



How Lincoln's 'T-Mails' Won the War: Lessons for Wired Managers

By James Pressley

Dec. 21 (Bloomberg) -- In the dark days of August 1864, Abraham Lincoln sent a telegram to Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, whose bloody advance on the Confederate capital had piled up corpses and ground to a halt in a grisly siege.

"Hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew & choke, as much as possible," Lincoln wired.

Grant, reassured, laughed out loud on reading the message, writes Tom Wheeler in "Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails," a brisk history of how the Illinois rail-splitter used the telegraph to win the Civil War. "It was as good as walking into Grant's headquarters, sizing up the general's state of mind, and responding through conversation," Wheeler says.

Wheeler, a former tech executive, is a managing director of private equity fund Core Capital Partners LP. As a historian he may be no Bruce Catton, but he does have a knack for making the Civil War relevant to executives today. In a previous book, "Take Command," he drew leadership lessons from the conflict, and his new volume is valuable as narrative history in its own right.

Wheeler frames the story of Lincoln's telegrams in unabashed anachronisms. Honest Abe, he says, was an "early adopter" of new technology; he practiced "management by walking around" and "accentuated the positive."

Corny? Yes, and no. Wheeler's points are valid, and the narrative he teases from the telegrams has an immediacy not unlike that of John F. Kennedy's tapes during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

'Attack or Give Up'

"The time is near when you must either attack Richmond or give up the job and come to the defense of Washington," Lincoln wrote in frustration to General George McClellan on May 25, 1862. "Let me hear from you instantly."

Wheeler is right to call these messages "t-mails." The tone, power and speed of telegrams resembled that of today's e-mails, and the link between the two is clear: Yesterday's dots and dashes begat today's digital ones and zeros. Like school kids in the Internet age, Lincoln quickly mastered a novel technology.

Lincoln took office in March 1861, less than two decades after Samuel Morse's first telegraph message, "What hath God wrought!" Lincoln sent fewer than 20 telegrams as president that year. When conflict broke out, the War Department wasn't even wired to the telegraph network.

Little by little, however, Lincoln began using telegrams to glean information from battlefields. Then, as 1862 opened, he realized the telegraph would allow him to project himself into the fray, something every modern manager must do. McClellan was in bed with typhoid fever. Lincoln, faced with a military stalemate, stepped into the vacuum, ordering generals on Jan. 7, 1862, to set a date for an offensive.

'Throw Some Shells'

By May 1862 he was giving more explicit commands, proposing to catch Stonewall Jackson in a vise and urging McClellan to threaten the Confederate capital. "Can you get near enough to throw some shells into the city?" he wired.

He had become ``more than a titular commander in chief," as Wheeler puts it. He often slept on a cot in the telegraph office.

The book thunders along, following the ``messages of lightning" down the wires and into Vicksburg, Gettysburg and on to surrender at Appomattox. The writing is focused and lean, though Wheeler works in some sharp asides on telegraph code, political kickbacks and wartime censorship.

The only serious drawback in this book is the absence of maps. Time and again I found myself reaching for Catton to refresh my memory of obscure Virginian killing fields. Yet even that process proved rewarding. I can think of worse ways to pass a gloomy Sunday afternoon in December.

``Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails: The Untold Story of How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War" is published by Collins (227 pages, \$24.95).

(James Pressley is an editor for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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