The Artist as Reporter
Drawing National Identity during the U.S. Civil War

This article examines how the pictorial press during the U.S. Civil War constructed nationalism and national identity to its readers. Illustrated content was studied in the nation's two leading pictorial publications, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper and Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization. Asking how the war was reported visually, the researcher studied selected issues from these two periodicals to reveal how drawings by artist-reporters used flags and flag iconography to communicate sentiments of nationalism. By focusing on pictorial reporting, the narratives crafted by these early visual journalists presented unique ideological constructs about what it meant to be on the Northern or Southern side of this conflict. Using visual semiotic methods to ascertain both denotative and connotative meanings embedded in pictorial news, this study found that national identity was most often associated with a white, male public with connections to the military and government. This article examines how special artists used flag imagery in illustrations to communicate news about the war as sentiments of nationalism. Proceeding with a definition from Anthony D. Smith, nationalism is understood as "an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential 'nation.'" Smith's work on nationalism informs the design of this study that uses visual methods of analysis to offer new and unique insights about symbolic constructions of the nation and national identity in Northern illustrated newspapers.

As an emerging form of journalism in the nineteenth century, illustrated news reached its peak during the United States Civil War. “Special artists”—painters and other artists—were hired by publishers to work as war correspondents to create pictorial content. They were often sent on assignment to travel alongside the military to sketch firsthand accounts of war. These artists-turned-reporters drew battle scenes, camp life, troop movement, maps, and other war-related imagery for a public eager for news and information. As they worked at times in the line of fire, their reporting contributions helped introduce and popularize pictorial newspapers to a national audience. As a new way to report the news, visual journalism took hold during the U.S. Civil War and never turned back.¹

What remains remarkable more than a century and a half later is the ubiquity of flags and flag imagery in these nineteenth-century illustrated news reports on the Civil War. Providing the public with realistic-looking images of war and its aftermath, many illustrations included battle flags as well as the United States' national flag and the Confederacy’s “Stars and Bars.” Some flags decorate the background of illustrations while other flags serve as a focal point of the image's central narrative. At the most basic level, these flags functioned to help readers identify Northern and Southern people and places in their illustrations. But upon deeper inspection, flags communicated certain ideological constructs about what it meant to be on the Northern or Southern side of this conflict.² That ideological construct can be explained by examining these images through the lens of nationalism.

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The visual narratives drawn by artist-reporters who chronicled the war from 1861 to 1865 were a regular feature in the two top illustrated periodicals of the period, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper and Harper’s Weekly: A Journal of Civilization. The majority of “special artists” worked for these two competing publications; both were the most widely distributed weeklies of their kind.³ Illustrated representations of news not only further contextualized written accounts of the war but also offered their own unique narratives about war news. To offer one interpretation of how illustrated content communicated sentiments of nationalism through news about the war to readers, this article asks: How were flags used in illustrations to signify national identity? How did the depiction of flags in illustrations connote certain ideas of what it meant to be on the Union (Northern) or Confederate (Southern) side of the war?

Historian Joshua Brown explains that scholars often fail to examine illustrations appearing in the nineteenth-century press “as evidence of a social practice in its own right.”⁴ Over the last several years there has been an increase in journalism studies that focus on illustrations; this study adds to that growing body of literature.⁵ Specifically, this work asks how illustrated reporting communicated sentiments of the nation and national identity.
and offers new interpretations of the illustrated press during the Civil War era. Placing importance on this nascent form of visual reporting, what's revealed is reporting that in some ways could be distinctive from written reports of the war.

As a carrier of news and information, media messages, such as illustrations, can have an effect on audiences and make meaning when content appeals to recognizable and memorable concepts and themes.

Understanding illustrations as media constructions also place these representations in the context of changes in journalism as well as a society experiencing massive social, economic and political reconfiguration. Over time, flag imagery was associated with the harsh realities of war, and arguably built the foundation for our contemporary association of national flags with strong but certain sentiments of national identity.

Considering the Civil War and the press's role in constructing the "Stars and Stripes" into the common and revered symbol that it is today, this work reveals how the illustrated press elevated the flag as a national symbol. Before the onset of U.S. Civil War in 1861, displays of the American flag were limited to government and military use. Versions of George Washington, Columbia, and Liberty were more common ante-bellum symbols of the U.S. However, once the war began, it did not take long for the press to use the flag as a symbol for the North. Robert Justin Goldstein explains, "Popular magazines like Harper's, which before the Civil War had paid little attention to the flag . . . now focused on it as the preeminent symbol of the nation." 

