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Mitchell, Elizabeth. *Lincoln's Lie: A True Civil War Caper through Fake News, Wall Street, and the White House*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2020. 320 pp. \$26.00. Reviewed by Gregory A. Borchard, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Elizabeth Mitchell's *Lincoln's Lie: A True Civil War Caper through Fake News, Wall Street, and the White House* delves into a complex and complicated series of events involving the newspaper industry during the Civil War. It reveals in a dramatic way how Abraham Lincoln interacted with the press and describes his administration in a way that might trouble proponents of both his legacy and the First Amendment. Mitchell provides a compelling narrative about events that unfolded in 1864, but the story that unfolds has more literary qualities than historical ones, as the sources for her claims leave much to interpretation.

The focus of the book revolves around an event subsequently described as "The Great Civil War Gold Hoax," in which, during the war's descent into its darkest battles, two newspapers published a call allegedly authored by President Lincoln for the immediate conscription of an additional 400,000 Union soldiers. The call itself was eventually exposed as a fabrication produced by profiteering journalists, but historians have since understood the motivation for the document reveals much about the climate surrounding the press during the war.

In the narrative about the call provided by Mitchell, an otherwise unremarkable teenager had delivered to various newspapers the fraudulent presidential proclamation at the behest of its authors, and on May 18, 1864, newspaper managers at the *New York Journal of Commerce* and the *New York World* succumbed to pressure for competitive reasons to publish it. The streets of New York subsequently erupted in pandemonium with potential draftees resisting the news. Just as consequentially, Wall Street markets went wild as forecasts of a protracted war suggested unprecedented business conditions. Reacting to the chaos, Lincoln sent troops to seize the newspaper presses and arrest the editors, sending a

message that the proclamation was a lie. Union soldiers occupied telegraph and newspaper offices, imprisoning those inside without formal charges. *Lincoln's Lie* recovers the real fear and anger of innocent people swept up in the arrests, and Mitchell narrates in a "true crime" style of reporting the detective work that discovered journalists Joseph Howard, Jr., and Francis A. Mallison as the perpetrators of the hoax.

Previous historians have ascribed Howard and Mallison's efforts as motivated by the profits they would have made from a destabilized stock market that would drive investors to seek safety in gold. However, Mitchell probes further and argues that the traditional interpretation downplays the likelihood of a broader conspiracy. She suggests Lincoln had signed a real order for 300,000 more troops the evening before the fraudulent proclamation appeared; so the lie in *Lincoln's Lie* is not only the content published in the newspapers, but also Lincoln's denial that a new conscription was in the works. In Mitchell's reading of sources, Lincoln's real concern was protecting confidential information, not simply dispelling falsehoods in the press. She uses circumstantial evidence to propose Mary Todd Lincoln leaked the information, as Senate investigators had suspected her of secretly releasing a presidential speech two years earlier, and Howard enjoyed White House access and kept a friendship with her throughout the Civil War.

Mitchell convincingly depicts Lincoln as a media-savvy politician throughout his career—a case supported by several other historians of Lincoln and the press. However, Mitchell also gives Lincoln too much credit in a Machiavellian sense for allegedly plotting a message that would strike fear into the hearts and minds of reporters. "President Lincoln intended to arrest newspaper editors—famous ones at

that, pillars of the community—and subject them to a potentially fatal punishment” (97), she writes. While Lincoln historians have documented the president’s disregard for habeas corpus, there is no evidence that he made any plans to execute his critics.

The text elsewhere reveals a tendency to make conclusions based on sources that are not corroborated with other primary documents from the era, and the context for interpreting these works appears lacking with little attention to subsequent research on Lincoln and the press. For example, a chapter titled “Stop the Presses” features the following passage:

When Lincoln received word that the so-called proclamation signed by his hand had been published in the New York papers, he blasted into one of the worst tempers witnesses had seen him—or would ever see him—in the entire course of his presidency. Despite his reputation for sagacity and calm, Lincoln could get riled to a terrifying degree. An eyewitness to a speech Lincoln once delivered, inspired by an injustice, remarked on his temper: “Lincoln reportedly ‘stepped cleanly out of character and became ... A different person—fiery, emotional, reckless, violent, hot-blooded—everything what at other times he was not.’” (88)

While the description here reads tantalizingly—

potentially even quotable or citable—it bases the paraphrased material on an obscure memorandum from Frank A. Flower, a journalist who worked in the 1880s. The material in direct quote marks, moreover, comes from Michael Burlingame’s *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (1994), which in turn used an unnamed source for it to describe a Lincoln speech in 1856.

The demonstrated lack of familiarity with existing literature reveals *Lincoln’s Lie* has an ultimately revisionist—if not problematic—approach to the complex events surrounding the Gold Hoax. The book does succeed in taking a relatively understudied event during the war and creates from it a tale of intrigue and skullduggery, opening questions for subsequent studies to pursue. At the same time, it attempts to make an extraordinary event describe Lincoln’s general approach to the press, and in doing so, it falls outside of the consensus of interpretations that understand his policy toward as nowhere-nearly as Draconian as depicted. The most valuable understanding of the book may come from its ability to connect the current maelstrom over fake news and misinformation to historical roots that precede contemporary practice. Indeed, *Lincoln’s Lie* shows quite convincingly that the press has not always produced entirely factual accounts of events for a variety of reasons.