Lincoln's America 2.0

Edward L. Ayers

Matthew Pinsker's extremely useful essay alerts us to, among other things, digital sources that promise fresh ways to understand Abraham Lincoln. Thanks to the work of dedicated scholars and librarians, we also find ourselves in possession of millions of digital words, statistics, and images about the America in which Lincoln lived. The challenge now is to find meaning, coherence, and pattern in that abundance.

For most people at the time, far from battles or capitals, the Civil War arrived in long gray columns of text. A new system of telegraph stations, railroads, and press organizations spread words with unprecedented speed and in enormous quantity. Reports from the battlefield poured out in brief messages and long torrents, editorials commenting on every event and utterance. Even generals and presidents understood the shape and meaning of the Civil War through print. Newspapers expressed and molded public opinion daily, and Lincoln realized fully how much this public opinion mattered. "Public sentiment is every thing," he said. "*With* it, nothing can fail; *against* it, nothing can succeed. Whoever moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes, or pronounces judicial decisions."[1]

The bland appearance of unadorned nineteenth-century newspapers belies the passions within. No matter how passionate they might be, however, no matter how unique the situation might appear, people returned time and again to key words to express themselves. The subjects people wrote about, the words they habitually paired, the ideals they named, the slurs they cast—all bore strong patterns. Those patterns are as distinct as fingerprints.

The availability of newspapers in digital form offers the opportunity to explore public opinion with a thoroughness and precision impossible just a few years ago. Historians at the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond, led by Robert K. Nelson, are building tools that provide exciting new perspectives to anyone who knows the rudimentary techniques of searching on the World Wide Web. The four newspapers of the Valley of the Shadow Project, a long-established digital archive, provide a convenient way to experiment. These papers represented Republicans and Democrats in the North and unionists and secessionists in the South before, during, and after the Civil War in two counties. A broad comparison with other publications in digital form—the *New York Times, Harper's Weekly,* and the *Richmond Dispatch*—shows that the general patterns of

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[1] See Menahem Blondheim, "'Public Sentiment Is Everything': The Union's Public Communications Strategy and the Bogus Proclamation of 1864," *Journal of American History,* 89 (Dec. 2002), 869–99, esp. 869.

Northern Republican
Semi-Weekly Dispatch/Franklin Repository

Northern Democrat
Valley Spirit

Figure 1(a). The words most commonly used in articles that contain the word "people" in the two Northern papers in the Valley of the Shadow Project, April 1861 through April 1865. The larger a word appears on these lists, the more frequently the word appears in each newspaper.

the Valley of the Shadow newspapers also characterized major publications of both the Union and the Confederacy.[2]

The most commonly used words in these four Northern and Southern newspapers between April 1861 and April 1865 show how thoroughly the war trumped every other concern. (See figures 1[a] and 1[b].) Northerners talked of "rebels" and Southerners talked of the "enemy," but otherwise white Northerners and white Southerners spoke in remarkably consistent and similar vocabularies. In some ways, Northern Republicans and Northern Democrats differed from one another more than Northerners and Southerners did.

Extending our view across the entire era of the war, from 1859 to 1870, reveals that issues of governance and race became dominant as soon as the war ended. During the

[2] *Digital Scholarship Lab,* http://digitalscholarship.richmond.edu. *The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War,* http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu. The tools used for this essay are available at *Digital Scholarship Lab: American Past,* http://americanpast.richmond.edu. For a comparison of the Valley of the Shadow papers with the other publications, see *Digital Scholarship Lab: Text Mapping,* http://americanpast.richmond.edu/textmapping/pages/jah/.

