Lincoln’s Critics: The Copperheads

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Many Americans mistakenly believe that Abraham Lincoln enjoyed nearly universal support during the Civil War. If they are aware of any opposition, it is in the form of the New York City Draft Riots in the summer of 1863. In fact, Lincoln had to deal with dissent from the very beginning of the war. Opposition to the war, to the administration’s policies, and to the president himself waxed and waned, depending on how well—or poorly—the army was doing in the field. When opposition to the war was fiercest, in the summer of 1864, Lincoln was under incredible pressure to stop the war at any cost. Lincoln resisted clamorous calls for a cease-fire, but he and many others thought it would cost him reelection that fall. That Lincoln was able to withstand the extraordinary pressures to halt the bloodshed, even at what he thought would be the expense of his presidency, underscores both his tenacity and his moral and political courage.

The principal dissidents were known as Copperheads, conservative Democrats who harkened back to Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson as ideal presidential role models. The two were strict constructionists when it came to the Constitution, and philosophically they could be compared to present-day U.S. Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas. Republicans early in the war labeled the Peace Democrats as “Copperheads,” and by 1862 the term was in widespread use. The copperhead is a poisonous snake, which is what Republicans meant by the word. The Peace Democrats tried to turn the meaning on its head. The penny at the time was also called a copperhead, and Peace Democrats embraced the label because, with an image of Lady Liberty on one side, the copperhead reinforced the Peace Democrats’ insistence that they were resisting the president in defense of the Constitution and civil liberties.

So why don’t we hear more about these dissidents? The very few historians to write about them—all in the mid-twentieth century—marginalized them. They said that Copperheads were few, and two of the three historians who studied them treated them as cranks. The main debate among those historians was whether the Peace Democrats were trying to overthrow the government, either state or federal. That

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is the wrong question. The better question is, What impact did Peace Democrats have in the political and military arenas? The answer is that they had significant influence, especially as the war wore on and the financial and human costs mounted into the stratosphere. Copperheads had an enormous effect on the Democratic Party, nearly taking control of it in 1864. While some Copperheads were unquestionably dabbling in plots to overthrow the government, most were probably being truthful when they said they were loyal Unionists. The majority wanted to effect change at the ballot box, not at gunpoint.

The Copperheads were not, as many people assume, Southern sympathizers. Some were. But most were not. Copperheads came to the movement generally from three different backgrounds. First were Southerners who had moved north, or whose families were Southern. Second were immigrants, especially Catholic Germans and Irish. They had no love for the Republican Party, which had absorbed the nationalists who had rallied against them in the 1840s and 1850s, and which also contained a number of temperance advocates whose crusades against alcohol targeted a centerpiece of both cultures. Third were conservative Jacksonian Democrats, the strict constructionists. It was their talk of constitutionalism that became the lingua franca for the entire movement. Jacksonian Democrats believed that secession was constitutional because the Constitution (they rightly pointed out) says nothing about the terms of membership in the Union. Throughout the war, even as Confederates insisted on independence, Jacksonian Democrats and other Copperheads believed that the war would end immediately if the North would give the South what it had wanted before it seceded, including an unalterable amendment to the Constitution protecting slavery.

Lincoln’s opponents were relatively quiet the first year of the war. They opposed Lincoln’s decision to call out the militia, which is a congressional prerogative; challenged his order to blockade Southern ports, which they claimed was an act of war before Congress declared war; and disputed the income tax and the suspension of habeas corpus. Dissidents, most notably newspaper editors who differed with the administration, were being thrown in jail. Other newspapers received visits from uniformed troops who destroyed their presses or just locked the door and shut down operations. Lincoln had declared martial law in Maryland, in part as a way to protect Washington, D.C., from the Confederate sympathizers who lived mostly in the eastern part of the state. The Copperheads claimed that Lincoln was a “tyrant” using unconstitutional methods to prosecute the war. Yet
while support for the war effort was strong, the Peace Democrats went relatively unheard.

