form of being written by anonymous or pseudonymous authors to obscure a source or more directly leverage criticism with less hope of reprisal. Known for their woodcut prints, illustrations and longform articles, weekly periodicals

⁵ Terence A. Tanner, "Newspapers and Printing Presses in Early Illinois," *American Periodicals* 3, (1993): 102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20771045>.

⁶ Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 250 Years, 1690-1940*, (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 216.

such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Vanity Fair* were oriented toward illustrating life in America. Political cartoons were the satirical, imagery-based commentary of the day, using exaggerated features to ridicule subjects for the pleasure of readers and to make targeted points. The spectacle of public debating and speaking was also a feature for public discourse and a means of leveraging criticism in 19th century America. Debaters had the opportunity to argue their own positions and criticize their opponents before a live audience. Use of oratory skill allowed the speaker to “score points” with the audience through rhetorical twists of phrase and satire. It is within this landscape Lincoln lived, moved, and operated as a lawyer and rising politician.

Lincoln was well-versed in the ways of communication in his day and demonstrated his adeptness at each. His understanding of the media and his ability to write and speak in plain language gave him a solid foundation from which to respond. During the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates, he famously quipped, “He who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions.”⁷ This key statement reflects his understanding of both the power of messaging and the need for proficiency with it. Lincoln personally participated in editing transcripts of his speeches before they were published to ensure the clarity and accuracy of his message.⁸ Lincoln, himself, took a foray into the newspaper business as a burgeoning politician purchasing part-ownership of German language daily paper in Illinois for the sake of reaching Republican-leaning German immigrants. He personally engaged in writing letters under his own name and under pseudonyms. Lincoln was also known to have met with newspaper publishers, both Whig and Democrat, during his public travels around the country.⁹ He was a well-known consumer of satirical writing. Lincoln scholar Harold Holzer shares one famous

⁷ Robert W. Johannsen, ed., *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 65.

⁸ Sara Gabbard, “An Interview with Harold Holzer,” *Lincoln Lore* 1907 (Fall 2014): 5, https://www.friendsofthelincolncollection.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/LL_2014-Fall.pdf.

⁹ Gabbard, “An Interview with Harold Holzer,” 4.

example from the Cabinet meeting at which Lincoln announced he would issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln began by reading a recently published bawdy story. When questioned by one of the Cabinet members present on its propriety to the moment, Lincoln responded by saying, "If I did not laugh, I should die."¹⁰ Despite losing the 1858 Senate election in Illinois, Lincoln undertook the opportunity to publish transcripts of the debates between him and Senator Stephen A. Douglas as a means of propagating his messages on key policies to the American populace. At a time when candidates for public office did not campaign for themselves, publishing the debates created a record of his words to "speak" for him during his future candidacy in the 1860 Presidential election. In his famous Cooper Union speech, Lincoln's mocking repetition of Douglas's phrase the "founders under which we live" is an example of using speech to criticize and lampoon an opponent.¹¹ Political cartoons in 19th century America provided some of the most biting criticism against public figures and policies, employing both images and text to satirize, mock, and critique their subjects. It is unknown if Lincoln ever produced any cartoons of his own, but he was certainly the subject of numerous cartoons throughout his Presidency. Lincoln's familiarity with the media, and propensity to use it, gave him a broad foundation from which to respond when he found himself the subject of public criticism.

The 21st Century Social Media Age

Whereas the public sphere of discourse and criticism in 19th century America was under the control of publishers and political organizers, today's media environment has its own unique

¹⁰ Harold Holzer, "Lincoln Takes the Heat," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 39, no. 7 (February 2001): 44, https://usnwc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USNWC_INST/e8pt7d/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_199028943.

¹¹ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 522.

characteristics. The variety and reach of media in the 21st century have increased in scale and speed by comparison to Lincoln’s day. Print journalism still exists, but in conjunction with the immediacy of the Internet, television and the 24-hour news cycle, spawned with the creation of Cable News Network (CNN).¹² The smartphone gives people nearly universal and uninterrupted access to the world of online media. Social media is defined as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).”¹³ The perceived anonymity afforded by the Internet gives users and content creators a false sense of confidence because their personal information is not immediately on display.¹⁴ Social media posts have evolved in new, darker ways to include trolling or doxing. Anonymized users can troll - “antagonize (others) online” through deliberate inflammatory, offensive, or even irrelevant posts to disrupt an online conversation.”¹⁵ Participants can be peers, neighbors, leaders, or any number of people who have no in-person relation. Social media users also participate in more serious harassment such as doxing - publicly identifying or publishing private information about someone – as a means of taking revenge or punishing them.¹⁶ A Pew Research survey from 2020 showed two thirds of the respondents saying social media is having a negative impact on American culture.¹⁷ A separate report indicated television remains the

¹² Sarah F. Hill, “The 24-Hour News Cycle: Why the Constant Barrage of Headlines Adds to the Hysteria,” *The Big Idea Magazine*, (Spring 2021), <https://research.uh.edu/the-big-idea-mag-spring-2021/stories/the-24-hour-news-cycle.html>.