The emergence of illustrated news in the nineteenth century represents one among many shifts in publishing and journalism. Periodicals such as Leslie's and Harper's were part of a larger popular culture movement in a marketplace inundated with printed materials. Advances in steam press technologies enabled faster and more frequent printing, and cheaper raw materials allowed publishers to grow audiences. Before the war, the newspaper business was uneven and at times struggled financially. But by 1862, public demand for news about the war drove circulation upward, especially in urban areas. In cities such as New York, reporting on significant battles, for example, boosted sales to roughly five times their usual quantity. The U.S. Civil War touched every part of the country, and the desire for news and information was insatiable. Artists took advantage of this "flexible" medium and often embedded political commentary into illustrated content to avoid censorship and suppression, including sentiments of nationalism. Thus, illustrated content often blurred the lines between news and editorial commentary.

Still, in order for these illustrations to work to communicate meaning, they also had to be believable. In The Form of News: A History, Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone explain how Leslie's and Harper's remained credible with readers: "[Their] production was mechanized to an extent that permitted predictable manufacturing schedules and allowed the (believable) claim to authentic representation." It is also reasonable to understand the role visual content played in increased newspaper sales; news images about the war allowed otherwise disparate social classes to have similar experiences through pictures, not to mention access to news for those unable to read. Years after the war, it was New York City's infamous crime boss, William Marcy "Boss" Tweed, who recognized power of visual reporting on his often poorly educated supporters; "Let's stop them damned pictures. I don't care what the papers write about me—my constituents can't read; but damn it, they can see pictures!"

The artists hired to create illustrations of the war for news purposes provided these image-makers their largest audiences to date. "Civil War artists were a group of widely divergent personalities, but in many respects they were remarkably alike," historian W. Fletcher Thompson Jr. explains. Thompson notes the majority of artist-reporters were not wealthy and worked as war correspondents as a means to an end. Many had formal artistic training, such as Alfred Waud, who studied at the Royal Academy of London. Winslow Homer, who studied in New York City at the National Academy of Design, hoped to leave war reporting by 1863 to pursue a painting career but did not find success until well after the Civil War. The artist arguably best known today for his Gilded Age editorial cartoons, Thomas Nast, started working for Frank Leslie in the 1850s at the age of fifteen and had worked for several periodicals by the onset of the war.

The rise and popularity of the illustrated press during the U.S. Civil War coincides with other significant transformations in the practice of journalism, underscored by societal, legal, political, and technological changes at the time. These include storytelling structure changes (the beginnings of the inverted pyramid); use of the telegraph to quickly transmit reports from the front lines of war; improvements to the steam press that helped increased newspaper circulation; and transportation improvements that allowed for wider distribution of newspapers.

And while the contributions by the illustrated press are not ignored in scholarship, more often their contributions are secondary to the aforementioned developments in journalism. Furthermore, studies on what was written far outpace scholarship on how the war was visualized.

When the United States became two nations at war, visual news reporting in periodicals such as Harper's and Leslie's augmented written reports in daily newspapers, and publishers of pictorial news assumed their pictorial coverage worked in concert with the daily press. However, differences between these two publications are well documented in the scholarship. Described by one scholar as "a soldier of fortune bent on conquering the world," Frank Leslie was a self-taught artist who honed his craft in his native England. Changing his name from Henry Carter to hide his identity from a disapproving family, Leslie emigrated to the United States and pursued opportunities that would establish him as an influential publisher. As an artist who understood a working-class audience, Leslie strengthened his skills in self-promotion to sell newspapers from his first U.S. employer, showman and promoter P.T. Barnum. Launching his first publication in 1855, Leslie is remembered for improving the engraving process that rapidly increased production and allowed visual news to flourish during the Civil War. As a result, the impact of Leslie's publishing house was "felt throughout the country." Leslie himself claimed to have had artist-reporters cover every important conflict and contribute nearly three thousand illustrations to his periodical.