That changed in the summer of 1862, when the Union suffered a series of bad defeats, culminating with the second battle at Bull Run. Many Union sympathizers gave up on the war that summer. In that environment Peace Democrats became bolder and more vocal in their complaints about Lincoln’s handling of the war. They beat the drum harder and louder in their critiques of the administration and adopted a new rallying cry that they would use for the rest of the war: “The Union as it was and the Constitution as it is.”

The most fervent Copperhead criticism of the administration revolved around race. Copperheads were deeply racist, even by the standards of their own time. Their racial fears increased as slaves ran to Union lines in search of freedom. Laborers feared that freedmen would take their jobs. Others simply did not want African Americans anywhere near them. Whatever the case, Peace Democrats were convinced that abolitionists had brought on the war by stirring up so much trouble in the antebellum period. Under the Lincoln administration, abolitionists had far too much influence and were, claimed the Copperheads, running the government. (Never mind that Lincoln was a raging moderate who moved to the left only as the war forced his hand.) Tensions were so high in the summer of 1862 that race riots broke out in Toledo and New York.

When Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, the Copperheads were apoplectic—although it did give them the satisfaction of saying “I told you so.” The Emancipation Proclamation confirmed their worst suspicions of what they thought was the true agenda of Lincoln and the Republicans: freeing the slaves. Democrats performed well in the off-year elections six weeks later, but Republicans held their own. The Republicans lost seats in Congress, governorships in New York and New Jersey, and legislatures in Indiana and Lincoln’s home state of Illinois, both of which went to the Copperheads. But Republicans had not lost as much ground as parties in power generally had in congressional elections.

Whatever satisfaction Lincoln may have gained from the election dissipated soon after, with another serious blow to the Army of the Potomac at Fredericksburg in December 1862. There the Union took 12,600 casualties (killed, wounded, and captured) to the Confederate’s 5,000. Debacle hardly begins to describe the outcome. “Who is responsible for this terrible repulse?” demanded Harper’s Weekly, usually a bastion of Republican thought. Northerners “have borne, silently and
grimly, imbecility, treachery, failure, privation, loss of every suffering which can afflict a brave people. But they can not be expected to suffer that such massacres as this at Fredericksburg shall be repeated.” In Boston, an attorney wrote, “My confidence is terribly shaken. So is everybody’s. Things have never looked so black to me as at this moment.”

It was in this environment that the Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863. At the same time, talk of the Midwest seceding and forming a third country, or perhaps joining the Confederacy, reached a crescendo. Lincoln worried about the state of the nation. At his front he had one enemy, the Confederates. At his back he had the Copperheads. In a rare display of concern, Lincoln confessed to a senator his fears about what he called “the fire in the rear.”

Dwindling support for the war effort was evident in lower enlistments for the Union army. The situation was grave enough in the summer of 1862 that the federal government began demanding that states meet manpower quotas for the army. Several states were forced to institute conscription to meet the call. Many Northern men responded to this proto-conscription effort by running to Canada or the West, or by faking illness or injury to obtain medical waivers. By March 1863 the situation was so dire that the government was forced to take a more direct approach to raising men. Congress approved the Enrollment Act, the first federal conscription act in American history (unless one counts the draft that the Confederates had imposed almost a year earlier). This law provided for a bureaucracy unlike any that Americans had seen before. The Provost Marshal General’s Bureau was charged with administering and enforcing the draft. At least one office had to be set up in every congressional district in the North. The marshals and their aides, enrolling officers, and spies collected all kinds of information on men who were eligible for the draft and on those who might interfere with the same. Information about dissidents was sent directly to Washington, D.C., to the Provost Marshal General. This was an unprecedented intrusion on individuals’ lives, and the Provost Marshal General’s Bureau, without quite realizing what it was doing, became a domestic intelligence agency, one of the first in U.S. history.

The draft was a serious impingement on the liberties of eligible Northern men. They could not even travel if a draft was afoot. Copperheads tapped into a deep well of resentment. They now began actively to undermine the war effort, encouraging draft dodging and desertion. Women were not immune to prosecution for harboring deserters, even if the men in question were husbands, sweethearts,
or brothers. In some parts of the country, opposition to the draft was so intense that government agents dared not enter certain counties. In others the Provost Marshal General’s Bureau had trouble hiring men to enroll draft-age men, the job was simply too dangerous.

