The Telegraph Comes to the Civil War
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On October 24, 1861, the lines completing the intercontinental telegraph came together at Salt Lake City, rendering the Pony Express obsolete and creating a new era of coast-to-coast communications. This emerging technology would also have an impact on the conduct of the war building in the eastern half of the country.

The feat of connecting the two coasts by telegraph was the logical extension of an explosion in telegraphy over the preceding two decades. Since Samuel F.B. Morse patented the telegraph in 1840, the growth of telegraph lines resembled in some ways the growth of the internet in the 1990s. As with the internet, without centralized regulation a variety of small companies went wild in building the new infrastructure across the eastern half of the United States. In some ways, the telegraph and the railroad grew up together. Since keeping trains moving in opposite directions from colliding depended on timely long-range communications, the two new technologies were often in the control of the same people.

Between the early 1850's and the start of the Civil War, a consolidation of telegraph companies began and by the start of the war only six companies remained. Two of these companies dominated the industry. The American Telegraph Company covered the eastern seaboard from Canada to Florida with extensions westward to New Orleans. The Western Union Telegraph Company extended from the eastern states above the Mason Dixon line westward to the upper Midwest. The Civil War would permanently alter the power structure in the industry. Western Union, whose lines ran from east to west, would thrive. The American Telegraph

Company, whose lines ran north to south, would be torn apart. By 1866, Western Union would stand alone as a monopoly.

All the existing telegraph companies found themselves in the curious position of trying to be loyal to their country while simultaneously trying to survive or even profit from the conflict. This seems like an early version of the situation facing many multinational corporations in the modern world.

As the nation prepared for war in 1861, the telegraph lines were busy. The news of Fort Sumter's fall flashed across the country and Northern governors received by wire Abraham Lincoln's call for seventy-five thousand volunteers. Businessmen on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line rushed to settle up business before the lines of communication were broken.

Just as the telegraph would transform civilian communication, it would dramatically alter military command. While many generals were initially resistant to use the telegraph, most of them quickly realized its value in repositioning forces and gathering intelligence. The North, with its great infrastructure and greater capacity to build more, generally made better use of long-range telegraphy than did the Confederacy.

The Union army would also pioneer the first effective use of field telegraphy, mobile systems that would allow a commander to micromanage systems in various parts of the battlefield. While this technology had seen limited and ineffective use by the British in India in the late 1850's and by the French in their Italian campaign of 1860, it was the Union who first managed to make the field telegraph work and enable it to actually affect the outcome on the battlefield. The details of the development of the field telegraph will be described later in this podcast series.