



Marketing the Blue and Gray: Newspaper Advertising and the American Civil War by Lawrence A. Kreiser Jr.

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The American Civil War occurred at a time when newspapers dominated the media landscape and advertising columns seemed to be the most important part of the publication. High-speed presses appeared earlier in the century, making it possible to put papers in the hands of many thousands of consumers.

In *Marketing the Blue and Gray*, historian Lawrence A. Kreiser Jr.¹ (Stillman College) argues that advertisers took advantage of booming newspaper circulations to monetize every aspect of the war.

The goods themselves were not going to determine whether the Union or Confederacy ultimately won the Civil War, but advertisers offered their readers a sense of turning an everyday purchase into a political activity. A customer might strike a blow for the war effort without ever leaving the storefront. Shopping had become its own form of patriotism, one of the more enduring legacies of the fighting that raged between 1861 and 1865. (3)

Kreiser concentrates on a neglected aspect of the war: the interests—both shared and unique—of Union and Confederate consumers. He also reveals the tactics marketers used in the tumultuous mid-nineteenth century. Through a study of advertisements in 550 Union and Confederate newspapers as well as comments on them in contemporary publications, Kreiser explores how advertising influenced specific aspects of the war, including politics, military recruitment, slavery and race, and perceptions of battle.

For one thing, advertisers capitalized on Union patriotism and Southern pride to sell their wares; critics commented that merchants and their advertisements were convincing civilians to spend extravagantly and unnecessarily while soldiers suffered. They even profited from the assassination of Pres. Abraham Lincoln by selling books and portraits. They lured volunteers into battle with promises of adventure and appeals to duty. They scammed veterans uncertain about their futures with get-rich-quick schemes. They preyed on the fears and woes—real or perceived—of soldiers, veterans, and their families to sell patent medicines.

Although each chapter covers a discrete aspect of war advertising, patent medicines are a recurring topic throughout the book. The fraudulent and sensational tactics of patent (or “quack”) medicine advertisers are well known, but Kreiser puts them in a new context, showing how aspects of the Civil War provided new opportunities for marketing. Advertisers stressed maladies and concerns unique to war time and used the same appeals to patriotism, nationalism, and identity that other advertisers did during that era. Kreiser notes, too, that the war presented patent medicine advertisers with new challenges, including medical advancements, increasing

1. His previous work includes *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2011).

knowledge of self-care, and changing views of femininity. He observes that typical patent medicine marketers' depiction of women

as fragile and delicate contrasted with their portrayal in other forms of wartime literature. In poems and novels, wives, mothers, and sisters bore risks and sacrifices to help the Union and Confederate causes. They became stronger as individuals, especially in not allowing themselves to become overwhelmed by the war's carnage. The "feminized war" claimed for women an equal stake as soldiers in strength of character and love of country. Fear, however, sold more medicine than fortitude. (162)

Despite the manipulative and exploitive qualities of wartime marketing, it also had benefits. The author writes that books, maps, portraits, lectures, and dramatic presentations satisfied consumers' thirst for knowledge about the war's important people, places, and events. War bonds enabled civilians to support the war effort. Photo cards and albums allowed soldiers and their families to keep mementos of each other and record their own war histories. Newspaper notices mobilized voters and aided veterans returning to civilian life. They even helped emancipated slaves transition to freedom and rebuild their families. In effect, the author shows, advertisers created unity in a time of division.

Lawrence Kreiser successfully informs readers about the mutual influences of the war and the marketers operating in the wartime environment, while emphasizing the role of the often partisan, editor-driven nineteenth-century newspaper in the marketing process. The variety of topics treated in *Marketing the Blue and Gray* will make it useful for students of the Civil War and media historians but, more broadly, for anyone interested in nineteenth-century politics and culture.