Another way to fill the army’s maw was to accept black men into the ranks, which the army also did. Common sense suggests that this would be a relief to antiwar men because it reduced their chances of being drafted. In this instance, though, prejudice outweighed reason. Instead, black men serving in a blue uniform merely reinforced the Copperheads’ preexisting belief that this was not a war for reunion and never had been. Instead, they argued, it had been a war of emancipation from the very beginning.

The spring continued to go poorly. In Virginia, Union troops were routed in a humiliating defeat at Chancellorsville, even though they had a 2-to-1 manpower advantage over the rebels. In Dayton, Ohio, a rogue general had the country’s most prominent Copperhead, former Congressman Clement Vallandigham, arrested, pulled out of his home in the middle of the night, tried by a military tribunal, and sentenced to spend the rest of the war in a military prison, despite his civilian status. Democrats were outraged, and Republicans were more than a little uncomfortable with an arrest that appeared to have taken place for little more than a prominent man exercising his free speech rights. Lincoln, whom the general had never consulted, did not want to undercut his general or make Vallandigham a martyr. So he split the difference and had Vallandigham released . . . to the Confederates. Vallandigham learned he did not much like the Southerners nor they him, so by mutual consent he shipped off to Canada. That fall he would reappear on the national scene, albeit from Windsor, Ontario, as the Democrats’ nominee for governor of Ohio.

Finally in July, Lincoln and the Unionists got a break as the main armies of the East and West scored major victories. On July 3, the Army of the Potomac drove back Robert E. Lee’s troops after a scorching three-day fight at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The battle was so costly for Lee that he never recovered his ability to pursue an offensive strategy. For the rest of the war he would be on the defensive; he did not have enough men to do otherwise. In the West, Union General Ulysses S. Grant finally broke the Confederate defenses that for weeks had protected Vicksburg, Mississippi, from his siege. The fall of the city on July 4 gave the Union navy total control over the Mississippi River from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. It also divided the Confederate States of America in half.
Lincoln could not enjoy the dual victories for long. A week after Vicksburg, a draft riot broke out in New York City. It quickly turned into a race riot, and it remains the most deadly civil disturbance in American history. Draft riots broke out shortly thereafter in Boston; Portsmouth (New Hampshire); Rutland (Vermont); Troy (New York); and Wooster (Ohio). Mayors in many parts of the North feared their cities would follow suit, especially in areas near New York City. In the countryside, enrolling agents continued to be targets through the summer as hostility toward the draft boiled over again and again.

The riots seemed to break with the summer heat, but Lincoln and the Republicans continued to face serious political challenges on the homefront. Ohio Democrats nominated Vallandigham as their candidate for governor. They hoped to capitalize on antipathy toward African Americans, and the centerpiece of their campaign was asking why white men were dying for the black race. The Democrats believed this was a sure way to attract the soldier vote. They did not realize that the men of the Union armies had turned hard against the Peace Democrats—and the Democratic Party in general—earlier in the year. Many soldiers believed that the conservatives were actually prolonging the war by speaking out against it and by interfering with the process of raising critically needed men. They argued in letters home that the Copperheads ignored their considerable sacrifices and those of their slain and wounded friends. This was true; the Copperheads almost never acknowledged the cost to soldiers. In Ohio, many of the men in blue threatened to come home and beat up or kill their neighbors who supported the peace movement. Ohioans worried about a civil war in their state if Vallandigham won. They need not have worried. Vallandigham went down in flames, receiving only a fraction of the soldier vote. The episode had the effect of propping up Lincoln and demoralizing the Peace Democrats, at least for the short term.

Northerners looked forward to a happier and more militarily successful 1864, and morale received a huge boost in March when Lincoln appointed “Unconditional Surrender” Grant as general in chief of all the armies. Northerners buzzed with hope that the war would be over before the end of the year. Finally, they thought, they had a general tenacious enough to crush Lee. His plan, as laid out to his generals in early April, seemed to validate Northerners’ hopes. His three main armies, under generals George Meade in Virginia, William T. Sherman in Georgia, and Nathaniel Banks in Louisiana, were directed to destroy their Confederate counterparts. Commanders not directly involved in this enterprise were to tie down the rebels so that reinforcements could not be sent to the main armies—or, as Grant put it, borrowing a
phrase from Lincoln, the armies not directly involved in the skinning “can hold a leg.”

