

A Precarious Precedent

How Civil War Peace Movements Nearly
Lost Lincoln's Re-election

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Introduction

Maintaining the hope that a war persecuted by the United States will result in a quick victory is perhaps the most surefire way to ensure one's place on the wrong side of history. Presidents routinely find themselves continuing a war far beyond any initial estimation. As the amount of time and resources invested in the war rises, so too does the domestic pressure for peace. Even Abraham Lincoln, who led the United States through arguably the most just and honorable of American wars, still had to contend with a peace movement that grew to a critical mass by 1864. There is no denying the Union's overall success in the Civil War, and there is no disagreement with the traditional assessment of the effectiveness of the peace movement during the Civil War and all other wars until the second half of the twentieth century. Peace movements did nothing to prevent American engagement in the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, or the Indian Wars. In 1917, doughboys went "Over There" and GIs devoted themselves to the unconditional surrender of the Axis Powers three decades later. It wasn't until Vietnam that peace movements had a substantial effect on the prosecution of a war by the United States. Yet the colossal nature of the Civil War created unique societal demands that both challenged and promoted peace-seekers in ways unseen during the War of 1812 or Mexican American Wars. Amongst these demands is the institution of a federal draft, the suspension of civil liberties, and the re-election campaign of the single most controversial President in United States history; upon whose back the political future of the war bore-down.

Peace-seekers during the Civil War can be separated into three main archetypes. First, there are those whom were not motivated by political nor religious convictions. They simply did not want their country to invest any more into the conflict, and communicated their stance through displays such as the New York City draft riots. The next are the Copperheads, a faction

of anti-war Democrats in the north, that desired the preservation of the Union with the institution of slavery intact. Those motivated by religious convictions make up the remainder of the peace-seekers. With the introduction of the draft, male pacifists could now be compelled by the state to serve despite any religious objections.

The Perfectionist Pacifists

In the summer of 1863, the world of woolens merchant and devout pacifist Alfred H. Love was turned upside down when he refused to comply with the Federal Enrollment Act. Love subscribed to a perfectionist flavor of Christianity which promoted strict adherence to the doctrine of nonresistance, formulated from Jesus' command to Matthew 5:38-39: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil." Adherence to this principle forbade the perfectionist pacifist from returning evil for evil, meaning that sinful acts shall never be met in turn with sinful acts. Love and his ilk were adamant abolitionists, but their faith forbade them from engaging in any acts of violence to destroy the peculiar institution.¹

Nonresistance did not mean idleness, however. Perfectionist pacifists took literally the words of Paul the Apostle in Corinthians, "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God" (Corinthians 10:4). Their faith not only promoted the doctrine of nonresistance, it also instilled a sense of duty to seek the purification of society by advocating their perfect world to which they aspired. Perfectionist pacifism existed long before the dawn of the Civil War, but it was this conflict that caused them to band together in political pursuit. Prior to the Civil War, the question of required military service was left up to the states. Many

¹ Curran, *Soldiers of Peace: Civil War Pacifism and the Postwar Radical Peace Movement*, pp. xii-13

established exemptions of military service for members of the historic peace churches: The Quakers, the Anabaptist Sects, and in some states the Shakers. However, the Federal government would not uphold that policy after the passing of the Federal Enrollment Act for some time, and the provisions only applied to members of the historic peace churches which many perfectionist pacifists did not belong.² Focusing solely on the draft, a study would find a defensive response to a particular governmental demand for an arbitrary set of conditions and circumstances. For the perfectionist pacifist, however, the Civil War itself was a manifestation of everything wrong with the United States government.

Organization of the perfectionists began through William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, which allowed for the diffusion of ideas on how to address the shortcomings of the government and affect meaningful change.³ It was very difficult for the perfectionist to stay true to their rigid peace principles during the conflict. The general tone of Union society was one of passion, motivated by Stephen Douglas' proclamation that "There can be no neutrals in this war, *only patriots – or traitors!*"⁴ While the northerners engaged in their crusade to protect the Union, the perfectionists engaged in a nonviolent yet unrelenting assault against the Federal government. Their terms of surrender were for the government to abandon all unholy characteristics and assimilate its civil laws and Constitution to that of the divine.

A month and a half into the Civil War, a letter from Love to Garrison appeared in the *Liberator* where the Philadelphian expressed his hope that the nation would "part with its discordant members," and let go of their claim to the slave states, thereby circumventing the

² Kohn, S. *Jailed for Peace: The History of American Draft Law Violators*.

³ Villard, F. *William Lloyd Garrison on Non-Resistance; Together with a Personal Sketch*.