In contrast to Leslie's entrepreneurship, a well-established publishing empire launched Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization in January 1857. It aimed to create a "high-class illustrated weekly paper for family reading," and scholars note the illustrated weekly was the "pet enterprise" of Fletcher Harper. Much like the already popular Harper's New Monthly Magazine that preceded it, this illustrated weekly paper was immediately successful, boasting a weekly circulation of 120,000. Editor Thomas Sedgwick kept in line with the family-friendly focus until the outbreak of the Civil War when Harper's became a go-to source for news across the country. Fletcher, along with his brothers, changed his political allegiance to the Republican Party after the attack on Fort Sumter. But while the weekly "advocated the principles of the Republican party," it did not strive to be a political paper. A quote from The North American Review in April 1865 describes Harper's as "one of the most powerful public organs of public opinion. Its vast circulation, secured and maintained by the excellence of its illustrations of the scenes and events of the war . . . has carried it far and wide." Histories of illustrated reporting are secondary to histories of photography, but the development of the photograph offers important insights into the development of the pictorial artist-reporter and the illustrated press. In the fall of 1862, war photographer Matthew Brady's "Incidents of the War" photography exhibit in New York
City captivated viewers and elevated Brady as a vanguard of the new medium. However, to share images of the war with the greater public, the press hired artists to re-create not only Brady’s photos but others as well. The technology to reproduce photographs directly in newspapers through the halftone process did not exist until later in the century, thus giving way to the “artist reporter” during the war.

In *The North Reports the Civil War*, J. Culter Andrews says the illustrated press proved to be one of the most intriguing outcomes of Civil War journalism. The original illustrated content drawn by special artists allowed for depictions of news that a photograph could not. On-the-spot illustrated content, for example, could capture moments for readers not possible through the camera lens. Cameras were not easily portable, and technology limited what photographers could document, such as in-focus movement on a wide scale. Sketch artists, on the other hand, were only limited by their imagination and artistic skills. The nature of pictorial war reporting would not tolerate artist-reporters straying from a realistic aesthetic, but as this research reveals, the use of flags as a symbol was a way to insert certain ideologies about nationalism and national identity.

Nationalism is used as a conceptual frame to interpret how artist-reporters illustrated flags and flag iconography to report the war. Benedict Anderson’s seminal publication, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, helps explain how newspapers played an essential role in the development and spread of nationalism in the United States. That development, Anderson argues, is also unique to the United States. The roots of nationalism in the United States of America particularly lie with the rise of print-capitalism, Anderson says, because the development of U.S. nationalism has strong ties to the printer-newspaper publisher. Further explaining nationalism as an ideology, Smith places the nation’s vitality at the center of concern. He further explains “generic” goals of nationalism as “national autonomy, national unity, and national identity,” and a nation needs all three elements working together to thrive.

Understood as a complex marker of identity, autonomy and unity, nationalism must also be understood, according to Liah Greenfeld, as a derivative of the concept “nation.” Summarily put, Greenfeld explains nationalism as a term that “distinguishes nationality from other types of identity,” and as a “source of individual identity within a ‘people,’ which is seen as the bearer of sovereignty, the central object of loyalty, and the basis of collective solidarity.” Historian Eric Hobsbawm describes nationalism based on certain characteristics, “such as shared language, common territory, common history, cultural traits.” He further asserts that a nation cannot exist without a sense of nationalism, and cites Anderson to help explain his position through the concept of “imagined communities.” Along with being limited and sovereign, according to Anderson, a nation can also be constructed as imagined by people who form such deep connections that many are willing to go to war and die for their nation.

The U.S. flag is one of the few cultural markers in a nation of immigrants who otherwise do not share an ethnically singular common food, language, or social custom. In *Blood, Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle assert that the U.S. flag is a “totem” symbol of America’s civil religion: patriotism. Using Emile Durkheim’s theory of religion as an allegory for society, Marvin and Ingle argue that the U.S. flag embodies the willingness to sacrifice fellow citizens in order to uphold and maintain the nation-state. This sacrificial act manifests by sending soldiers off to war where many die for their country. The totem ritual also explains why persons are willing to put themselves in harm’s way for their country and why visual journalists included flag and flag iconography in their war reporting.
As a study of visual journalism’s role in communicating nationalism, Michael Billig’s concept of “banal nationalism” is also useful. He explains banal nationalism as a “low key” and “understated tone. In routine practices and everyday discourses, especially those in the mass media, the idea of nationhood is regularly flagged.” It is the interrogation of the “everydayness” of national sentiments regarding flag depictions in Civil War pictorial reporting that offer insights into how flag symbols were ideologically embedded with nationalistic sentiments that ultimately communicated what it meant to be on the right or wrong side of the conflict.