Northerners were right to believe that Grant was a different kind of general. For one thing, his orders were in stark contrast with the orders of earlier commanders, who tended to focus more on capturing Richmond rather than crushing the rebel armies. Grant’s target was the Army of Northern Virginia, and he pursued Lee tenaciously. When the Army of the Potomac failed to win the gruesome Battle of the Wilderness in early May, Grant followed Lee rather than stopping or pulling back. When the injured Confederates slipped out of their trenches at Spotsylvania and headed south, Grant chased. And even after his tragic decision to plunge into battle at Cold Harbor, Grant pursued Lee to Peters burg, a few miles south of Richmond. There, the two armies settled into a siege.

In six weeks, Grant lost 64,000 men and the support of many in the North. He became known as “Grant the Butcher.” That he had nothing more than a siege to show for his costly efforts added to the fury at home. “This war is murder, & nothing else. And every man who gives a dollar or moves his finger to aid [it] is an aider & abettor of murder,” a New York Copperhead wrote. Ohio Congressman Samuel S. Cox, a peace man, wrote a friend: “I don’t think he shows skill in hurrying so many into death & agony. Is it butchery, or—war?” Even members of Lincoln’s cabinet were shocked. “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,” Secretary of State William Seward wrote.

Northerners received no comfort from the other armies. In the West, Nathaniel Banks’s Red River campaign had been turned back outside of Shreveport, Louisiana, in April. Plans to go to Mobile, Alabama, atrophied while his men spent the summer in New Orleans. Campaigns along the James River and in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia foundered in May, prompting Lincoln to fire one of the responsible generals, Franz Sigel. After moving swiftly through northern Georgia

in May, William T. Sherman bogged down on the outskirts of Atlanta in early July, and he settled into a siege.

By mid-July, support for the war was waning fast. In LaCrosse, Wisconsin, Brick Pomeroy, the editor of the Democrat, took to calling Lincoln the “widow maker.” Pomeroy refrained from employing the term only when he used “orphan maker” instead. He also advocated assassination if Lincoln were reelected. Even Lincoln’s allies were wilting with weariness. Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, privately pleaded with Lincoln: “Our bleeding, bankrupt, almost dying country . . . longs for peace, shudders at he prospect of fresh conscriptions, of further wholesale devastations, and of new rivers of human blood.” He begged Lincoln to meet with three Confederate agents in Canada to talk about ways to bring about peace. Skeptical that the agents even had the authority to engage in such discussions—they did not—Lincoln sent Greeley and a presidential secretary to Niagara Falls for the meeting. Lincoln outlined his terms to the editor, thinking that if the agents were legitimate brokers, he could flush out Davis and demonstrate to the North that the Confederates were the reluctant party. At the same time, Lincoln agreed to allow two men to go on an unofficial mission to Richmond to find out President Jefferson Davis’s thoughts on a negotiated peace. No deal, Davis told them. The Confederates wanted independence, not reunion. Lincoln’s terms were reunion and emancipation. Their positions were mutually exclusive. There would be no cease-fire as long as these two men were in office. The deadlock could break only on the battlefield or at the ballot box.4

Morale at home continued to slide, and the military situation in the East eroded further. Confederate General Jubal Early romped almost unimpeded through southern Pennsylvania and western Maryland in July. He essentially held the Maryland communities of Hagerstown and Frederick hostage, agreeing to spare them only when they had paid him a total of $220,000. Then the rebels moved on toward Washington. On July 11, Early got to Silver Spring, Maryland, which is at the very edge of the capital city. He burned down the postmaster general’s house before deciding that too many federals were closing in on him and that he should leave. His jaunt was not over, though. On July 30, he had his men torch Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, when

it refused to pay a half-million dollars in protection money. Finally, Early scampered back to Virginia unscathed.