⁴ Wells, Damon. *Stephen Douglas; the Last Years, 1857-1861*.

reliance on one evil to destroy another.⁵ Love continued promoting these sentiments with his 1862 pamphlet and spoke out for a negotiated peace on other occasions. Joshua Blanchard, a long-time nonresistant and abolitionist, added his voice when he published a paper in the *Liberator* which promoted the growing doctrine of Garrisonian disunion.⁶ This doctrine called for the free states to amputate the Southern slave society and establish their land as a holy sanctuary for any escaped slave that may find their way there. Garrisonian disunion preached the purging of evildoers rather than the purging of evil itself. There was a major philosophical difference between Garrisonian disunion and Confederate secession. Garrison expounded upon this difference in an issue of the *Liberator* appearing a few days after the firing on Fort Sumter. The first was “based on the eternal fitness of things, and animated by noble, disinterested, and philanthropic spirit.” The latter was “the concentration of all diabolism,” motivated exclusively by a perceived threat to the practice of slavery.⁷

The Copperheads

The fiercest of organized political opposition to the Civil War came from conservative Democrats, who looked to Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson as Presidential paragons. Strict constructionists, these two can be philosophically compared to contemporary Supreme Court justices Clarence Thomas and the late Antonin Scalia. Early in the war, Republicans branded these Peace Democrats as “copperheads” – a reference to the poisonous snake. Peace Democrats proceeded to co-opt the term by spinning it to reference the penny, which at the time featured the profile of lady liberty etched into the piece of copper. Peace Democrats would go

⁵ Love, A. “Letter to William Lloyd Garrison,” *Liberator*.

⁶ Blanchard, J. “Peaceable Division,” *Liberator*.

⁷ Friedman, L. J. *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison: Vol. V, Let The Oppressed Go Free 1861-1867*.

on to wear these coins as badges, reinforcing the notion that they were resisting the United States executive in defense of civil liberties and the Constitution of the United States.⁸

Many assume that the Copperheads were simply Confederate sympathizers living in the north. While this is true for some, the vast majority were pro-Union. The ranks of the Copperheads were filled by three types of people. The first were Southerners who moved north and whose kin resided in the South. Next are immigrants, primarily Catholic Germans and Irish, who had no love for the Republican Party which had absorbed the nationalists who rallied against them in the 1840s and 1850s. The third type were the conservative Jacksonians who subscribed to the constitutionality of secession, citing the lack of enumeration concerning membership to the Union. As Confederates insisted on independence, the Copperheads largely subscribed to the notion that the war would end immediately and the Union survive if the North simply allowed for a constitutional amendment protecting the peculiar institution.

In the first year of the war, the Copperheads were relatively quiet. As is the American custom, the populace subscribed to the sentiment that the war would end quickly and successfully. As the first year of the war dragged on Lincoln took key executive actions that the Copperheads staunchly opposed. The decision to call out the militia which was a congressional prerogative, the order to blockade Southern ports which were seen as an act of war before Congress declared war, the income tax, and the suspension of Habeas Corpus were the highlights.⁹

The summer of 1862 would see a decrease in Northern support for the war after the series of defeats culminating in the second battle of Manassas. As general support for the war waned,

⁸ Weber, J. *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North*.

⁹ Ekirch, A. *The Civilian and the Military*, pp. 90-104.

the Peace Democrats gained steam and became much bolder and more vocal with their opposition of Lincoln's methods. Despite the varied backgrounds, the Copperheads were all vehemently racist. Peace Democrats subscribed to the belief that the abolitionists had brought the war upon themselves by stirring up too much trouble in the antebellum period. The racial fears increased as slaves escaped to the Union seeking freedom. The Laborer faction of the Copperheads feared that the slaves would take their jobs. Most just didn't want African Americans anywhere near them. Copperheads believed that abolitionists had too much influence and were running the government. The tensions rose to a fever pitch in the summer of 1862 with the race riots that broke out in New York and Toledo.¹⁰

The Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, issued in September of 1862, resulted in the Copperheads to rally around the satisfaction of saying "I told you so." Their worst suspicions were realized: The true motivation of Lincoln and the Republicans was to end slavery. The midterm elections two months later would see the Republicans losing seats in Congress, the governorships of New York and New Jersey, and the state legislatures of Indiana and Lincoln's home state of Illinois. The Union took another hit soon after the midterm elections, when the Confederacy dealt a serious blow at Fredericksburg in December 1862. The Union faced 12,600 casualties (killed, wounded, or captured) to the Confederate's 5,000. The Battle of Fredericksburg initiated a reverberation of despair through the Union. In the words of a Boston attorney, "My confidence is terribly shaken. So is everybody's. Things have never looked so black to me as at this moment." This was the environment in which the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863. Patriotism reached a new low as talk of the

¹⁰ Cecelski, D. *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway and the Slaves' Civil War*, pp. 140, 194.

