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978-1-107-01228-8 - Western Union and the Creation of the American Corporate Order, 1845–1893

Joshua D. Wolff

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## Western Union and the Creation of the American Corporate Order, 1845–1893

This work chronicles the rise of Western Union Telegraph from its origins in the helter-skelter ferment of antebellum capitalism to its apotheosis as the first corporation to monopolize an industry on a national scale. The battles that raged over Western Union's monopoly on nineteenth century American telecommunications – in Congress, in courts, and in the press – illuminate the fierce tensions over the rising power of corporations after the Civil War and the reshaping of American political economy. The telegraph debate reveals that what we understand as the normative relationship between private capital and public interest is the product of a historical process that was neither inevitable nor uncontested. Western Union's monopoly was not the result of market logic or a managerial revolution, but the conscious creation of entrepreneurs protecting their investments. In the process, these entrepreneurs elevated economic liberalism above traditional republican principles of public interest and helped create a new corporate order.

Joshua D. Wolff completed a PhD in history at Columbia University, where he has also served as a lecturer in history. He is an associate for a global management consulting firm.

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*For Melissa*

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been force-fed obscure points about Western Union over the years and nonetheless claimed that they looked forward to the book merit greater thanks than I can offer here, but one deserves special mention: Jeff Tapick provided not only steadfast friendship but also a room in his apartment in Washington, turning what might have been a lonely year away from home into a very pleasant sojourn.

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