To examine how special artists used flags and flag iconography to communicate sentiments of nationalism and national identity in war reporting, issues of Leslie’s and Harper’s were selected by their proximity to four significant events in four different years of the Civil War: 1) The attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861; 2) President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862; 3) The New York Draft Riots in July 1863; and 4) November 1864 reporting on the “march to the sea” campaign by General William T. Sherman. Each of the four events offers a unique window into certain political shifts, from the first shots fired to events that led to the end of war. The bombardment of Fort Sumter by the Confederate Army in 1861 denotes the war’s beginning; Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation to free slaves in the Confederacy represents a significant political shift in Lincoln’s strategy from preserving the Union to abolishing slavery; the New York Draft Riots in 1863 “tempered the luster” of recent Union victories and Northern abolitionist hegemony; and late 1864 marks Lincoln’s re-election and also General Sherman’s military campaign from Atlanta to the coast that “signaled an impending end of the Confederate military,” according to historians David Bulla and Gregory A. Borchard.

The analysis was informed by semiotic methods to ascertain both denotative and connotative meanings embedded in pictorial reporting. Norman Fairclough posits that semiotic analysis can aid in connecting visual content in the media to “ideologies, power relations and cultural values.” Similar to text, images in the media contribute to a person’s understanding of who he or she is, and images found in media aid a person in making sense of the world. Denotation implies the literal, or natural, meaning, such as the U.S. flag denoting the United States of America. Connotation, on the other hand, is not as explicit, but offers a way to understand what Rolland Barthes calls the “ideological baggage” attached to images, offering an avenue to interpret media portrayals of nationalism and national identity.

Using a contemporary example, consider the use of the U.S. flag to communicate a sentiment of a unique, and perhaps superior, form of national identity associated with the North. Both Greenfeld and Hobswam explain that an important component of nationalism happens when a group of people define themselves against another group. This concept is evident in “Virginian of 1861” from Harper’s in May 1861 (Figure A). The secessionist soldier is shown stepping on the U.S. flag in an act that symbolizes and obvious and blatant desecration. In contrast, as the war is coming to a close, an editorial illustration from Harper’s on December 3, 1864, depicts a Southern military general standing on a flag marked C.S.A., shaking hands with President Lincoln in a gesture of unity (Figure B). Stepping on a nation’s flag is a clear sign of disrespect, with the soldier metaphorically “stomping out” the South and the Confederacy itself. The depiction of the soldier shaking Lincoln’s hand underneath the U.S. flag suggests a settlement or an agreement made between the two parties. The U.S. flag is a prominent focal point of this image, framing the persons depicted, and it serves to visually facilitate a strong sentiment of sovereign Northern national identity.

National Sovereignty

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Loyalty, Unity and Strength

Flags also functioned in many illustrations to depict loyalty, unity, and strength of the Northern war effort. In fact, many of the illustrations identified under the theme “sovereign national identity” could also be categorized as loyalty, unity, and strength. This theme, much like sovereign national identity, is closely associated with the military and the government. Flags representing this theme are depicted as high-flying and animated—often flapping in the wind to clearly show its stars and stripes—making it recognizable to readers as the U.S. flag. The sheer number of flags in many illustrations studied implies unity and strength among the citizenry and the military. As the war continued, more frequent depictions of flags were illustrated but also showed signs of wear and tear. Despite being noticeably damaged, flags continued to be drawn flying high and flapping in the wind, suggesting continued strength and resilience despite the damage—connoting a
struggling yet surviving nation.

The first report of the attack on Fort Sumter in Leslie's April 27, 1861, issue featured a four-page foldout illustration of the attack. The Union flag immediately draws the eye, flying high and strong, and surrounded by smoke and incoming cannon fire (Figure C). The image seems to romanticize the bombardment by demonstrating the North's strength and steadfastness under fire by making the high-flying flag a focal point of the image. Although Union soldiers lost this battle, the U.S. flag illustrated in this image serves to communicate a unifying message: While the battle was lost, the North remains united and resilient.