The bad news continued to flood in. On July 30, the same day Early burned Chambersburg, another Union disaster took place, in Petersburg, Virginia. It came to be known as the Crater. A regiment of Pennsylvania coal miners had dug under Confederate lines and packed 8,000 pounds of gunpowder into the tunnel. When the charge exploded, some of the Union troops stood and gawked at the 30-foot-deep hole. Others ran straight into the crater rather than around it. The Confederates recovered quickly, moved cannon into place, and opened fire on the men trapped in the bombed-out cavity. Northern civilians were dumbfounded by this latest blow.

Public unrest was growing acute. Conspiracies were reported in every state west of the Appalachians. Federal officials reported hundreds of rumors from the heartland. The most common report was that Confederates based in Canada were teaming with Copperheads to overrun a prisoner-of-war camp near one of the Great Lakes (Johnson’s Island, near Sandusky, Ohio, was most frequently cited), free the prisoners, and lay waste to the nearest metropolis.

Sometimes such claims were more than rumor. In Indianapolis, a printer named Harrison H. Dodd was planning to take over the arsenal in the capital, free rebel prisoners from nearby Camp Morton, and lead Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, and Missouri out of the Union. They would either form a new nation or join the Confederate States of America. The rebels bankrolled Dodd in exchange for a promise to cooperate with the Southern army and free Southern prisoners of war. Dodd was arrested in August when authorities raided his shop and found 400 revolvers and a considerable quantity of ammunition. He escaped and fled to Canada, but a jury found him guilty in absentia.5

5. Kenneth M. Stampp, *Indiana Politics During the Civil War* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1949), 215–18 and 231–49; Jefferson Davis, *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, ed. Lynda Lasswell Crist, vol. 10 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 152–55; Robert Churchill, “The Sons of Liberty Conspiracy, 1863–1864,” *Prologue* 30 (1998): 295, 301–02; Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850–1880* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1965), 215–18. Three of Dodd’s accomplices, including Lamden P. Milligan, were found guilty and sentenced to death. After the war President Andrew Johnson commuted the sentences to life imprisonment. The case ultimately went to the Supreme Court as *ex parte Milligan*. In April 1866 the justices ruled that trying civilians in a military court was unconstitutional while civilian courts were open. The prisoners were released immediately, but prosecutors did not drop the charges until the next year. Thornbrough, 218–20, including n. 76. For a complete account of the case, including full transcripts of the trial and the Supreme Court decision, see Samuel Klaus, ed., *The Milligan Case, Civil Liberties in American History* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970).
After Dodd’s arrest, the Confederates and a secret Copperhead society called the Sons of Liberty worked out an elaborate plot to coincide with the Democratic convention to be held at the end of August in Chicago. Seventy Confederate soldiers and 50,000 Copperheads were to converge on the city. After they arrived, 5,000 prisoners of war at Camp Douglas were to escape, go to the nearest arsenal, and arm themselves. Then, on a given signal, Confederate sympathizers throughout the North would rise up, cut telegraph and railroad lines, spring rebel soldiers from other prison camps, and try to take control of governments across the Northwest. The Confederate government once again financed the operation and gave the secret society’s leaders enough cash to cover arms and transportation costs. As in the Dodd case, word leaked out, and the Union army showed up in force in Chicago. This gave the Northern participants pause. When confronted with the possibility that their opposition to Lincoln and the war might result in their being injured or killed, the Sons of Liberty backed down. They encouraged their Confederate contacts to wait to see what happened with the election instead.6

The president’s political fortunes were fading fast. Henry J. Raymond, chair of the Republican Party and editor of The New York Times, thought that the country did not care about emancipation and was “tired & sick of war.” Raymond also thought that Americans were starting to suspect that the president “cannot or will not give up peace” and was “fighting not for the Union but for the abolition of slavery.” Thurlow Weed, who ran Republican politics in New York State, was utterly pessimistic about the president’s future. Lincoln’s reelection was an “impossibility,” he said. “The People are wild for Peace.” Desperate to maintain their hold on power, a group of Republicans planned to meet September 28 in Cincinnati to find a replacement candidate. Among the members of this group was Greeley, whose blunt assessment was that “Lincoln is already beaten. He cannot be elected.”7

Peace Democrats stepped up their attacks on the president. In Philadelphia, the Jeffersonian pleaded with him to “stop this bloody hell-devised carnage.” In other quarters, Peace Democrats focused on one of their favorite themes: race. The Age in Philadelphia reminded its readers that “fanatical Abolitionism” was to blame for the war. The


happiest black was not a freeman but one whose subjugation was “most complete.” Many prominent antiwar men spoke darkly of the miscegenation threat.  