Southern Former Unionist
Staunton Spectator

Southern Former Secessionist
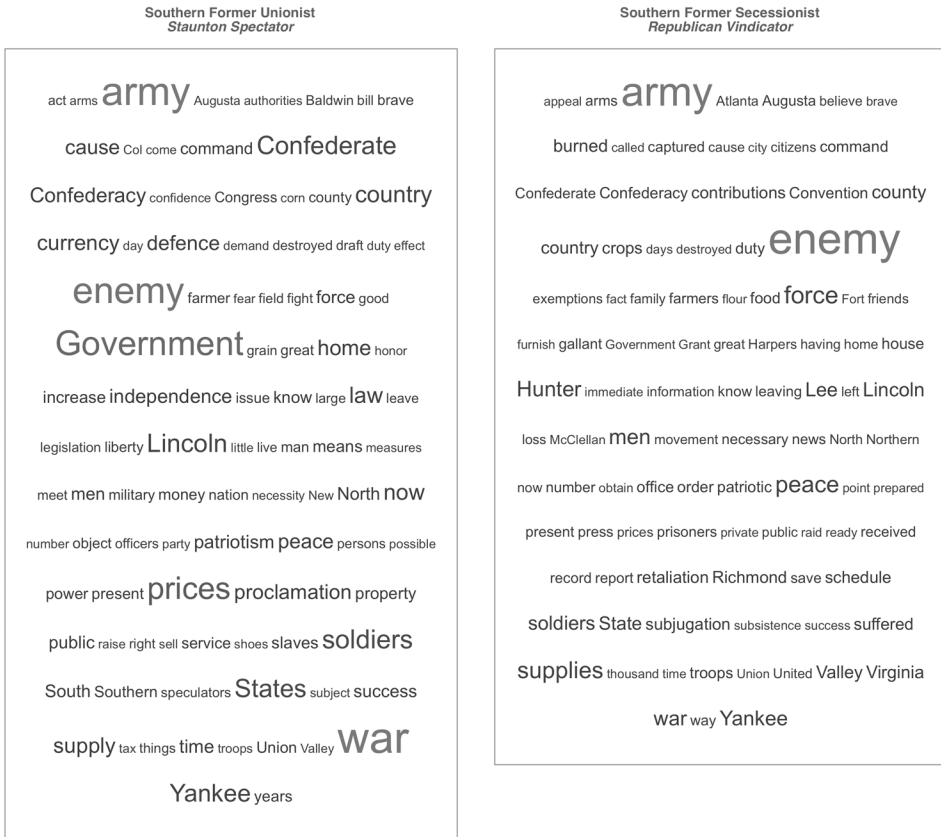*Republican Vindicator*

Figure 1(b). The words most commonly used in articles that contain the word "people" in the two Southern papers in the Valley of the Shadow Project, April 1861 through April 1865. The larger a word appears on these lists, the more frequently the word appears in each newspaper.

war, Democrats invoked "negroes" over and over again, especially at election time and especially as the end of slavery became ever clearer. Republicans spoke positively of black soldiers, but they did not dwell on slavery or black people until the war had been won and Lincoln reelected. At war's end, the language of race exploded and concerns with "negroes" proliferated, with most of the concern focused on black voting and with Democrats doing most of the talking (For a graphical representation of this trend, go to http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/ayers.html).

These brief sketches of the patterns of language in the Civil War era show us how digital tools can throw patterns into stark relief. A different set of tools allows us to explore voting, the other major index of public opinion in the Civil War era. Here, too, the Web permits people to examine detailed evidence for themselves. Through the Digital Scholarship Lab Web site, one can compare every election in the United States from 1840 to 2004 from several perspectives: by electoral college vote, by population density, by county, by party, by turnout, and by margin of victory.[3]

[3] See *Digital Scholarship Lab: Voting America—United States Politics, 1840–2008,* http://americanpast.richmond.edu/voting/.