Leslie's next issue on May 4 features the U.S. flag that flew over Fort Sumter during the battle. The caption read: "The flag of Fort Sumter, as it appeared after the bombardment." The flag is tattered and torn, signifying distress, but it is still recognizable and in one piece, connoting the Union's strength.

Appearing in the May 11, 1861, issue of Harper's, a caption to this illustration reads, "The Thirteenth Regiment New York State Militia Leaving their Armory In Brooklyn for the War, April 23, 1861" (Figure E). Flags appearing in the foreground and background leave little doubt that Union troops departing their armory have strength in numbers and are supported by a united crowd of civilians cheering them on. Another illustration appearing on the same page captioned, "The Sixteenth (Irish) Regiment Embarking in the 'James Adger' for the War April 23, 1861," shows troops boarding the James Adger that prominently displays two large U.S. flags. Again, flags are prominent, with the U.S. flag as a focal point. A crowd of civilians is drawn cheering and waving in unity and support as the troops board the ship (Figure E).

The front page of Harper's September 20, 1862, issue depicts a dying Union soldier in the arms of another who is carrying a U.S. flag. Titled "A Gallant Color-Bearer," the reporter-artist’s rendition of this soldier clutching the flag suggests courage and heroism on the battlefield. While the flag is tattered and torn, the connotation is resilience, symbolized by waving prominently in the wind. Another injured soldier lies on the ground, looking up and reaching out to the flag. In this powerful portrait of death and dying, the dominant message is the bravery of soldiers and the loyalty of the army to the Union, even under the worst of circumstances. The flag's imperfect but recognizable structure connotes the struggle and resolve of the soldiers depicted.

Special artists also conveyed loyalty, unity, and strength through detailed drawings of troop movement. To emphasize Northern power, illustrations sometimes depicted a greater number of Union flags when compared with Confederate flags. Depictions of conquest also apply to this theme. For example, "Triumphal entrance of Gen. Grant's Army into Vicksburg, July 4," exemplified Northern military power with a crowd gathered watching the troops march into the Mississippi city. Leslie's dedicated a two-paged illustration sketched by Fred B. Schell, a reporter-artist who covered Grant's movements during the Vicksburg campaign, to this story. The sheer number of troops in this picture connotes Northern power, led by soldiers waving swords in the air behind a marching band as a large crowd looks on. A government building appears prominently in the background where U.S. flags already appear to be placed on the dome; one appears tattered but
The backgrounds are nearly identical, but the men in the foreground of this drawing contrast significantly with the military men. Two men—the “philistines”—drawn in clothing that marks them as poor or working-class, are depicted helping a third man who appears intoxicated and unable to walk without their help. One of the men assisting appears to be holding several ballots, implying voting fraud. A surface level reading of this unsympathetic portrait of the poor might imply a stark contrast when compared with the illustrations of the veterans. But a deeper analysis suggests otherwise. The same flags fly above both the veterans and the philistines, and both groups are exercising their voting rights. The act of voting is a shared act of loyalty and unity, despite socioeconomic class and military service to country. Both voting scenes connote a sense of unity, or national identity, among Union citizens—both military and civilian.

Ritual and Ceremonial Uses of the Flag

It’s reasonable to say that nearly all of the flag and flag facsimiles in images under study connote ritual and ceremony. This theme isolates visual depictions of large public displays of the U.S. flag. Ritual and ceremonial portrayals in Harper’s and Leslie’s were often associated with communities and social groups that communicated commitment to the country and the war. The formality and presentation of ritualistic flag uses make these illustrations particularly meaningful. This theme is especially evident at the beginning of the conflict. The two aforementioned images in Figure E, “The Thirteenth Regiment” and “The Great Meeting in Union Square, New York, To Support the Government,” from Harper’s May 4, 1861, issue are representative of ritual flag use. Citizens ritualistically wave their own flags at this public gathering, connoting their support for the troops and government. As the war persisted, reporter-artists for both Harper’s and Leslie’s created images of Union conquests of Confederate holdings with ubiquitous flag imagery, such as the aforementioned “Triumphal entrance of Gen. Grant’s Army into Vicksburg, July 4.” These ritual and ceremonial themed illustrations are the few where women and non-whites appear in the news. “The Capture at Vicksburg—arrival of Admiral Porter’s fleet at the levee on fourth July, 1863,” for example, depicts men and women, both black and white, enthusiastically waving flags as ships enter the harbor. For the reader, support for the nation through ritualistic practices of flag-waving helps to mitigate gender and racial difference.

