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## The wired Lincoln

How Civil War leader made technology work for him

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

After his great victory at Vicksburg in 1863, Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's thoughts turned toward Mobile, Ala. But then he received a telegram from President Abraham Lincoln.

Tom Wheeler, a telecommunications expert and former CEO of the National Cable Television Association, quotes from that Lincoln-to-Grant telegram in his mesmerizing new book, *Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails*. Lincoln wrote:

"I see by a dispatch of yours that you incline quite strongly towards an expedition against Mobile. ... This would appear tempting to me also, were it not that in view of recent events in Mexico, I am greatly impressed with the importance of re-establishing the national authority in Western Texas as soon as possible."

Lincoln's concern about Texas derived from a troubling turn in Mexico. Napoleon III had invaded, defeated the Mexican armies and set up a pro-Confederate puppet government in Mexico City. The president wanted a stronger U.S. presence in the Lone Star State to discourage the French from turning their eyes upon Texas.

The president, however, did not translate that concern into an order. Micromanaging was not his style in dealing with Grant. He did not have to, as he did with some of his other generals. But Grant caught his drift. He telegraphed back:

"After the fall of Vicksburg I did incline very much to an immediate move on Mobile. ... I see however the importance of a movement into Texas just at this time."

As shown by their telegraphic interactions, Lincoln and Grant tended to sing from the same page. Lincoln propounded the strategy objectives, which focused primarily on the destruction of the Confederate forces, and left the execution to Grant and the generals under him.

That, of course, had not been the case with the generals upon whom Lincoln was forced to rely before he found Grant. The strained relationship between Lincoln and Gen. George McClellan, a.k.a. "Little Napoleon," is recounted at great length by Wheeler. He includes the texts of numerous telegrams in which Lincoln implores McClellan to engage Lee's forces and McClellan continually finds excuses for not doing so.

Lincoln had to resort to micromanagement through barrages of telegrams and actual visits to the front. But to little avail. McClellan simply would not engage, even when he had Lee's forces greatly outnumbered.

Wheeler recalls how on one of his "Management-By-Walking-Around" visits to McClellan's encampment, the president expressed his disdain for the flashy general. The author writes:

"At sunrise the president walked to a hilltop from which he could see the broad landscape. Spread before him was the awesome sight of thousands of tents and the materials of war running to the horizon. Turning to a friend from Springfield who had accompanied him, O.M. Hatch, Lincoln asked rhetorically, 'Hatch -- Hatch, what is all this?' The response, 'This is the Army of the Potomac,' was greeted with the rejoinder, 'No, Hatch, no. This is General McClellan's bodyguard.'"

Although this is the kind of book that will have instant appeal for Civil War history buffs, Wheeler is not endeavoring just to retell history that has been massaged thousands of times before. He is intent upon making some points about putting telecommunications and other rapidly changing technology to effective use.

Lincoln, in Wheeler's view, was what is commonly referred to today as an early adopter. He shows how Lincoln used the telegraph in much the same way that e-mails are used by business leaders today -- to shrink distance and time and delegate authority while retaining general oversight.

Wheeler contrasts Lincoln's use of the telegraph with Confederacy President Jefferson Davis':

"The Union leader had little military experience and was cursed with lesser military leaders. Davis had the military experience and was blessed with a better pool of generals. Lincoln grew into his relationship with his generals and the telegraph played a major part in that growth. Davis, characterized by the editor of one newspaper as treating 'all men as if they were idiotic insects,' used the telegraph to tell his commanders how smart he was."

While there is food for thought in such comparisons for modern CEOs, Wheeler comes up short in his effort to sell *Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails* as a historically based business leadership guidebook. But he has succeeded in writing a very enjoyable and rewarding take on an aspect of the Civil War and Lincoln's leadership that has not been examined in before in the kind of light he sheds upon it.

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**Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails: The Untold Story of How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War**

By Tom Wheeler

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