Words appearing near the word 'negro'

▢ Northern Republican (*Semi-Weekly Dispatch/Franklin Repository*)
■ Northern Democrat (*Valley Spirit*)
▨ Southern Former Unionist (*Staunton Spectator*)
▨ Southern Former Secessionist (*Republican Vindicator*)

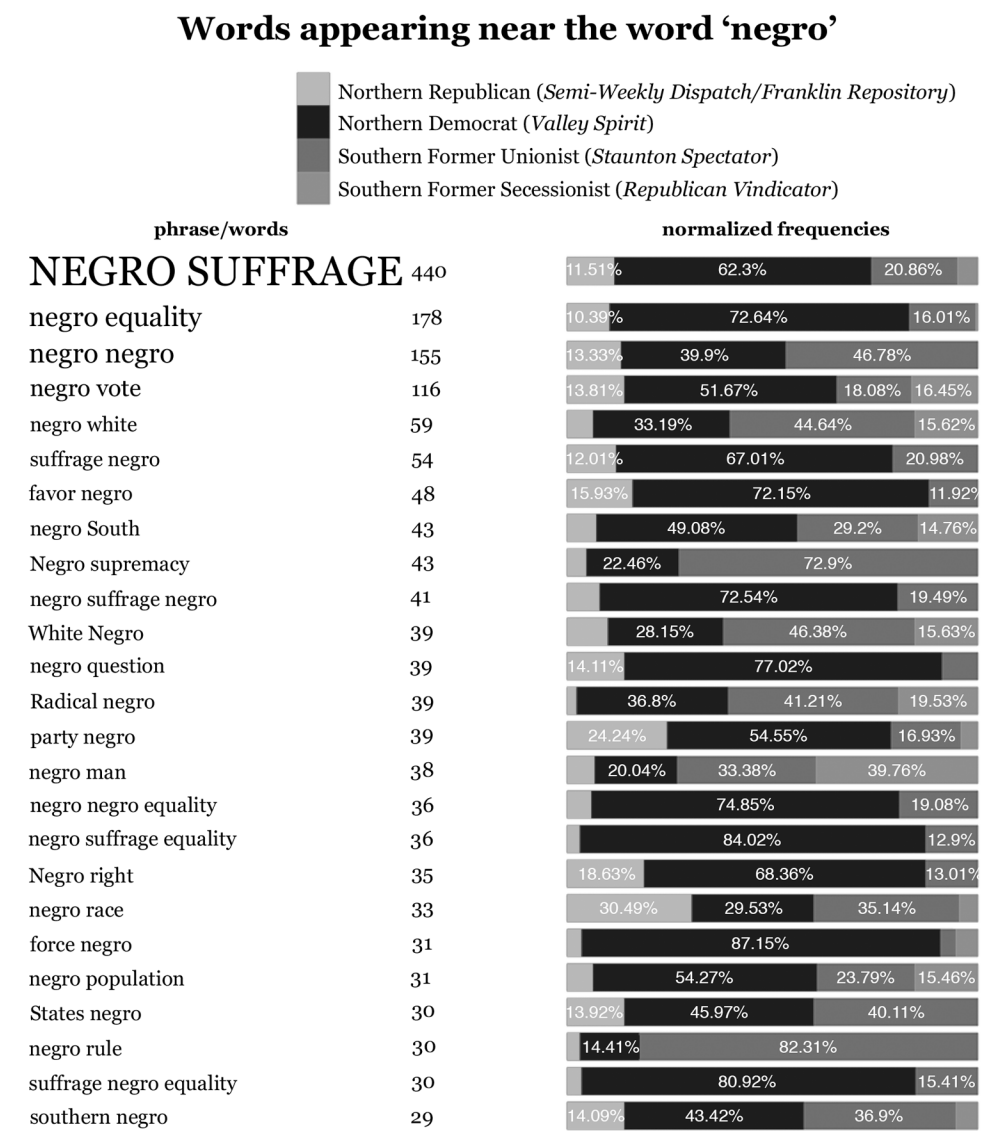| phrase/words		normalized frequencies
NEGRO SUFFRAGE	440	11.51% / 62.3% / 20.86%
negro equality	178	10.39% / 72.64% / 16.01%
negro negro	155	13.33% / 39.9% / 46.78%
negro vote	116	13.81% / 51.67% / 18.08% / 16.45%
negro white	59	33.19% / 44.64% / 15.62%
suffrage negro	54	12.01% / 67.01% / 20.98%
favor negro	48	15.93% / 72.15% / 11.92%
negro South	43	49.08% / 29.2% / 14.76%
Negro supremacy	43	22.46% / 72.9%
negro suffrage negro	41	72.54% / 19.49%
White Negro	39	28.15% / 46.38% / 15.63%
negro question	39	14.11% / 77.02%
Radical negro	39	36.8% / 41.21% / 19.53%
party negro	39	24.24% / 54.55% / 16.93%
negro man	38	20.04% / 33.38% / 39.76%
negro negro equality	36	74.85% / 19.08%
negro suffrage equality	36	84.02% / 12.9%
Negro right	35	18.63% / 68.36% / 13.01%
negro race	33	30.49% / 29.53% / 35.14%
force negro	31	87.15%
negro population	31	54.27% / 23.79% / 15.46%
States negro	30	13.92% / 45.97% / 40.11%
negro rule	30	14.41% / 82.31%
suffrage negro equality	30	80.92% / 15.41%
southern negro	29	14.09% / 43.42% / 36.9%