National Temperament

Another theme in this research found connotations of “temperament” or “character” of the nation embedded in flags and flag imagery drawn into illustrations about the war. Furthermore, many activities associated with flags, either directly or indirectly, communicated something about a nation’s disposition. Even today, the U.S. flag is often referred to as a sacred symbol of the nation; this theme also reveals a certain sacredness about flags that represent nations. Simply put, whether the flag is being revered or disrespected by a person says something about her or his national identity.
Some special artists drew negative sentiments of national temperament into portrayals of the flag. For example, some illustrations depicted Southerners desecrating the U.S. flag, connoting a form of rebellion against the Union. Again, “The Virginian of 1861”—first discussed in the Sovereign National Identity theme—shows a soldier with his sword drawn in one hand, holding in the other a Union flag draping on the ground and resting his foot on top of it. To the left, an illustration of “The Virginian of 1776” appears in contrast to the rebellious Virginian of 1861 (Figure F). The message is clear: the South is disrespecting the nation by trampling on the Stars and Stripes—an unmistakable form of desecration. It is a portrayal of the South that connotes a negative temperament of Southern people, and more specifically in this case, the Confederate military.

The artists working for Leslie’s and Harper’s often depicted Confederate flags negatively as a way to associate disloyalty and brutality with Southern character and temperament, especially in the later years of the war. A Harper’s illustration captioned “A Rebel Guerrilla Raid in a Western Town” gruesomely depicts a rampage by Southern troops. It is a chaotic scene. A Stars and Bars version of the Confederate flag is prominent in the foreground—visually connecting the horrible acts of brutality in this illustration as Confederate. A black man hangs from a noose on the pole holding the Confederate flag. A white man is drawn shooting a dog as if not to care and another white man is holding a child by one leg upside-down. Women and blacks are being manhandled in the foreground. Other rebels appear on a balcony, seemingly intoxicated. The only sign of the North appears in the distance—a U.S. flag is flying upside-down, a recognized sign of distress. The illustrator is using both the Union and Confederate flags to connote temperaments of both nations. The North is under attack by the “rebels” of the South who seem to have little respect for the rules of war. The South’s barbarism portrayed in this illustration leaves little to the imagination on how to interpret Northern and Southern temperament.

The absence of flags in pictorial war reporting is worth noting also, as absences connote sentiments of national temperament. For example, an illustration on the front page of the November 15, 1862, Harper’s reads, “Convalescent soldiers passing through Washington to join their Regiments” (Figure G). The sketch artist, identified as Mr. A. Oertel (Johannes Adam Simon Oertel), reports that the soldiers were in a “variety of garb” and “the soldier who has seen service is a different looking object from the trim gent he was when he left home.” In this illustration, a domed building in the background above the marching soldiers has a notably empty flagpole. As an unfavorable portrait of Union soldiers, the omission of any flag imagery helps defray any negative association towards the North and Union efforts.

While the majority of New York-based newspapers at the time offered their own partisan spin on the 1863 New York City Draft Riots, editors overall advocated for the “safety and security of the city” to be preserved. In the issues of Harper’s and Leslie’s selected for this study, few illustrators drew flags into images in places where they otherwise might appear when depicting riot activity. In one Leslie’s sketch, a man carries a flag on a flagpole among a group of men marching. This small depiction is a part of a full-page collage of illustrations of riot activity. The pictorial collage carries the caption, “Andrews of Virginia and Other Ringleaders.” The other images among these include buildings that are often drawn with flags. In contrast to other illustrations
studied, no flags appear on the tops of buildings, as one would expect. A gruesome scene portraying the aftermath of the September 1862 Antietam battle also is notable for an absence of flags. “Battle of Antietam—the 130th Penn. Regiment volunteers burying the rebel dead, Friday, Sept. 19—this spot was the scene of one of the most desperate conflicts of the day,” depicts a melancholy scene with losses on both sides of the battle (Figure H). The artist’s exclusion of flags in this illustration is a key to its meaning: Keeping flag imagery out of this picture serves both the Union and the Confederacy in the devastating battle from association with the revered symbol of their respective countries.

