Introduction: Occupied!

Abstract: American journalists have rarely experienced enemy occupation, in large measure because most American wars have occurred across oceans and in other hemispheres. Only twice in the country’s history—during the Revolutionary War and during the Civil War—has the opportunity arisen for American journalists to try to operate newspapers under long-term enemy occupation. Other studies have examined how the press has covered military occupations, but these studies do not deal directly with how that occupation affected the press. Consequently, the literature on this topic is relatively thin. Most of what exists deals with how the United States military dealt with the press in countries it occupied in the 20th century or the use of newspapers as propaganda devices during occupation.

On February 11, 1864, the following paragraph appeared in The Memphis Daily Appeal:

The Reconstruction Movement in Arkansas—The editor of the Little Rock Democrat has been arrested by the (Union) military authorities for publishing disloyal sentiments, and his paper suppressed. A new paper will soon be started by men ofundoubted loyalty who will use their influence in favor of the reorganization movement.

The Daily Appeal had some reason for sympathy. At the time, it was being published from Atlanta, a haven for other journalistic fugitives from the Union army. The Appeal's story looms large in Civil War journalism historiography because of its dramatic events. Declaring it would rather see its presses sunk to the bottom of the Mississippi than suffer “the despotic suppression of the Nashville journals,” the paper fled from its home city. The editors pledged to move to a safe point in Mississippi where they could “still breathe the pure and untainted atmosphere of Southern freedom.” They were unwilling “to submit to a censorship under Lincoln's hireling minions that would deprive us of the privilege of expressing at all times our earnest God-speed to the progress of Southern independence, and write and speak what we think.”

As General Ulysses S. Grant’s troops surrounded the city, the paper’s staff loaded up its press and its plates onto a boxcar and became the poster-child for vagabond journalism during the Civil War. The “Moving” Appeal fled initially to Grenada, Mississippi. In the first issue published from its new offices on the Grenada square, owner John Reid McClanahan justified the Appeal's escape with the argument that its fate was wholly tied to that of the Confederacy, which meant that the paper had to be in Confederate-held territory to do its job. The editors wrote, “In taking this step our principal motive has been to continue in a position wherein we may be able to render efficient service to the cause we advocate, hereafter as heretofore; and in accomplishing this, should we succeed, we will find our greatest reward.” Before the war ended in 1865, the paper would flee just ahead of advancing Union troops five more times and would publish from Jackson, Mississippi; Meridian, Mississippi; Atlanta, Georgia; Montgomery, Alabama; and Columbus, Georgia, all so it could serve the need of its readers—mostly members of the Army of Tennessee—for news about the war.