Figure 2. Words appearing in the same articles as the word "negro" in the newspapers of the Valley of the Shadow Project, April 1865 through December 1870, ranked within each newspaper.

Exploring the election of 1864 from those angles reinforces the impression of complexity and division evident in the language of the era. Lincoln won 55 percent of the vote in that election, a landslide in American politics, especially in the closely contested nineteenth century. But that result nevertheless meant that nearly half of all voters in the North refused to support the president even in the desperation of wartime, even after the Gettysburg Address, Gen. William T. Sherman's victory in Atlanta, and Gen. Philip H. Sheridan's burning of the Shenandoah Valley. Though the election signaled that the North under Lincoln would fight until Confederate surrender, Lincoln's overall share of

Figure 3. This map demonstrates Abraham Lincoln's narrow margin of victory over George B. McClellan in the 1864 presidential election.

the vote had barely changed between 1860 and 1864. Even with all the power of patronage and vast government spending at his command, even in the middle of an enormous war commanding the loyalty of an immense army, Lincoln began his second term with nearly half the electorate opposed to him. Across the North, in one county after another, Lincoln won by only a small majority of the electorate. He remained president because the Electoral College created a convincing mandate from a narrow popular difference, just as it was designed to do. He won because the two-party system suppressed fragmentation and dissent and because fixed election cycles prevented his opponents from seizing moments of despair and crisis to launch challenges to him. (See figure 3.)

White Northerners, then, judging from both the language they used and the votes they cast, disagreed with each other as much at the end of the war as at the beginning. Lincoln pushed a reluctant white majority toward black freedom. As Frederick Douglass would write a decade later, "measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined."[4] Many white Republicans, both soldiers on the field and voters at home, came to understand slavery more fully as they saw the institution in person and as they witnessed black soldiers' bravery. White advocates for black freedom, however, did not dominate public discourse in the North; their heroism grew by action and by personal commitment, often in the face of hostility, ridicule, and indifference.

The detail and context provided by these digital tools complement the rich perspective that has emerged in the voluminous writing Matthew Pinsker has analyzed. Abraham

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[4] Quoted in George M. Fredrickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 126.

Lincoln's leadership, we see, lay in capturing what he could from each moment of possibility and in avoiding the worst in each moment of disaster. His leadership lay in doing less than many wanted, later than many wanted, in less dramatic ways than many wanted. He worked at the very edge of public approval, repeatedly testing its boundaries and its strength. A fuller understanding of the contexts in which Lincoln struggled enhances our respect for the man even as it challenges common and reassuring assumptions about the nation he led.