**Appeasement and (Re) Unification**

Appeasement and reunification themes identified in illustrations happened, unsurprisingly, toward the end of the war. Flags portrayed in illustrations in both Harper’s and Leslie’s suggest efforts to rebuild the nation during and after the 1864 presidential election. Illustrations in Harper’s continue to symbolize loyalty and solidarity, but this is complicated by a sense of conditional, or provisional, unification of the North and South into one nation. For example, in some illustrations, slaves are shown being freed by the Union, and the North is shown inviting the South back into the Union. One provocative image is an editorial drawing depicting President Lincoln on the Capitol steps shaking hands with a soldier stepping on a flag labeled “C.S.A.” (i.e., a Confederate flag). The U.S. flag is flying above the president and the general, and many people look on in celebration (Figure B). This illustration is part of a collage of many depictions of a tired but resolute Union effort to defeat the Southern opponent. All supporting illustrations in this collage evoke a sense of hope that the North is willing to forgive the rebellion and welcome the South back into the United States—but only if Southerners denounce any loyalty to the C.S.A., as symbolized by the military stepping on the Confederate flag.

A two-page editorial illustration in December 31, 1864, Harper’s depicts several themes, including loyalty and unity, but arguably more strongly connotes reunification. In a gesture to invite the South back into the Union, President Lincoln is shown offering Southerners a place at the Christmas dinner table where Northern state representatives are already seated. Empty seats are reserved at this table for the secession states as signified by chairs labeled with abbreviations of state names. A plaque on the wall behind the table that reads “one flag” is nestled among other symbols of the Union. Other smaller illustrations support the theme of this dinner scene, including Northern and Southern soldiers shaking hands under the U.S. Flag—a torn and tattered flag that still retains its function of flying stalwartly. A Confederate flag appears in a subordinate position on a flagpole where rebel soldiers are bowing their heads before Union soldiers and turning in their weapons. “Lady Victory” extends an olive branch to someone assumed to be a “rebel,” and she is holding a “stars and stripes” shield.

A strong sentiment of reunification among citizens is communicated through the display of flags in the 1864 front-page illustration captioned, “Celebration of abolition of Negro Slavery in Maryland, at Philadelphia, Penn. Nov. 1” (Figure I, the cover of this issue of Journalism History, and below). Reporter-artists drew blacks and whites together in a festive scene on the streets of New York,
suggesting a shared sacrifice and a unified public. It’s another example of flags in these illustrations serving to mediate the unification of black and white citizens.

The flag of truce—a white flag—while not a national flag, was an important symbol that connoted sentiments of appeasement. For example, a truce flag appears above a Northern and a Southern general negotiating terms of surrender in “The capture of Vicksburg—interview between generals by Grant and Pemberton to settle terms of surrender.” The two generals are pictured in the foreground, sitting and talking, and a white flag is seen in the distance flying above their location. In this issue another illustration of the Vicksburg surrender shows “rebel” soldiers holding onto white “truce” flags and turning in their weapons with Union soldiers looking on. These illustrations together convey cooperation between the North and South, but they also connote Northern nationalism through the subordination of the Confederate army.

As an emerging reporting form, illustrated news in Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper uniquely communicated news and information about the U.S. Civil War that words alone could not. Asking how meaning about the war was communicated to readers, this research examined selected issues of both periodicals to study how artist-reporters symbolically constructed nationalism in illustrated news. Visual reporters used the illustrated form to construct ideologically latent visual messages about the nation and national identity. Focusing specifically on flags and how they were drawn to signify nationalism and national identity, several themes were uncovered: Sovereign national identity; loyalty, unity, strength; ritual and ceremony; national character; and appeasement and re-unification.