¹³ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “social media,” accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media>.

¹⁴ Timothy Boman, “Defamation, Social Media, and the Limited Purpose Public Figure Doctrine,” *South Texas Law Review* 61, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 246, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/stexlr61&i=270>.

¹⁵ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “trolling,” accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trolling>.

¹⁶ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “doxing,” accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/doxing>.

¹⁷ Brook Auxier, “64% of Americans say social media have a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in the U.S. today,” Pew Research Center, last modified October 15, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact->

primary news source for Americans, but social media sources are increasing in prevalence despite a low level of trust in them.¹⁸ Researchers have noted the social media age is effecting a change to leader-follower dynamics. Anonymous or fake identities afford followers an unprecedented environment in which they can attempt to “control” their leaders or, at worse, serve “as an accelerant to more toxic and abusive behaviour.”¹⁹ The media environment in which today’s military leaders find themselves is undeniably complex.

Topics of Criticism

Topics of public criticism between 19th century and 21st century America show little degree of difference. Lincoln received criticism about his personal appearance, his policies, and his political affiliations. During the 1860 election the *Houston Telegraph* described Lincoln as “the leanest, lankiest, most ungainly mass of legs, arms and hatchet face ever strung upon a single frame” – a demeaning *ad hominem* depiction of his physical characteristics as if they mattered to his Presidential abilities.²⁰ Whether it was the Emancipation Proclamation, suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus*, or his advocacy for the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, Lincoln experienced regular public criticism in articles, weekly cartoons, and personal letters for his policies. Some criticism was personal and some was about his policy, but it was unrelenting throughout the Civil War. His political affiliations were also a point of public criticism especially in the lead up to his first Presidential election. Harold Holzer contends,

tank/2020/10/15/64-of-americans-say-social-media-have-a-mostly-negative-effect-on-the-way-things-are-going-in-the-u-s-today/.

¹⁸ A.W. Geiger, “Key findings about the online news landscape in America,” Pew Research Center, last modified September 11, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/11/key-findings-about-the-online-news-landscape-in-america/>.

¹⁹ Parisa Gilani, Elvira Bolat, Donald Nordberg, and Claudia Wilkin, “Mirror, mirror on the wall: Shifting leader–follower power dynamics in a social media context,” *Leadership* 16, no. 3 (June 2020): 360, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/1742715019889817>.

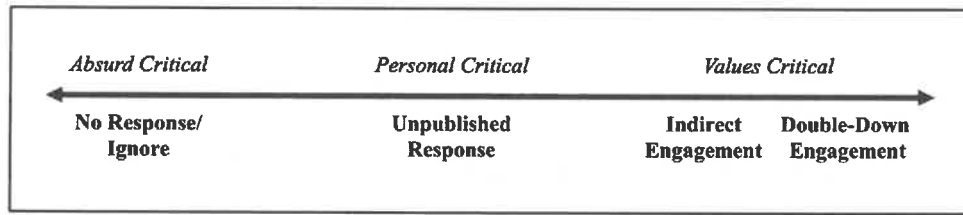
²⁰ John Barr, *Loathing Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 25.

“Lincoln never had a ‘fair hearing’ because it wasn't the way things worked in Lincoln's day. There was always a party angle from four of five newspapers.”²¹ It should not surprise modern-day leaders for decisions, affiliations, or even personal appearance to be any more off limits for attack than they were for Lincoln. Lincoln was both familiar with these methods of attack and was a participant in the media environment of his day given the value he had for molding public sentiment. Criticism suffered by leaders today is no different than what Lincoln experienced and this is why lessons from his life have modern-day relevance.

Lincoln’s Response Framework

Examining situations in which Lincoln received and responded to criticism reveals a multi-faceted spectrum of responses to a similarly wide range of criticisms. Criticism against Lincoln could be categorized as ranging from what this paper will call *absurd critical* to *offensive critical* to *values critical*. This paper will categorize *absurd critical* as those accusations which are so inaccurate or outlandish as to be unbelievable and not taken seriously. Those criticisms which were *offensive critical* are in the category of being inaccurate, but of a directly personal nature as to be believable and hurtful. Finally, the category of *values critical* are those accusations and criticisms which attack the core values of the person. Lincoln is known to have valued the preservation of the Union most of all and, as will be examined later, would directly engage when challenged in this area. Lincoln’s methods of responding to the categories of criticism ranged from outright ignoring, making unpublished responses, redirecting the conversation, or doubling down with a direct response. The diagram below is a simple depiction of the spectrum comparing criticism and response types against one another.