Pressure was building on Lincoln to drop emancipation as a condition for peace and to negotiate an end to the war. The situation came to a head August 22, when the Republican National Committee met in New York. After the meeting, Raymond delivered the grim news to the president: If the election were held that day, he would lose the key states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. Indeed, he might lose every state. Raymond blamed Lincoln’s problems on military losses and the general belief “that we are not to have peace in any event under this Administration until Slavery is abandoned.” Many Americans, he said, thought emancipation was all that was standing between them and peace. Raymond suggested that Lincoln show the country that Davis, not he, was the problem. Offer Davis peace “on the sole condition of acknowledging the supremacy of the constitution,” he advised Lincoln. Davis would turn it down, insist on independence, and the country would see that he was the true obstructionist. Lincoln thought about the strategy and then adopted it. On August 24 he wrote a memo authorizing Raymond to meet with Davis and propose an immediate cease-fire based on the restoration of the Union only. All other questions, including emancipation, would be dealt with later.  

The problem was that this would send a terrible message to freedmen, especially those who were serving in the Union army. Almost exactly a year earlier, Lincoln had written a public letter in which he acknowledged the crucial role black soldiers were playing in the war. “If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive—even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept,” he told his critics in August 1863. Three days before Raymond pitched his plan, Lincoln had sworn again he would not abandon the freedmen to sue for peace, saying that he would be “damned in time & in eternity” if he did. Raymond’s plan was the primrose path.  

Confronted with Raymond’s message of political doom, Lincoln had to make the hardest decision of his political career: abandon emancipation and his own moral code or lose in November. Lincoln decided to risk the latter. In the words of his hero, Henry Clay, he would “rather be

right than president.” Within twenty-four hours of drafting the memo authorizing Raymond to meet with Davis, Lincoln changed his mind and rejected the idea. “Sending a commission to Richmond would be worse than losing the Presidential contest—it would be ignominiously surrendering it in advance,” he told Raymond.  

Lincoln now prepared to lose. He wrote a memo to his cabinet, sealed it in an envelope, and asked each of his cabinet members to sign the back of the envelope, contents unseen. The memo, which Lincoln shared with them shortly after election day, said: “This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards.”

Democrats met in Chicago for their national convention at the end of August. Unlike the rest of the country, the Copperheads were practically gleeeful. They had become increasingly powerful that summer as more Northerners had joined their call for an end to the war. They had good reason to be optimistic: Lincoln’s chances of reelection appeared to be nil. The party, too, recognized the public’s support for peace and the Copperhead’s great and growing power. Trying to keep them in line, moderate Democrats agreed to put a prominent peace man, Congressman George Pendleton of Ohio, on the ticket with General George B. McClellan, the party’s presidential nominee. Moderates thought this would buy the loyalty of the peace men, and at virtually no cost. They assumed that McClellan, the beloved (or so they thought) former head of the Army of the Potomac, would command the soldier vote. As was in case in Ohio, what many Democrats did not realize was that the Copperheads’ rhetoric had so alienated soldiers and field-level officers—especially the veterans who had volunteered in 1861 and 1862—that the army had turned Republican and most of its men supported emancipation. 

