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Decorated Envelopes as Weapons of War

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Abstract

This essay, illustrated with attractive Confederate and Union patriotic covers, will attempt to illuminate and overcome a weakness in Civil War historiography. It will propose a method for curing an outstanding evidentiary problem — how to judge the effectiveness of wartime visual propaganda — and will propose preliminary hypotheses based on examining images and reports of more than 20,000 used and unused envelopes, showing examples sufficient to demonstrate major points of special significance, and with a vocabulary suited to the methodology. If successful, this paper's recommendations may prod a fresh team of students, equipped with 21st century skills and technology, to pursue an exciting path of research and discovery among largely philatelic and postal history sources, which has the potential to shed new light on the old debate of how and why the Union won (or the Confederacy lost) the war, and perhaps also on why some fruits of the Union victory were transient and insecure.

As Union and Confederate armed forces clashed on battlefields, inland waterways, and at sea, the Civil War advanced on other fronts as well: in diplomacy, in politics, and in fiercely partisan propaganda. Battles pursued on the home front and internationally for the hearts and minds of patriots and allies depended primarily on the spasmodic and fitful successes and failures at Bull Run (Manassas), Pea Ridge (Elkhorn Tavern), Pittsburg Landing (Shiloh), New Orleans, Antietam (Sharpsburg), Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Cold Harbor, Mobile Bay, Atlanta, Sherman's march, Petersburg and Richmond, but they were fought by different combatants, fueled by different logistics, and delivered by different armaments.

Previous studies of Civil War visual propaganda have extensively explored the contents, and have inferred or presumed the effects, of contemporary illustrated newspapers, stand-alone parlor prints, and photographs, but have ignored or scarcely touched upon decorated envelopes, although millions of propaganda envelopes were printed, sold, and mailed or collected, and hundreds of thousands still survive. Most of those studies, as well as a smaller number of publications specifically about patriotic envelopes, have analyzed the iconography of the images and have speculated about their influence on consumers and viewers (or, alternatively, have assumed the influence and treated the iconography as reflexive evidence of public opinion). But anecdotal evidence and iconography alone cannot measure the effectiveness of propaganda, which requires such metrics as speed of delivery, dispersal, persistence, repetition by imitation, overall volume, fluctuation over time, and negative factors such as technical deficiency, censorship, delay, opposition, or suppression.

Among scholars, only W. Fletcher Thompson Jr., author of *The Image of War: The Pictorial Reporting of the American Civil War*, has published a study that treated the images comprehensively and historically. Other authors have dwelt on their intrinsic aspects. Although Thompson included occasional envelope images in his research, he made little use of their special qualities.

Consider a few differences between a picture commissioned by Fletcher Harper for

publication in his weekly newspaper, or a Mathew Brady photograph included in a public display of war scenes, and a similar image printed on a pro-Union envelope. Both the *Harper's Weekly* print and the Brady photograph are monochrome on white or nearly white paper. The envelope frequently sports a multicolor print or colored paper, or both. Harper's and Brady's readers and viewers were mostly passive recipients of their images, for whom the publishers were practically anonymous. Envelope publishers offered a greater variety of eye-catching images than Harper or Brady, and often were faster off the mark. (Many *Harper's* pictures were shamelessly copied from envelope prints.) The effectiveness of envelope propaganda was surely enhanced by the personal or business links shared by the correspondents. Propaganda envelopes were more widely distributed, purchased, mailed, and saved. Harper's, and to a lesser extent Brady's, images tended to be transient. Envelope images remained in postal circulation for months and even years.

Although the differences between propaganda envelopes and other media are easy to list, developing methods to study and measure their distinct contributions to the war poses a stiff challenge, one that this presentation will tackle ambitiously.