²¹ Gabbard, “An Interview with Harold Holzer,” 6.



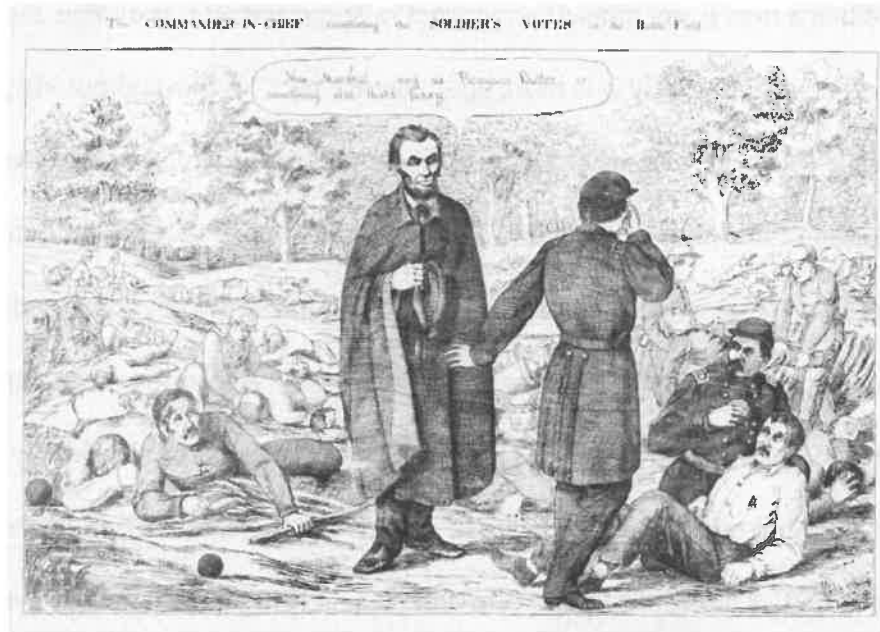
During the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Lincoln revealed what one could consider to be his opinion and response method to criticisms falling in the category of *absurd critical*. Lincoln told the audience, “When a man hears himself somewhat misrepresented it provokes him...but when it becomes very gross and palpable it is more apt to amuse him.”²² Throughout his public life, cartoons, editorials, speeches, and articles would amass against Lincoln in untold volumes. This “very gross” amount of criticism was beyond an individual’s ability to respond in terms of time or effort given greater tasks at hand. The survival of the Union could not come at the expense of addressing every piece of criticism which came Lincoln’s way. For leaders who may face volumes of criticism there is only so much to which one can respond or which may even warrant a response. This does not mean being unaware of what is out there. However, Lincoln chose deliberately which battles he would fight while otherwise turning his tough skin toward the criticism. In his book *Loathing Lincoln*, John Barr notes how Lincoln’s resignation to allow for public expression of hateful criticism during his second Presidential election “contradicted the charge that he had eradicated northern civil liberties.”²³ Lincoln tolerated an immense amount of *absurd critical* comments about him from all sides during the Civil War, yet he did not waver in his core value and purpose to preserve the union of the nation.

There is a nuanced transition from criticism Lincoln faced which was *absurd critical* to the *personal critical* and how he responded. To a degree, absurd criticisms had the power to hurt

²² Johannsen, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*, 49.

²³ Barr, *Loathing Lincoln*, 47.

or be offensive. There are examples, though, which indicate he took some criticism more personally than others. The way he responded to these criticisms, which hurt him personally, was different from the technique of ignoring absurd criticisms. In the aftermath of the battle at Antietam, President Lincoln went to visit the battlefield and the wounded Union soldiers there. The anti-Lincoln *New York World* falsely reported the President had been so



A cartoon from Harper's Weekly criticizing Lincoln's Antietam battlefield visit.²⁴

overcome by the devastation he unceremoniously requested one of his companions to sing a song to lighten the mood. The President was never one to dishonor those serving the Union cause, and he was deeply hurt by both the articles as well as cartoons which depicted this contrived event. His friend Ward Hill Lamon vigorously appealed for Lincoln to clear his name and Lamon initially drafted a response for the press. Lincoln chose to write his own account of the visit, but instead instructed Lamon to “keep this paper” and eventually never published a response.²⁵

²⁴ Unknown, “The Commander in Chief conciliating the Soldier’s Votes on the Battle Field,” HarpWeek, last modified 2008, <https://elections.harpweek.com/1864/cartoon-1864-medium.asp?UniqueID=31&Year=1864>.