Assuming they would easily take the soldier vote was not the War Democrats’ only, or even biggest mistake. Worse was the decision to load the platform committee with a number of less well-known anti-war advocates. This proved to be a terrible mistake. Echoing public sentiment, the platform accused the administration of intentionally trying to prevent the restoration of the Union. The president had em-

12. Ibid., 514.
ployed “extraordinary and dangerous powers” that the Constitution never granted the executive branch, the platform said, hinting at the standard Copperhead charge that Lincoln was a “tyrant.” The most controversial and ultimately damaging plank pronounced the war a “failure” and called for “immediate efforts” to end hostilities, including a peace convention.13

Democrats were delighted with their platform and adopted it almost unanimously. They left Chicago on August 31 thinking the presidency was theirs. Democrats around the country were elated. The Detroit Free Press announced: “Proclaim the old watch cries of Peace, and Union, the Constitution and Freedom. Away with the gag, with all the manacles with which the present administration has endeavored to bind Liberty. Let the giant awake and burst his bonds.” Republicans were nearly apoplectic in their response. Harper’s Weekly called the platform “craven, abject, humiliating.” It had “no word of righteous wrath” against Southerners who started the war and no word of censure for the Confederacy. “There is not a word in it that can cheer any soldier or sailor fighting for his country; not a syllable that stirs the blood of a patriot,” Harper’s complained.14

The convention and platform turned out to be among the worst timed in American political history. Less than forty-eight hours after the meeting broke up, Sherman took Atlanta. Public reaction on the Union side was swift and stunning. The mood, so grim all summer, turned almost giddy overnight. Suddenly, people in the North were sure that they would win the war and that it was simply a matter of playing out the clock. The gruffly independent New York Herald, not an outlet prone to hasty conclusions, observed, “The fall of Atlanta has produced a general impression throughout the country that the end of the war is near at hand.” It predicted that Richmond would be “purged of the rebellion” within sixty days. The New York Times, a Republican vehicle, was even more fulsome. The victory, it said, was “of such wide scope, such far-reaching result, such indisputable importance,” that the country could do nothing but exult and look forward to the successful resolution of the war. Its editors could not help but take a dig at the Democrats: “What infamy it is that at such an hour croakers should be croaking, and Copperheads hissing, and

13. For the full platform, see http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/site/docs/doc_platforms.php?platformindex=D1864.
men actually contemplating a disgraceful surrender to this thrice-accursed rebellion.” Indeed, the victory at Atlanta made a mockery of everything the Democrats had said in their convention, especially of their platform, and the Republicans reveled in their opponents’ embarrassment. The *St. Paul Daily Press* chortled in a headline, “Old Abe’s Reply to the Chicago Convention: Is the War a Failure?”

Sherman’s success was followed later in September by General Phil Sheridan’s romp through the Shenandoah Valley, a victory that finally brought that part of Virginia to heel. It brought no small measure of satisfaction that Sheridan’s foe was Early, whose army had run through the North so brashly in July. After Sheridan broke Early’s army at Winchester, Virginia, Congressman James A. Garfield wrote, “Sheridan has made a speech in the Shenandoah Valley more powerful and valuable to the Union cause than all the stumpers in the Republic.”

The twin victories sent the War Democrats into crisis mode. McClellan, the Democratic nominee, scrambled unsuccessfully to distance himself from the Copperheads’ platform. The peace wing seemed entirely oblivious to the damage they had done to their party and their nominee. To the contrary, they were sure that the Democrats would win handily in the fall. It brought no small measure of satisfaction that Sheridan’s foe was Early, whose army had run through the North so brashly in July. After Sheridan broke Early’s army at Winchester, Virginia, Congressman James A. Garfield wrote, “Sheridan has made a speech in the Shenandoah Valley more powerful and valuable to the Union cause than all the stumpers in the Republic.”

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Lincoln, of course, did go on to win reelection, and the North did go on to win the war. But the story of the summer of 1864 makes it clear that neither proposition was a given, even—or perhaps especially—late in the war. Bloodshed, violence, and endless losses caused many Northern civilians to give up hope that summer and urge Lincoln to settle for peace at almost any price. Lincoln’s refusal to bargain with Davis and to give up emancipation in exchange for peace led to the perception in the North that Lincoln was to blame, nearly costing him his political career. The opposition, whose power


had fluctuated in the previous three years, enjoyed the windfall of Northern dismay, and its strength grew to unprecedented levels. Military losses were largely responsible for the despair that summer, and a military victory erased it. The victory at Atlanta, followed by Sheridan’s successes in the Shenandoah Valley, redeemed Lincoln and saved emancipation. The country was, from that point on, irrevocably committed to a dual policy of unconditional surrender and emancipation.