Readers of these periodicals were sometimes presented with complicated ideological messages about the war, but more often these messages reaffirmed the need to preserve Northern American identity and a Northern way of life. Ideological constructs of nationalism uncovered in this research revealed limited depictions of who and what was associated with the nation and national identity vis-à-vis the flag and flag facsimiles. Reporter-artists used images of the U.S. flag to communicate certain sentiments about loyalty to one’s country as sovereign, the importance of sacrifice, and the duty to unify a divided nation. Flags were most often associated with the military and the government, thereby constructing American nationalism and Northern identity as white and male. In fact, flag depictions in illustrations studied were rarely drawn outside of a pro-military or pro-government context. As a result, these depictions ostensibly rendered women and minorities absent. When artist-reporters did draw women and African Americans in illustrations with flags, they appeared in supporting roles, such as in crowds supporting the military and Union war efforts. Artist-reporters also did little in these illustrations that questioned or challenged governmental and military institutions. Tattered and torn flags connoted the struggle and stress of war, especially in the later years of the conflict, but their prominence and stature in images communicated resilience. In issues studied at the war’s end, the U.S. flag was drawn as a symbol of reunification.

Flags from the Confederacy were seen more frequently in illustrations as the war continued. It seems reasonable to conclude that, as a new nation, the Confederacy was not as solidly defined by its emblems as the Union, thus explaining why flags representing the South were drawn less frequently during the first years of the conflict. As the war continued far beyond expectations, the increased presence of Southern flags in illustrations connotes the Confederacy as a force to be taken seriously. Notable changes in language used to describe the Confederacy were seen as well. These include the use of “rebel” to describe the Southern troops from late 1862 and beyond in contrast to earlier labels of “secessionists” or “Confederates.” And, at the end of war, the Confederate soldiers were shown desecrating the flag—reaffirming their commitment to returning to the nation and unify under the singular U.S. flag.

When a nation’s identity—and its very existence—is in jeopardy, the mass media exercise considerable influence over citizens seeking news and information. Furthermore, if media function to shape and construct a sense of reality for people, then, the Civil War-era illustrated press likely played an influential role in shaping a citizen’s understanding of what it meant on the Northern or Southern side of the conflict. Illustrations studied that used flags to connote nationalism typically focused on a white, male public with military and government associations. Ultimately, a U.S. flag in these illustrations narrowly defined what it meant to be a citizen of the United States at the time. No war could have been fought—or won—without citizen support, and in appealing for that support, the illustrations studied helped define and focus a very narrow (Northern) national identity. The special artists’ reporting on the Civil War pictured unique and previously unseen news to the public, and their efforts should be recognized as an early form of visual journalism.

NOTES

1 Earlier examples of war photography exist, such as the Mexican War (1846-1848) and the Crimean War in the 1850s, but the U.S. Civil War is considered the first war where timely visuals were captured and distributed widely. On page 48 in Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age Journalism, Joshua Brown explains, “Historians of the Civil War have recognized its visualization as a unique feature of the conflict.”


6 For a recent example, see John M. Coward, Indians Illustrated: The Image of Native Americans in the Pictorial Press (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

7 For example, see Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content (London: Longman, 1996), 213.


9 Ibid.


11 David W. Bulla and Gregory A. Borchard, Journalism and the Civil War Era (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 90.


18 David Tatham and Winslow Homer, Winslow Homer and the Pictorial Press (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003), xix, 88.

Bulla and Borchard, Journalism and the Civil War Era xvi-xvii.


5. These two periodicals will be hereafter cited as Leslie’s and Harper’s.


8. Ibid.


10. Stern, Purple Passage, 35.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 133.

16. Ibid., 230.


23. Ibid., 3-4.


27. Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War, 32.


33. Franklin Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Nov. 26, 1864.

34. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 15, 1863.


38. For example, see Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 22, 1863.

39. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 15, 1863.

40. Ford Risley, Civil War Journalism (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger: 2012), 47

41. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 15, 1863.

42. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Nov. 26, 1864.

43. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 15, 1863.

44. Harper’s Weekly, May 18, 1861.


46. Ibid., 6.

47. Ibid., 6.

48. Document size constraints limit illustrations to only a few examples.

49. For example, see Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 22, 1863.

50. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 15, 1863.

51. Ibid.

52. Ford Risley, Civil War Journalism (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger: 2012), 47

53. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 15, 1863.

54. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Nov. 26, 1864.

55. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Aug. 15, 1863.


58. Bulla and Borchard, Journalism and the Civil War Era, 155.


60. “Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Oct. 18, 1862.


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