²⁵ Harold Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 503.

Similarly, during the Niagara Falls negotiations with the Confederacy in 1864, *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley criticized Lincoln's efforts as well as undercut the President's position in the negotiations. Lincoln was said to be annoyed by this "more than anything which happened during his administration." However, when encouraged to publish all the facts himself, Lincoln chose not to respond rather than be "convicted out of my own mouth of all the things which he charges against me."²⁶ In *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, Holzer concludes Lincoln chose "silence, deflection, and disinformation, and that when he did not want to get back to the point...he avoided the subject at hand."²⁷ Lincoln recognized, although the criticism was deeply offensive, responses to his detractors would only provide more, or potentially new, fuel to stoke their fires of criticism. Responding, without publishing, could provide therapeutic relief while not perpetuating the discord.

To the criticism categorized as *values critical* we observe Lincoln in his own way directly addressing criticism when his core values became the target. Preservation of the Union, above all, was central to Lincoln's leadership of the nation during the Civil War. When dealing with newspaper editorial criticisms against his core values, Lincoln found he could influence more effectively speaking out in print to the readers rather than directly addressing editors.²⁸ Even from within the northern states Lincoln received attacks which "inextricably connected to [his] decision to fight a war to restore a Union in which 'emancipation would be the effect' of the conflict"²⁹ The circumstances of Lincoln's exchange with *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley's over his essay "A Prayer for Twenty Millions" is instructive as a case for Lincoln dealing with a *values critical* assault against him. Greeley concludes his editorial piece saying,

²⁶ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 507.

²⁷ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 375.

²⁸ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 448.

²⁹ Barr, *Loathing Lincoln*, 20.

“the triumph of the Union is dispensable not only to the existence of our country [but] to the well being of mankind, I entreat you to render a hearty and unequivocal obedience to the law of the land.”³⁰ Greeley implies through his letter that Lincoln is putting the Union at risk. It is one of the most serious accusations to this President who not only cherished but was sworn to protect the existence of the nation in its Constitutional form. Lincoln responded ten days later with his own published response in which he directly addressed the accusations of Greeley. In his response Lincoln mentions “sav[ing] the Union” seven times and, to the accusation his perceived illegal acts are the source of the problem, Lincoln concludes “I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty.”³¹ It is a direct, concise, and humble response to open criticism. Because Greeley challenged the value Lincoln held most dear as President, he responded in kind. However, the vehicle of response Lincoln used is worth noting as part of the whole response framework. Greeley had criticized Lincoln using his own, widely circulated *New York Tribune* as the platform for speaking on behalf of “twenty millions” of American citizens. Lincoln chose to send his response to a local, conservative Washington paper for publication on a Sunday when Greeley’s paper did not print.³² This was an example of what Holzer describes as Lincoln’s ability to “transfor[m] the so-called public letter into a weapon of mass communication”³³ In addition to directly addressing the criticism of his values, Lincoln demonstrated how he possessed a level of media mastery and awareness by removing the chance for his critic to profit from a response.

³⁰ Horace Greeley, "A Prayer for Twenty Millions," *New York Tribune*, August 20, 1862, <https://americanantiquarian.org/Freedmen/Manuscripts/greeley.html>.

³¹ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, 652.

³² Gabbard, "An Interview with Harold Holzer," 6.

³³ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 448.

There Is No Parallel

Some might argue the methods and type of criticism faced by today's military leaders and Abraham Lincoln are so different between the 19th and 21st centuries that it is anachronistic to draw lessons from Lincoln's experience. While stenography, telegraphy and print journalism made for rapid dissemination of information in the 19th century there was nothing which moved as fast as Twitter or Instagram postings today. What exists in the critic's mind can now be in front of the entire world in the time it takes to type a few words. Woodcuts of critical political cartoons in the 19th century moved in weeks and days by comparison to the seconds for criticism to reach the members of a military unit's social media page. Lincoln and leaders of his day had the benefit of time for reflection. They did not have to constantly respond to a 24-hour inundation of information.³⁴ Additionally, much of the criticism Lincoln faced as President or a state politician was from other public figures or known news publications from which he could expect to receive criticism. He could not be expected to read or respond to the volume of criticism against him given his position leading a nation of millions of people, with thousands of newspapers and thirteen states in warring opposition. Therefore, taking principles from single events is not useful for leaders in the social media age. Military leaders today, from the tactical to strategic level, face the challenge of anonymous criticism levied at them from within their own formations. The parallel between criticism of a political leader is different from of a small-unit leader who has daily personal interaction with those making the criticism. Lincoln did not have a