Midwest seceding and forming a third country, or perhaps joining the Confederacy, reached a climax.¹¹

As public opinion for the war shifted from favorable to unfavorable, so too did enlistment rates into the Union. By March of 1863, the need for men was so dire that Congress passed the Federal Enrollment Act. In doing so, the Provost Marshal General's Bureau was established, charged with administering and enforcing the draft. There was at least one Bureau office in every Congressional district, and they collected information on men who were eligible for the draft and those who may interfere with its progress. Information on dissidents was directly sent to the Provost Marshal General in Washington, DC. An unprecedented intrusion upon the lives of individuals', the Bureau became one the first domestic intelligence agencies in the history of the United States.¹²

The Copperheads' political capital continued to increase as the Union continued to face defeat on the battlefield, routed by Confederates at Chancellorsville despite a 2-to-1 manpower advantage. The most prominent of Copperheads, former Congressman Clement Vallandigham, was arrested in the middle of the night by a rogue general in Ohio who tried Vallandigham in a military tribunal and sentenced him to spend the rest of the war in a military prison, despite Vallandigham's civilian status. Democrats were outraged, and even Republicans spoke out against the arrest of a man for little more than exercising his first amendment rights.¹³

¹¹ Weber, J. *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North*, pp.36.

¹² Fry, James B. *Restrictions on executive department franking privileges; height requirements for military draftees; reporting of military draft exemptions.*

¹³ Marshall, John A. *American Bastille: A History of the Illegal Arrests and Imprisonment of American Citizens in the Northern and Border States, on Account of Their Political Opinions, During the Late Civil War.*

Lincoln's hope for the war increased after the victories of Gettysberg and Vicksberg, but would not last long. Draft riots again broke out across the country towards the end of 1863, impacting New York City, Boston, Portsmouth (New Hampshire), Rutland (Vermont), Troy (New York), and Wooster (Ohio). Copperheads proceeded to nominate Vallandigham for the Ohio governorship, attempting to capitalize on antipathy towards African, asking why white men were dying for blacks. Believing this was a sure way to attract the soldier vote, they did not realize that the soldiers of the Union army had become staunch opponents of the Peace Democrats. The soldiers believed that the Democrats were prolonging the war by speaking out against it and decreasing enlistment. The soldiers argued in letters home that the Copperheads never considered their sacrifices, and they were right. Vallandigham lost his election handily.¹⁴

Ulysses S. Grant's appointment as general in chief of all the armies caused Northerners to buzz with hope. Once again, hope is quickly extinguished as "Unconditional Surrender" Grant went on to lose 64,000 men in the span of six weeks. The face of the war effort was now "Grant the Butcher", and the war received much censure. Disapproval reached as far as Lincoln's cabinet. In the words of Secretary of State William Seward, "It seems to myself like exaggeration when I find that in describing conflict after conflict in this energetic campaign, I am required always to say of the last one that it was the severest battle of the war."¹⁵

The other armies afforded Northerners no comfort. Nathaniel Bank's Red River campaign was turned back at the battle of Shreveport, Louisiana in April. Campaigns in Virginia floundered in May, and Sherman settled into a siege at Atlanta in early July. Support for the war

¹⁴ Ekirch, A. *The Civilian and the Military*, pp. 90-106.

¹⁵ Weber, J. *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North*, pp.39.

was decreasing substantially by this point. Brick Pomeroy, the editor of the Lacrosse, Wisconsin based *Democrat*, took to calling Lincoln a “widow-maker” and “orphan maker”¹⁶.

Between July and August, events would continue to transpire that suggested to Lincoln that he would not win reelection in 1864. Henry J. Raymond, chair of the Republican Party and editor of the New York Times, thought the country was “tired & sick of war.” Turlow Reed, who ran politics in New York State, was so pessimistic of Lincoln’s chances that he labeled his reelection an “impossibility.” The Democrats hosted their convention in Chicago on August 31, unanimously adopting an anti-war platform and confident that they would win the Presidency, and with it, peace. The timing of this convention could not be worse, however, as news spread not 48 hours later that Sherman had taken Atlanta. Lincoln’s approval sharply rose and continued to rise until his eventual re-election, aided by victories on the battlefield and the ideology of abolition.¹⁷

Conclusion

The successful prosecution of war in the United States requires careful consideration of domestic politics as well. It doesn’t matter if the government in question has the holy trifecta of superior talent on the strategic, operational, and tactical fields if that government gets voted out of office before the conclusion of the war. Lincoln faced a dangerous game coming into the election of 1864. On one side were the Democrats who decried abolition as an abomination and sought an immediate peace and renewal of vows, with the peculiar institution intact. On the other side, the perfectionist pacifists sought the termination of the war alongside the proliferation

¹⁶ Pomeroy, B. *The Peacemakers of 1864*.

¹⁷ McClure, A. *Abraham Lincoln and Men of War-Times: Some Personal Recollections of War and Politics during the Lincoln Administration*.

of abolition. Abraham Lincoln faced great political opposition throughout his persecution of the Civil War, and the possibility of losing the Presidency to a peculiar coalition of Copperheads and Perfectionist Pacifists was present until Sherman's victory over Atlanta.

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