³⁴ Diane Coudu, "Leadership Lessons from Abraham Lincoln," *Harvard Business Review* 87, no. 4 (2009): 46. https://usnwc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USNWC_INST/e8pt7d/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_227776264.

personal relationship with the volume of his critics in the same way as today's small-unit military leader. While admirable as a national leader, who endured much unjust criticism while leading the nation through its greatest time of trial, some may say Lincoln's techniques do not translate to helping leaders today respond to criticism in the information age.

Lincoln Remains Relevant

The reality is Lincoln, despite immense pressure and criticism, has lessons for us to learn. One cannot overstate his recognition of the centrality of influencing the public through proficiency in communication. Lincoln recognized the press had value, whereas other leaders of his time like General George Meade were all but written out of the Civil War due to hostility toward the press.³⁵ Future strategist and author P.W. Singer advises military leaders on the social media environment saying, "you can avoid this space, but you will be missing out on opportunities to understand and engage in a way that aids your career and those you serve." Leaders must be mindful how risks and obligations increase in the online world especially if they fail to use good sense.³⁶ Lincoln demonstrated both an adeptness at using the media of his day and doing so with good sense to propagate his message. Leaders can also learn how Lincoln's personal engagement "worked wonders" with the press, regardless of political affiliation. He consistently showed there is value in engaging within the present-day media space.³⁷ The risk today is the speed with which social media allows followers to criticize and influence opinion especially when doing so can "undermine the power of a leader over his command and sow the

³⁵ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 434-5.

³⁶ Peter W. Singer, "7 rules for how military leaders should use social media," *Task and Purpose*, last modified October 22, 2019, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/military-leaders-social-media-likewar/>.

³⁷ Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, 383.

seed of disharmony and discontent among the team/troops.”³⁸ Leaders today cannot ignore the reality and speed with which criticism moves in the social media age. Having a framework to address this reality is necessary and who better to use as a start point for building this framework than one of the nation’s most criticized Presidents.

Final Thoughts on a Framework

In conclusion, leaders today should take several lessons from Lincoln’s lifetime of sustained criticism. First, they must acknowledge criticism is going to come in various forms as it did for Lincoln, whether against their person, their policies, or their affiliations. Next, they must recognize the need to be well-versed in the media of the day and how it can emphasize or articulate their messages to the audiences of both supporters and critics. Leaders must be participants in the space where dialogue occurs, otherwise it will occur without them. Through examining Lincoln’s life and the framework discussed earlier in this paper, there are several questions they can ask themselves when it comes to criticism. First, they should ask, “*Is this criticism so absurd as to be worth a response at all?*” in line with Lincoln’s trait of not engaging with criticism which might fall into the category of grossly amusing. They should also evaluate criticism with the question, “*Is this criticism a personal attack only, and when I respond to it will my response contribute to a change in the behavior or opinion of the critic?*” In these situations, Lincoln would make written responses to personal criticisms, but never send or publish them. Finally, leaders should ask, “*Is this criticism against a core value I hold which I must defend?*” Here Lincoln responded vigorously especially when it came to preserving the Union. Leaders should remember Lincoln’s temperament in responding as an example to follow.

³⁸ D.R. Soni, “Military Leadership in the time of Social Media Explosion,” The Daily Guardian, last modified May 25, 2020, <https://thedailyguardian.com/military-leadership-in-the-time-of-social-media-explosion/>.

Consider if we apply the response framework discussed along with Lincoln's example of temperament to the situation with MG Donahoe. In the case of the COVID-19 vaccination exchange as well as the one with the news personality one could argue MG Donahoe was responding to *values critical* issues. One situation involved protecting the health of the force and the other regarded speaking out against gender discrimination. Protection of the fighting force and protection of members of the military itself are both causes worthy of defending and were not personal or absurd criticisms. However, Lincoln's measured, direct, humble written response to Greeley's "prayer" is important to remember. There is a distinction between this and wading into a social media war of words which devolves to point-scoring sarcasm characterized by today's "dialogue" in the social media space. We can take away from Lincoln's life not only examples of *when* to engage and *what* would drive response, but the *tone* of how to engage. With Lincoln we see a measured leader, who knew his media environment and how to use it but did so "with malice toward none."³⁹

³⁹ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, 793.

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